

Australia at Ground Level

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After the first International Rangeland Congress (IRC) at Denver in '78', Australia '84' reverberated in the minds of many range people. When the first information and tour flyers came out, we all started planning. I sent one to a friend who had lived in Australia. He answered, 'Tours have a way of stopping at the most expensive hotels, the best restaurants, and seeing the country from 16,000 feet—go at ground level.'

Fifty hours of travel brought me from Nebraska to Adelaide, Australia, for the IRC, May 13-18, 84. The preliminary session and the following concurrent sessions gave a complete, concise view of Australian history and landscape from 16,000 feet. The startling part was how closely related the problems of range degradation, mineral exploitation, revegetation, and tourism are to ours. In this sense we are truly cousins.

After the meeting I slowly packed my belongings, taking the time to prepare myself for entry to the unknown. Somewhere north, in the semitropic grassland, a family was expecting me. How was I going to get there? It was University swap back (final exam week) and all public transport was full. The Australian Reservation Committee came to my rescue by arranging for me to ride with one of the SRM members to the Charleville Experimental Station where I could get a bus north.

One look at the sports car which would carry me 1,200 miles to Charleville, Queensland, (a nation apart like Texas) told me I would see Australia at ground level—3 inches above it. A second look at the driver (the first of many hosts I would have) told me I would hear the heartbeat of the country. He was a true Aussie, rawboned, bronzed, and bearded. He possessed a deep sense of national pride, an extensive knowledge of his native home and range, all of which he gladly shared with his 'American Cousin.'

We left the cultivated gardens and coastline of European-flavored Adelaide for the interior. The horizon rolled softly by with the harmonious texture only an ancient landscape can possess. Two volcanic cones lent the only sharp contrast to the horizon on the entire trip. The red brown soil is of low fertility and every crop has to be fertilized, even the fields of wheat which lay in fallow strips of red and gold. Fat, sleek Hereford and Shorthorn cattle grazed in brown, dying grass. Soon the grass's lignin content would rise, reducing its nutritional value; then cattle would be supplemented with molasses and urea. May is the beginning of winter, the end of the rainy season. Presently, they are in a drought. Drought here is spoken of in terms of years (7-year cycles) not seasons as in the U.S.

We are now in the semiarid woodlands. I ran through ants in my bare feet to photograph a flowering Acacia tree. 'Does everything here bite or have thorns?' I yelled. 'If it didn't it wouldn't be here,' came the cool reply.



A live bore (artesian well) in northwest New South Wales feeding a narrow ditch which will water livestock for miles.

How true that is for this land where the vegetation evolved without the grazing pressures of ungulates. The importation of and overgrazing by hooved animals has degraded the rangeland for the profit of man, allowing the invasion of bush—'bush' not brush. The bush is so thick one cannot ride a horse through, it let alone rope a beast. We stopped at a station (ranch) and the grazer (manager) explained how they catch cattle. 'We ride or run along side the bullock (steer), grab the tail, throw him to the ground and sit on him. Can only do it twice, then they get wise. When possible we fence the water hole with trap gates where the cattle can walk in but not out.'

I tried not to stare at the jackaroo's (cowboy's) attire. I was having difficulty adjusting to men in singles (a skimpy tank top), shorts, bushboots, shapeless bush hat and a sweater—it's winter.

At our last stop I stared 60 feet up the windmill tower to a 24-foot fan which turned the opposite of those in the northern hemisphere. 'We have bigger ones', my host assured me. 'They have to be big because there is so little wind and the bore (well) is 500 feet deep. Much of the time diesel motors are used to pump the water into large storage tanks from which water trickles into watering troughs to limit evaporation.'

Other places are more fortunate. In Mitchell, grass (Aristida) country, the bores are artesian. Narrow ditches are dug out from the bores as far as the water will run, 3 to 9 miles,

and the cattle water from them as they pass through the paddock (pasture).

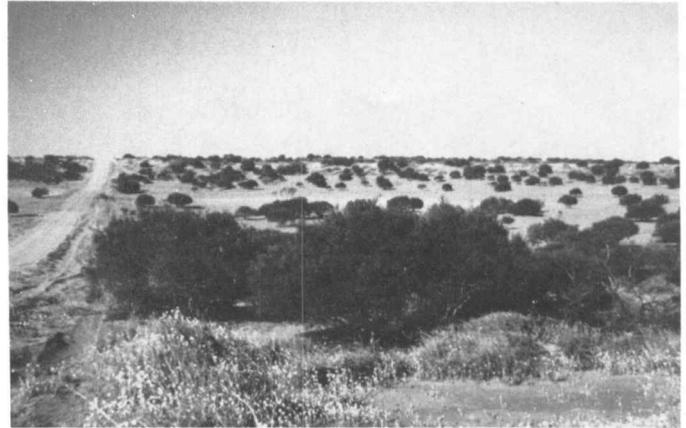
With a new family expecting me on the east coast, I said goodbye. The bus headed northeast to Rochampton via Greyhound through speargrass country, an interesting propagation of mankind. It seems that speargrass (a super needle and thread grass) is fire climax. When the grazers burned the dry grass to obtain fresh green forage, they encouraged the growth of the unpalatable, sore-inducing grass. The spear-like seedhead infests the wool, penetrates the skin and creates sore; thus raising sheep is unprofitable. The only other nonweather factor reducing sheep production are the dingoes. These wild dogs immigrated to Australia with the Aborigines. The legendary 'Dingo Fence' between New South Wales and South Australia is still maintained (South Australia has the dingoes; New South Wales and Queensland don't want them.)



This legendary "Dingo Fence" separates Queensland from South Australia. Note the tracks are on the South Australia side.

Northeastern Australia has a subtropical climate. The heat and humidity take a toll on man and beast. The traditional Queensland house was build for ventilation. Four rooms were held 7 feet above the ground by 18 inch diameter Eucalyptus poles. Later when more money was available, a 12-foot veranda was added to encompass the four rooms with shade. The final touch was adding a wood or wrought iron lattice work to the enclosure. With the coming of running water, the bath and utility room was put on the ground level. It was on a midnight trip 'downstairs' that I met face to face with a fruit bat who slept over the toilet. (P.S. Don't close the lid).

Like houses, cattle breeding has adapted to the climate. *Bos indicus* cattle are better suited than the traditional *Bos taurus*. These tall, deviled-horned creatures have a loving disposition, resistance to ticks, internal parasites, buffalo flies, and to mustering (gathering or handling). They are very hard to handle when they feel confined and almost impossible to muster with dogs. My host, an innovative cattleman,



Mulga bush and acacia extend mile after mile, making up a typical scene of South Australia grazing land.

was proud of his 'crush' (chute and headcatch) and 12-foot high yards (corrals).

He carefully explained: 'People here believe if you catch a cow by the head she will kill herself. Guess that's true is she has never been handled. Most people here don't know how many they have or if they do, don't have the yards to handle them.'

Since the majority of the cattle have Zebu blood, cows tend to calve every other year. The bullox run on the range until three years of age or when they can be caught and taken to slaughter, shipped to US and ground with American tallow —'international crossbreeding.' The major breeding debate is whether to have big high growth animals (Brahma) or smaller low producing animals (Red Syndy) which can live through the droughts.

Time for a spot of tea and a move on south to Bundaberg for a day with the extension agent, who of course is in dress shorts, a sweater and bush hat. The project for the day was to divide a 50-acre ryegrass center-pivot irrigation system into four pastures for rotational grazing. By theory the system was to roll over an electric fence. After tea, study and work, we started the system. The fence lay down as the system rolled over it, but instead of returning to the original upright position, jumped six feet into the air and lay flat on the ground. Another spot of tea and hinged posts succeeded in keeping the fence upright. Most of the fences are made of hardwood posts, too hard to drive a staple in. Holes are drilled into the post and a quarter of a mile of barbed wire threaded through them. To electrify, just attach a 'fencer unit'.

My next host family had four generations living on the original homestead settled in 1872. They raised sugar cane, Afrikander cattle, native and South African grass seed. Like US, although diversified, they are facing financial difficulty and realize how close their problems are to ours.

Many times the sugar caners told me, 'We are not going to borrow ourselves out of business like our American cousins.' I hope they can hold out.

Australia is a beautiful land, with deep feelings of national pride and concern for the world about them. I was honored to be referred to as one of their 'American Cousins.' Having been there, having sat at their tables and walked in their footsteps I saw Australia at 'ground level' and came home with a new appreciation for the abundance in the US.