



Chapter 5

Focusing on south-west Queensland

While social life in rural communities is often represented as boring, claustrophobic and doomed by economic decline, it is much more complex and often more optimistic than is usually assumed.

(Lockie and Bourke 2001 p. 87)

5.0 Introduction

Context has already been established as fundamentally important to participatory resource management (in Chapter 2) as the background element influencing all of the dimensions of participation (see model, Figure 2.2). Context is also fundamental to power. Power, in the Foucauldian sense, is the strategic games or rules that determine the formation and conditions of existence of discourses in society (Foucault 1991a p. 61). These social rules are determined by the contexts of a particular time and place, so understanding these contexts is integral to understanding power relations in participation.

Not only are power relations misunderstood, but the social context is also often misunderstood. As Lockie and Bourke (2001) point out, the social aspects of Australian rural communities are often more optimistic and more complex than are generally assumed. Various programs and projects have been introduced by governments to address land degradation problems and the declining economic base of many rural communities. However, these have been largely unsuccessful, as an integrated, holistic approach is missing. Few programs have shown an understanding of the links between the social circumstances, the environmental problems and the economic context.

Many people designing programs for the rangelands, such as policy makers — and even project officers based in the regions — have little comprehension of the complexity of the various contexts in the rangelands. Power dynamics within rangelands communities, and between the government agencies and the community, are certainly not well understood. While social and cultural aspects may be more important to the study of power, all of the various contexts are interrelated, and all have direct and indirect influences on power.

The aim of this chapter is to review the environmental, socio-economic and cultural contexts of the rangelands, including an outline of current participatory activities in government programs by landholders. This examination has two main purposes: firstly, to justify the selection of south-west Queensland as the region for the case study; secondly, to relate the various contexts to power relations and community participation.

Thus this chapter answers the questions: Why rangelands? Why regions? Why south-west Queensland? This first section highlights why the case study region is *politically important* (Miles and Huberman 1994). Then the second section of this chapter (Section 5.2) will elaborate on two of the other criteria used in choosing south-west Queensland. South-west Queensland is *typical* (Miles and Huberman 1994) of the Australian rangelands because of its environmental and socio-economic contexts. The participation trends and cultural context indicate that this

case study region is information-rich or *intense* (Miles and Huberman 1994) — the third criterion used to select south-west Queensland. The contexts of this region are also explored in terms of those aspects that are significant for community participation and power.

5.1 The case study

Several factors were considered when choosing this case study. Firstly the scale of the case study was considered; that is, the selection was narrowed to the Australian rangelands, then to regions, then to a particular region within the rangelands. Reasons for these choices are outlined below.

5.1.1 Why rangelands?

More than 75% of Australia is broadly defined as rangelands. Consequently, how to involve rangeland communities and the power relations between people in participatory activities is important to the management of a large area of Australia. In Australia, rangelands are described in several ways, with no commonly agreed boundaries. The National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management (Commonwealth of Australia 1999) suggests that boundaries move as climatic conditions alter. Rangelands are characterised by highly variable, usually low rainfall of 150–500 mm per year (Hodgkinson 1995).



The Australian National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management state that:

Rangelands comprise the low rainfall and variable climate of the arid and semi-arid areas and north of the Tropic of Capricorn, some seasonally high rainfall areas. The main ecosystem types are native grasslands, shrublands, woodlands and the tropical savanna woodlands. The rangelands also include the slopes and plains of northern NSW and southern Queensland. (Commonwealth of Australia 1999 p. 2)

Figure 5.1 Australian rangelands
(adapted by DNR&M from NLWRA 2001)

The problems of chronic environmental and socio-economic problems that occur in rural Australia are compounded in the rangelands by more dramatic changes in climatic conditions. Few options for development or diversification exist because of these climatic extremes. Rangelands are largely undeveloped agriculturally, except for the introduction of some improved pastures, mainly buffel grass. Indicators of socio-economic conditions, discussed in

the following section, indicate that some rangeland communities are not sustainable. These issues need to be discussed by rangeland communities to help them adjust to the changes ahead.

Rangeland regions in Australia are faced with difficulties in community engagement that are different from those of other rural and urban areas. The most obvious one is distance, which relates to the cost of participation. Research undertaken in other regions is not necessarily applicable, thus a specific rangelands case study is warranted.

The positive side of the lack of development is that the ecosystems of the rangelands remain in a relatively natural condition (NLWRA 2002). A focus on rangeland management is justifiable from an environmental perspective, to protect intact ecosystems, as well from a social perspective. The importance of rangelands arises partly because of their geographical area, but rangelands are also recognised as important because of their economic contribution to Australia's exports, and their environmental and cultural attributes. These aspects are described in more detail in the second part of this chapter (Section 5.2). Limited social research undertaken on the implications of regional institutional arrangements and in rangelands generally, means that this research has the potential to contribute significantly to improved community engagement.

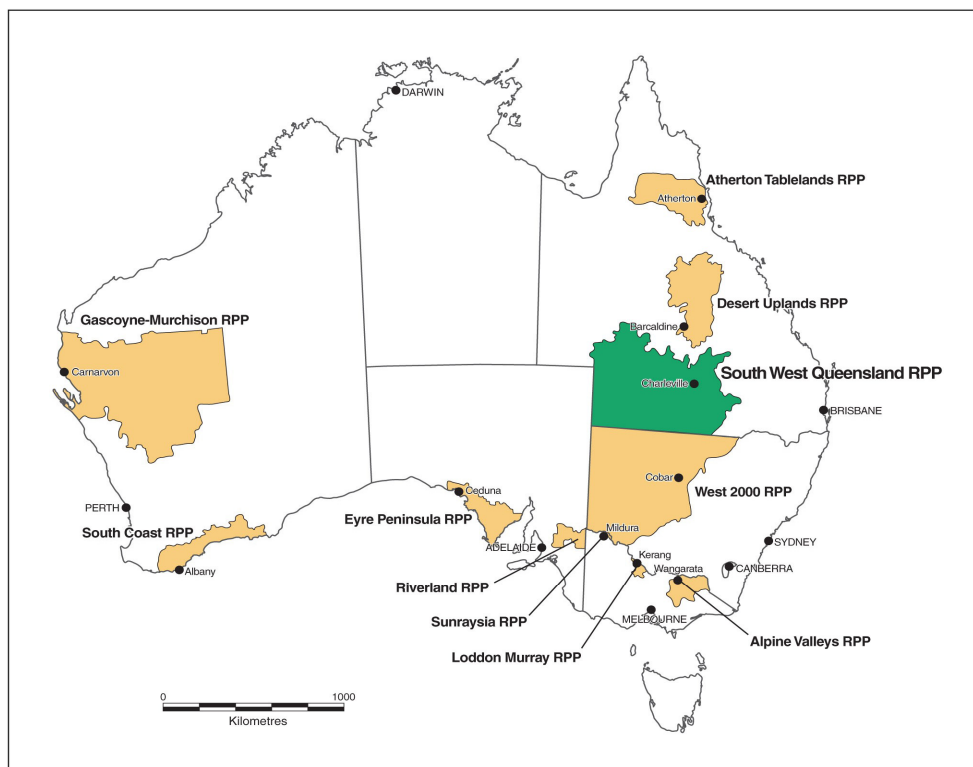
5.1.2 Why regions?

The regional scale is considered significant in land management because effective solutions need to be locality specific (see Chapter 2). Regional institutions also benefit from economies of scale, while acknowledging local needs and having the ability to be more adaptive than larger institutional scales (Dore and Woodhill 1999). Adaptability and flexibility have been highlighted (see previous chapter) as necessary for a holistic systems approach to land management, and to account for contextual differences.

Regions are defined at a variety of scales. International analysts may talk about the “Asia–Pacific region” (Penm and Fisher 2004), but to others, the term *rangelands* describes a region itself. Usually however, regions are considered to be mere components of the rangelands — such as south-west Queensland. While rangelands as a whole do have many characteristic features, each region within the rangelands area is inherently unique in some aspects.

When this research began in late 1998, one of the few programs that promoted the involvement of local communities in regional decision-making for land management was the Rural Partnership Program (RPP), see Box 5.1.

Box 5.1 Rural Partnership Program and map of Rural Partnership Programs in 1998²¹



The Rural Partnership Program (RPP) was developed cooperatively by the Ministers of Commonwealth and state departments of primary industries and agriculture in 1994 (as an ARM CANZ pilot study: DHARD 1994; DPIE 1995a, 1995b). It was an umbrella program under which communities could apply for funding from a variety of government programs aimed at supporting rural areas.

The broad principles under which it operated were:

- community support and ownership;
- coordinated program delivery at regional and local levels;
- a strategic approach to address rural regional economic development and adjustment, sustainable land and water management, environmental issues as well as social issues and community development. It was a triple bottom-line program, even though that was not the terminology used at that time.

The aims of the RPP were:

- to further develop a more profitable rural sector that operates competitively in a deregulated financial and market environment, and effectively adapts to changed market, economic and resource conditions;
- to improve sustainable management of the natural resource base and local environmental conditions;
- to develop a more robust and prosperous rural community; and
- to introduce complementary micro-economic and institutional reforms that address catchment-wide and regional issues (DPIE 1995c p. 5).

The Commonwealth government began a number of regionally based projects under the RPP. RPPs in the rangelands were the Gascoyne–Murchison Strategy (GMS) in Western Australia, Desert Uplands (DU) in central Queensland and WEST 2000, the western division of New South Wales. Memorandum of Agreements between the state and federal governments were signed for each region — for example South West Strategy in 1994; West 2000 (NSW) in 1997; Desert Uplands (Qld) and Gascoyne-Murchison (WA) both in 1998. The strategy agreements were generally timed to complete in 2003, but some of the regions continued to have a role beyond RPP funding; for example the Gascoyne–Murchison was still operating in 2002 (Lewis 2002). The eastern part South West Strategy region is now part of the Murray–Darling National Action Plan (NAP) region.

²¹ RPP map was adapted from a map by National Resource Information Centre, Bureau of Rural Sciences, 1998.

In late 1998, the South West Strategy had been running longer than any of the other rangeland RPP groups, as it was one of the first RPP groups established in Australia. The South West Strategy was often heralded as having excellent community involvement (personal communication Kingma 1998)²² and used as a case study by the Commonwealth for developing other regions (DPIE 1995a).

Regions became the focal scale for NRM in Australia during the 1990s (Commonwealth of Australia 1996d; COAG 200; DPIE 1995a; Taskforce of Regional Development 1993). Regions continue to be the focus for resource management in the 2000s, with the advent of the National Action Plan for Salinity (COAG 2000; Queensland Government 2002) and the developing NHT2 arrangements. These programs have institutionalised regional structures, as these regions are enshrined in legislation in all states except Queensland and Western Australia. It is at this scale that links between the local people and government institutions are being forged, redefining power relations in the “new territory” of government (Rose 1996a).

5.1.3 The South West Strategy region

The South West Strategy region in south-west Queensland was chosen as the case study for this research into power relations because of opportunities it provided — it was an *intense* or information-rich case according to Miles and Huberman’s (1994) criteria. Firstly, the community participation had not been researched, certainly not from the perspective of the general landholder community who, according to the popular rhetoric, were supposed to be in control of NRM in the region.

Secondly, the South West Strategy group (SWS) had implemented participatory activities at the local and regional scales over an extended period of time (the history of the SWS group is given in Box 5.2). Community involvement was viewed by state and federal governments as being well done, and local landholders had considerable experience in participatory approaches. This meant that the SWS region was a *politically important* case (Miles and Huberman 1994). Consequently, these communities were more likely than others, who may not have had that opportunity, to be able to provide useful insights.

Thirdly, government staff could offer insights about local community participation, as well as providing information about inter- and intra-agency links. Lessons could be derived from the existing coordination attempts between the various state government departments, established

during the development of the RPP. The SWS group adopted an integrated approach to solving problems by appointing social and financial rural counsellors, undertaking natural resource management projects and supporting regional development programs. Clearly, as a region for study of power relationships in participation, this case provided many incentives.

Box 5.2 History of the South West Strategy

The SWS grew out of an increasing recognition that significant areas of south-west Queensland were experiencing chronic economic, social and natural resource problems and that these were escalating. Much of the impetus for forming the SWS came from a specific concern about land degradation due in part to the non-viability of property size in the Mulga Lands. By the mid-1990s, pastoralists and government agencies in south-west Queensland had long recognised that the stock carrying capacities for many properties within the Mulga Lands were too high to be sustainable.

Community involvement began during a preceding scheme the Mulga Land Use Advisory Group, which formed in 1991. Landholders worked closely with scientists at the Charleville Pastoral Laboratory during the 1970s and 1980s in identifying and assessing the problems of land degradation, and in 1991 landholders initiated the Mulga Lands Advisory Group. This led to the successful establishment of the Land Degradation Voluntary Property Build-Up Scheme, launched in 1992. A Mulga Position Paper by the Mulga Land Use Advisory Group (1993), along with several other reports, highlighted the chronic problems of the region and gave impetus to the formation of the SWS (Centre for International Economics 1997).

The SWS was launched in 1994, after extensive consultation, as a blueprint for recovery for the region. The Queensland Government initiated a whole-of-government approach involving three main strategies:

- Enterprise reconstruction
- Natural resource management
- Integrated regional development (Centre for International Economics 1997 p. ix).

A fourth strategy, information and technology, was included later. This component was created to identify and address the communication infrastructure needs of rural and outback communities of south-west Queensland. This strategy aims to ensure more access to education and training, access to the global economic markets, communication with the global community, access to government services and access to research and development initiatives (DNR Corporate Communications *n.d.*).

As the research progressed, the SWS was recognised as being important because it was a region with a history of community participation, rather than because it was a Rural Partnership Program group. Since this research was concluded, the SWS group has continued, but under a different banner. The name remains, but the SWS has evolved into an NHT2 group under the regional arrangements negotiated in conjunction with the NAP groups (Queensland Govt 2002).

²² Onko Kingma was the Assistant Secretary in AFFA, responsible for the RPP in 1988.

5.2 The context of the South West Strategy region

In this section we examine the environmental, socio-economic and cultural contexts of the SWS region, and the trends in participatory processes that have taken place there.

5.2.2 Environmental context of south-west Queensland

The key environmental drivers which influence power relations in community participation are the ecological significance of the region, poor productivity of the land and land degradation, all of which are linked to the fluctuating climatic conditions. Differing perceptions and values about environmental attributes cause tensions and power struggles. The ecological significance of the Australian rangelands, including those of south-west Queensland, arises partly because these ecosystems are in a relatively natural condition. Elsewhere in the world, rangelands are more degraded than in Australia (Woinarski 2002). International agreements require the protection of internationally significant wetlands such as Currawinya Lakes, which are listed under the international Ramsar Convention (see Box 5.3). As such, people who do not live in the rangelands have an interest in its management, and tensions arise when land management for conservation purposes is being discussed.

Environmental conditions, including fluctuating rainfall, are the main reason for poor agricultural productivity of the Mulga Lands bioregion (Figure 5.2). Agriculture is predominantly extensive grazing. This in turn results in a sparsely populated region, and people may travel for 12 hours to reach their local towns. These factors limit the availability of people for participatory projects.

Perceptions about land degradation are another factor. Land degradation is one of the key environmental problems debated by stakeholder groups in south-west Queensland, and perceptions about who is responsible — for causing the problems and for rectifying them — is the cause of much tension. Two-thirds of Queensland's mulga lands lie within the SWS region. The mulga lands in Queensland appear to have suffered a smaller loss of biodiversity compared to those of New South Wales (MDBC 1998 p. B26), probably due to limited cropping. Even so, land degradation is a major problem in south-west Queensland and is largely the result of overgrazing, for whatever reasons. Degradation has many forms (see Box 5.3), including decline of biodiversity, vegetation clearing, spread of weed species, soil erosion, and a decline in water quality and quantity.

Box 5.3 Environmental issues in the rangelands

Biodiversity. Several landsystems in south-west Queensland are important for conservation – the internationally recognised Ramsar site of Currawinya Lakes, the wetlands of the Cooper Creek, of the Channel Country and of the Lake Eyre Basin. Many major water-bird breeding areas within the region are amongst the most significant wetland areas in arid Australia (Kingsford 1995). The Paroo River system has one of most significant wetland complexes in the Murray–Darling Basin as they have been the least affected by water and agricultural development in the Basin (Cowley 1998).

Many native plants and animals have become extinct over recent decades – twenty rangeland mammal species have become extinct over the past 200 years (McKenzie and Burbidge 2002). Loss of biodiversity is related to over-grazing, as well as other factors including the spread of exotic plants and animals, pollution and mining. These factors cause insidious and gradual change, which means that the symptoms and causes are often missed (Woinarski and Fisher 2003 p. 162).

Vegetation. The Australian rangelands remain relatively uncleared, even though wide-scale clearing has occurred. Approximately 13 % of the Australian continent has been cleared; while less than 1% per annum is cleared in the Mulga Region (NLWRA 2001c). However, specific vegetation communities have been extensively cleared, including brigalow and Mulga (NLWRA 2002) which both occur in the SWS region. A total of 11% of the regional ecosystems are endangered or of concern (Hynes 2002), including the endangered brigalow and gidgee. Only 10–30% of many riparian communities remain (Cowley 1998).

Declining grass species and an increase of woody weeds are often forgotten – 29% of the mulga shortgrass communities are degraded and 51% are deteriorating (Hynes 2002). In the SWS region, as in many rangeland regions, land degradation is often made manifest by an increase in native woody shrubs, e.g. *Eremophila*, *Acacia* and *Dodonaea* (Bull and Moore 2002 p. 281).

Introduced species. Weeds and feral animals threaten the biodiversity of native animals as well as agricultural production, and are considered a major management problem in the rangelands (Read 2003). Rangelands weeds of national significance (Thorp and Lynch 2000) are rubber vine, prickly acacia, mesquite and *Parkinsonia*. Weeds cost Australian agriculture at least \$3.4 million per annum, in terms of the cost of control and losses in output; and at least \$1.4 million is spent on weed control in Queensland alone (Sinden et al. 2004).

Animal pests, including rabbits in the far west, foxes and pigs, as well as horses to a lesser extent, contribute to over-grazing (NLWRA 2002). Goats are considered a resource as well as a pest, depending on market value (NLWRA 2002). Native species of kangaroo and wallabies are also considered pests by graziers; numbers are difficult to control contributing to over-grazing (Hodgkinson and Hacker 2002).

Soils. Soil acidity, soil erosion, soil structural decline and nutrient decline all affect agricultural land (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995; NLWRA 2002). Soil erosion has been identified as a major problem in rangelands with approximately 16% affected (Commonwealth of Australia 1999), largely caused by grazing patterns and over-utilisation of grasses. Possibly the most important principle of sustainable management is the maintenance of the grass layer (O'Reagain and Ash 2002).

Salinity. Irrigation salinity and dryland salinity both occur in the rangelands, but are predominantly a problem in cleared and farmed lands. Dryland salinity is an issue in the SWS region only in the western Balonne plains area, which is the most cleared part of the Mulga Regions. Minimisation of salinity hazard requires retention of vegetation, particularly in recharge areas (Pegler and Voller 2002).

Water. Water management is one of the growing causes of conflict in rural Australia. Controversy erupted in south-west Queensland during the 1990s over water allocation and irrigation licences, as exemplified by the “No Cotton on the Cooper” campaign. The Water Policy Reform framework adopted by the Council of Australian Government in 1994 (Commonwealth of Australia 1996b) heralded the beginning of legislative changes, and the more recent agreement between all of the states and the Commonwealth should provide for increased environmental flows (COAG 2004).

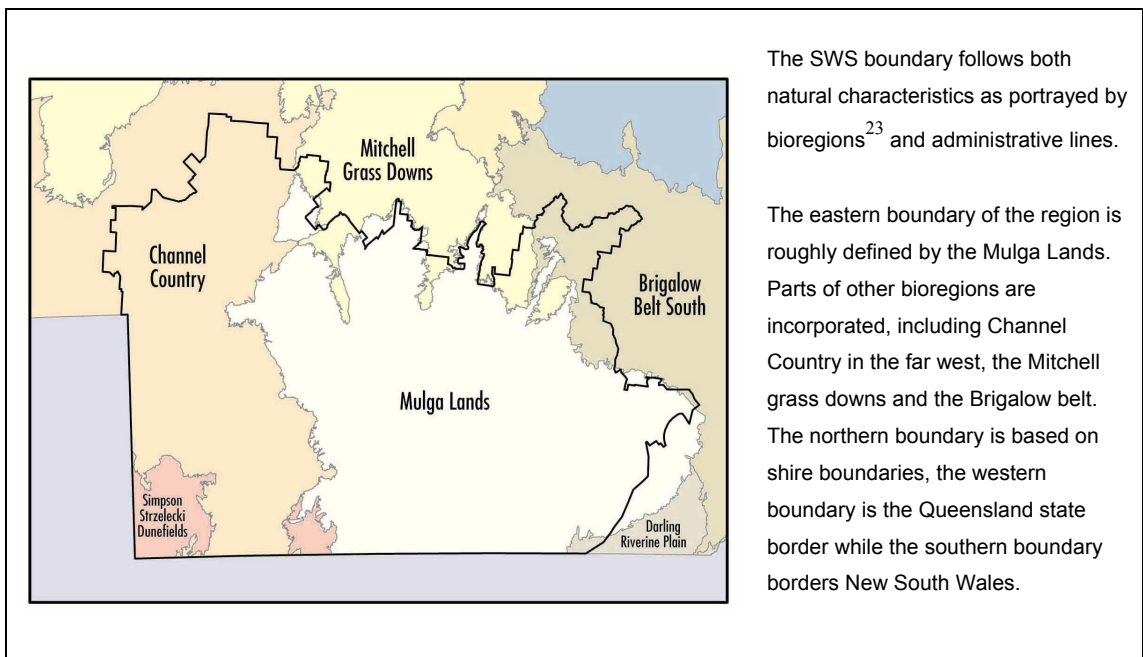


Figure 5.2 Bioregions of south-west Queensland (produced by DNR&M)

It is difficult to assess the state of the rangeland environment. The extreme fluctuations in seasonal and year-to-year rainfall can mask the long-term trends in land condition (Davies 1999; McKeon et al. 2004). Droughts, floods and fire also impact on production, droughts negatively, but floods can mean abundant grass in the Channel Country bioregion. From my observations, pastoralists can dismiss the concerns of scientists about land degradation because of their belief that the “country comes back after a good season”; this is supported by the literature (Lorimer 1999; Davies 1999). However, many landholders do recognise that land degradation is prevalent in rangelands. Landholders tend to agree with scientists’ assessments of weed invasions, but other issues such as vegetation clearing and salination are more contentious. These differences in perceptions about the long-term trends of land condition cause difficulties in community participation processes, and conflict often seems inevitable.

Many of the conflicts in the rangelands relate to the natural environment. In the SWS region one of the recent conflicts arose out of a desire to prevent irrigation on the Cooper River. Local townspeople, graziers in the region and from downstream on the Cooper in New South Wales, joined forces with conservationists from Brisbane, working together with scientists to successfully lobby the government to refuse irrigation licences to proposed cotton farmers. NRM conflicts are inevitably linked to economic and social systems, and should not be

²³ Bioregion is the commonly used term for Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation, which is defined as “A complex land area comprised of a cluster of interacting ecosystems that are repeated in similar form throughout. Region descriptions seek to describe the dominant landscape scale attributes of climate, lithology, geology, landforms and vegetation. Biogeographic regions vary in size with larger regions found where areas have more subdued terrain and arid and semi-arid climates.” (Thackway and Cresswell 1995 p. ix).

considered in isolation. The SWS group recognised the holistic nature of environmental issues (SWS group 1995), and has assisted in creating a greater awareness of these inter-relationships.

The environment clearly provides problems that generate power issues for regional people. However, it is in the context of social and economic relations that debate and struggle for power are most obvious.

5.2.3 Socio-economic context of south-west Queensland

This section outlines several elements of the socio-economic context of south-west Queensland. These are declining terms of trade, low incomes, high debt levels, land ownership, property size, social decline and structural adjustment schemes. Many of the characteristics of the SWS region are common in other rangeland regions. The lack of understanding and different perceptions of these elements are the cause of many conflicts and power struggles. For example, land degradation is often blamed on farmers' and graziers' lack of information and understanding.

In south-west Queensland, and across the rangelands generally, underlying socio-economic issues are the real causes of land degradation. Landholders often choose to ignore land degradation problems for "rational" reasons (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995 p. 172). It is increasingly difficult for landholders to care for the land as their enterprises become less profitable — as is commonly heard: "it is hard to be green when you are in the red". The factors that inhibit landholders' power to overcome land degradation are more complex than a paucity of scientific knowledge. Economics is the main barrier to sustainable land use in south-west Queensland (Cowley 1998).

Declining terms of trade and income

The major influences in agriculture in south-west Queensland are the same across the rangelands, and for most Australian agriculture in general. Australian rangeland agriculture is vulnerable to world trends, as over 70% of its pastoral industry product is exported (NLWRA 2002 p. 237). The 1980s saw market prices for agricultural produce in Australia distorted by subsidies and major structural surpluses of agricultural products overseas (Roberts 1997 p. 7). To a large extent this is still true. Trends in the changing global environment for agriculture which influenced Australian rural communities in the 1990s and early 2000s include globalisation, continuing pressure on small businesses from larger businesses, and advances in technology — especially in genetics and information management (Ash and Stafford Smith 2003; Napier 1997; Robertson 2003). The deregulation of the Australian dollar, and subsequent fluctuations, also influence the value of rangeland agricultural industries.

The economics of agricultural enterprises are a major influence on land management, as most of the geographical area of the rangelands is managed for extensive agriculture. Sheep and cattle

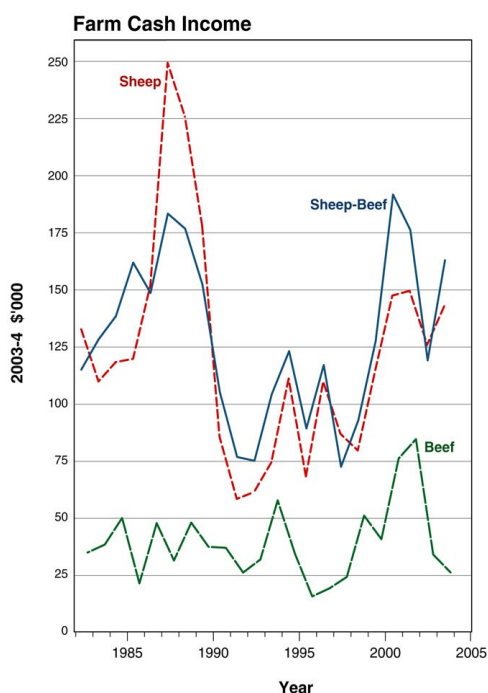


Figure 5.3 Variability of sheep and beef cattle production (adapted by Hilliker from Martin et al. 2004)

grazing are the most common agricultural industries in the Australian rangelands. Terms of trade for beef and wool fell substantially between 1986 and 1996, even though there was little difference in terms of trade for Australia agriculture (Cary, Barr, Aslin, Webb and Kelson 2001 p. 74).

During this period the value of rural commodities in general did not change substantially (Figure 5.3), even though costs, such as fuel and wages, continued to increase.

The value of livestock sales did fluctuate because of a highly variable climate, which influences supply and demand, particularly in the rangelands. Variable production and fluctuating commodity prices and influence farm incomes.

Incomes in south-west Queensland are similar to those of much of the Queensland and New South Wales rangelands (Figure 5.4). The trend of income decline is not totally consistent across the rangelands, or even across south-west Queensland. While many farm families struggle to generate sufficient returns to ensure long-term survival, some enterprises do generate significant incomes. In south-west Queensland, farm income is not likely to be supplemented by off-farm income, because of the lack of proximity to major population centres (Cary, Barr, Aslin et al. 2001 p. 79). Thus farm incomes are a good indicator of people’s ability and motivation to become involved in participatory projects.

The differences in income in south-west Queensland suggest that there is a widening gap between those enterprises that can manage change and those which are left behind. This trend, called *bifurcation* by Barr and Cary (2000) is widespread in Australian agriculture.

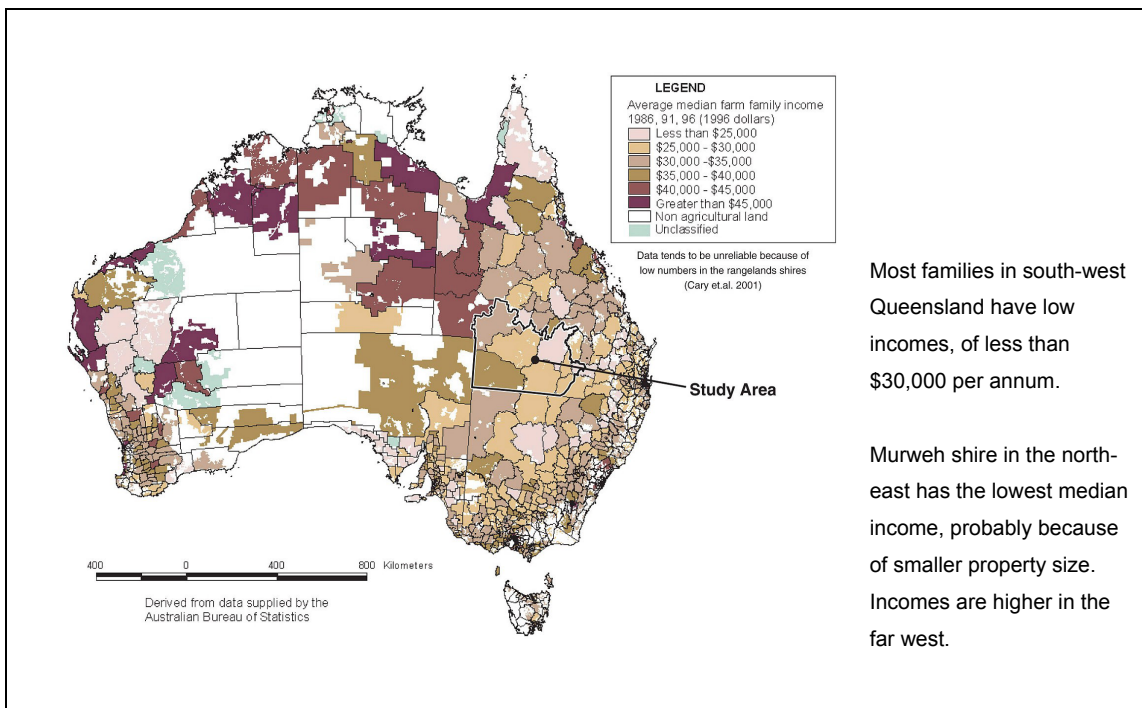


Figure 5.4 Farm cash income (adapted by Hilliker from NLWRA 2000)

Debt

Debt levels, which are linked to income, are a major driver of decision-making in all rural businesses, and it is important to understand this factor when participatory programs are being implemented. Servicing debt has been a major cost for many farm families: it impacts on their ability to implement NRM, and it contributes to their stress levels and motivation to participate in activities.

In the SWS region, debt levels in the 1990s of approximately \$400,000 per family were far greater than the state average (personal communication, Neale Price, Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority, Brisbane 28 March 2000). The Mulga region's position paper (Department of Lands 1993) reported that woolgrowers' debt levels had risen significantly since the mid-1980s. Of particular concern is the relationship between the value of production and debt level — regional debt has consistently been higher than the regional value of production (QRAA 2004).

High debt levels and low income affects the ability or financial power that farm families have to tackle sustainable resource management issues (NLWRA 2002). It also affects people's ability and motivation to participate in government activities and to attend meetings. Not surprisingly, informal discussions with government officers in south-west Queensland confirm the idea that participation rates, and the topics people are interested in, vary according to the season and landholders' incomes. Socio-economic factors are all inter-related.

Social decline

Exacerbating the declining economic situation of graziers is the deteriorating social fabric of many rangeland communities, such as health support and withdrawal of services. Structural factors such as the withdrawal of services are usually the cause of rural poverty (Alston 1999), and this negative cycle tends to be self-perpetuating. Overall, rural communities suffer from poorer health than urban populations. They have higher hospitalisation rates, lower life expectancies (Alston 1999; Strong, Trickett, Itulaer and Bhatia 1998), and high rates of youth suicide (Dudley, Kelk and Florio 1997). They also have to cope with the withdrawal of government services and a shortage of medical practitioners (*Queensland Country Life* 3 February 2000 p. 7).

One of the implications of withdrawal of services is that fewer options are available for supplementing low farm incomes with off-farm employment. All of these factors combine to increase stress and reduce people's feeling of power over their own lives, and thus their motivation to participate in land management programs.

Structural adjustment schemes

The structural adjustment schemes were seen as the panacea for the economic, social and environmental problems of many rangeland regions, including south-west Queensland (Box 5.1). However, these schemes have been largely unsuccessful. One indicator is that more property transfers occurred *without* assistance from these schemes in the SWS (and in the corresponding RPP region in NSW known as West 2000) than occurred *with* assistance from the schemes (Cary, Barr, Aslin et al. 2001; SWS Board minutes 1998, 1999; URS Australia 2001).

Regardless of government attempts to encourage such changes, further structural adjustment will occur in the rangelands as the value of pastoralism declines, in common with the structural adjustment in all rural communities in Australia. In the rangelands, the trend is likely to be towards "post-production" (Morrisey 1999) or multi-functionality, where conservation uses will be valued more highly than pastoralism and existing primary producers may be paid to be stewards of the land (Fargher et al. 2003). While this may sound overly idealistic in Australia's economic rationalist society, such systems do operate in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe.

Despite all of these negative factors, many communities seem extremely resilient. One example of a community's determination to survive in spite of these pressures is the success of community banks in rural areas (e.g. Cocklin and Alston 2003; Taylor 1999). Optimism in

landholder communities is beginning to be recognised (Cocklin and Alston 2003; Morrisey 1999; Stayner 1997). In the rangelands, people need more than optimism; they need skills to be able to cope with these changes. Hunt (2003) suggests that living and deriving an income in the rangelands is becoming increasingly complex. Numerous factors having been identified as blocking change, including lack of financial resources, a high degree of uncertainty about the future and the limited capacity for change at the local level. Limited capacity to change is compounded by the declining political power of rural and regional communities.

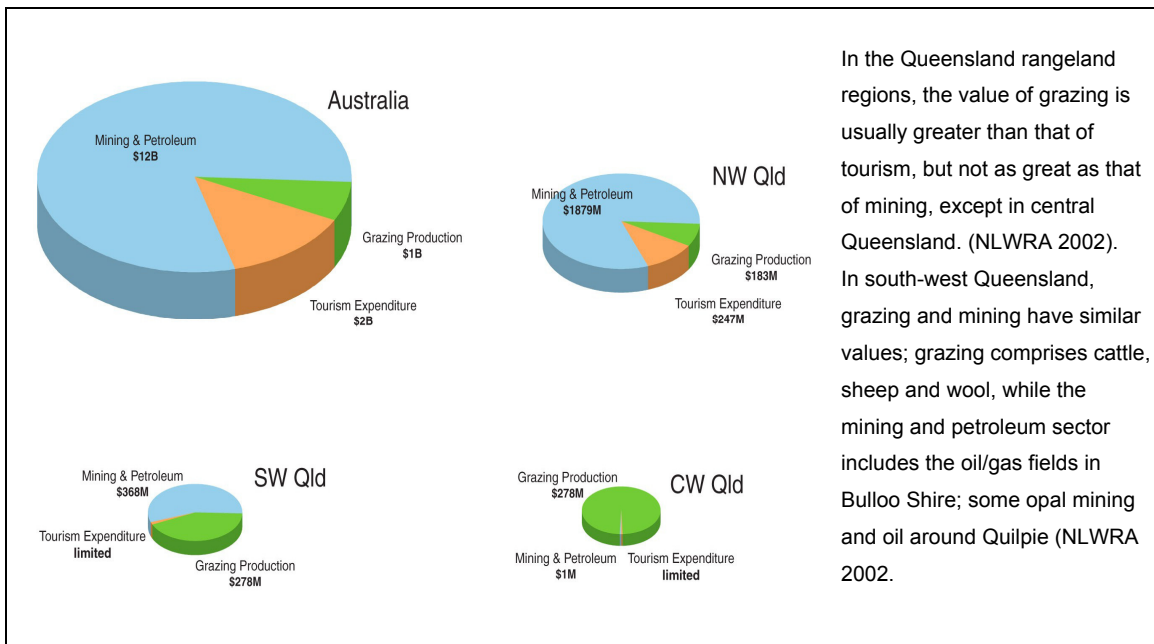
The declining power of pastoralism

Two key factors contribute to the declining political power of rangeland communities: relatively low value of pastoral industries and sparse population. The low values of pastoral industries has been covered (Figures 5.4 and 5.5). Population numbers in the rangelands are low and declining in many areas. Population levels are partly related to the falling value of pastoral industries because of decreasing employment opportunities and the reduction in farmer numbers.

Decreasing employment in primary industries is part of an international phenomenon (Fargher et al. 2003), and data in the Social Atlas confirm a continuing loss of employment in rangeland regions (Haberkorn et al. 1999) and a decline in the numbers of farm families (Cary, Barr, Aslin et al. 2001). However, in Australia it is the European population that is declining; in fact, Aboriginal populations are growing in many rangeland regions (Childs 2002; NLWRA 2002). The overall situation remains: in south-west Queensland, the number of farm families and total population are declining.

Fargher and others (2003) suggest that viewing 21st century rangelands as a pastoral economy and society is subscribing to a romantic myth, as tourism, mining and service industries increasingly generate more wealth than does pastoralism. No longer can Australia be said to be “riding on the sheep’s back” for the contribution of rangeland pastoralism to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has declined from 15–20% in the early 1950s (Pollard *n.d.*) to only 3% in the 2000s (NLWRA 2002). Despite these trends, south-west Queensland the cattle, sheep and wool industries are still the mainstay of the economy, as indicated in Figure 5.6.

While rangelands communities complain about lower levels of political power, government programs have continued, perhaps out of proportion to the population (Holmes 1997; Fargher et al. 2003). We need to remember that rangeland programs support the management of over 70% of the land mass of Australia, and thus the participation of rangeland people is imperative for the sustainable management of a large area of Australia.



In the Queensland rangeland regions, the value of grazing is usually greater than that of tourism, but not as great as that of mining, except in central Queensland. (NLWRA 2002). In south-west Queensland, grazing and mining have similar values; grazing comprises cattle, sheep and wool, while the mining and petroleum sector includes the oil/gas fields in Bulloo Shire; some opal mining and oil around Quilpie (NLWRA 2002).

Figure 5.6 Relative value of industries (adapted by Hilliker from Fargher et al. 2003)

Overall, the socio-economic data indicate that in the SWS region, the level of social services is low, debt levels are high, farm incomes are generally low and, on the whole, declining. The outlook for pastoralism is bleak. Long-term resource management problems are unlikely to be addressed until the economic situation of families improves, and this seems unlikely if people continue to rely solely on pastoralism. One would expect such circumstances to be a disincentive for participation in government NRM programs, as some of these families are living below the poverty line. Unless programs relate directly to improving their economic survival they are unlikely to be interested in participating.

5.2.4 Participation: critical trends

Landholder participation in NRM and agricultural programs is widely considered to be an indicator for people's ability and desire to solve environmental problems and adopt sustainable land management practices (Cary, Webb and Barr 2001; Curtis 1996; Mues, Chapman and van Hilst 1998), and thus cope with changing circumstances. Participation rates in the rangelands are low (Figure 5.7) thus the implication is that rangeland landholders are slow to solve environmental problems. This is a clear example of how a lack of understanding of the contexts of the rangelands can allow people to draw inappropriate conclusions.

In the rangelands, participation trends (as developed for Figure 5.7) are an unreliable indicator for several reasons. Firstly, much of the rangelands cannot be mapped because of small sample sizes, which means that no meaningful interpretation can be made (Cary, Barr, Aslin et al. 2001); this is especially true for the western part of the SWS rangelands. Secondly, the

management practices used in these indicators are not appropriate for the SWS region, and probably not for most of the rangelands. Undertaking soil works, pasture monitoring and adjusting stock type for pasture are said to have a strong association with participation in training (NLWRA 2001a). Pasture monitoring is appropriate for the rangeland context, but not the other indicators. Choice of stock type in the rangelands, for example sheep, is determined largely by the extent of dingo predation and the location of the property in relation to the dingo fence, as sheep are more susceptible to dingo predation than are cattle. Soil works are rarely needed in rangeland regions, because grazing is extensive, not intensive. Thus two of the three indicators of good environmental practice are inappropriate in the rangelands. Consequently, low participation rates are not a good indicator of environmental practice in the rangelands.

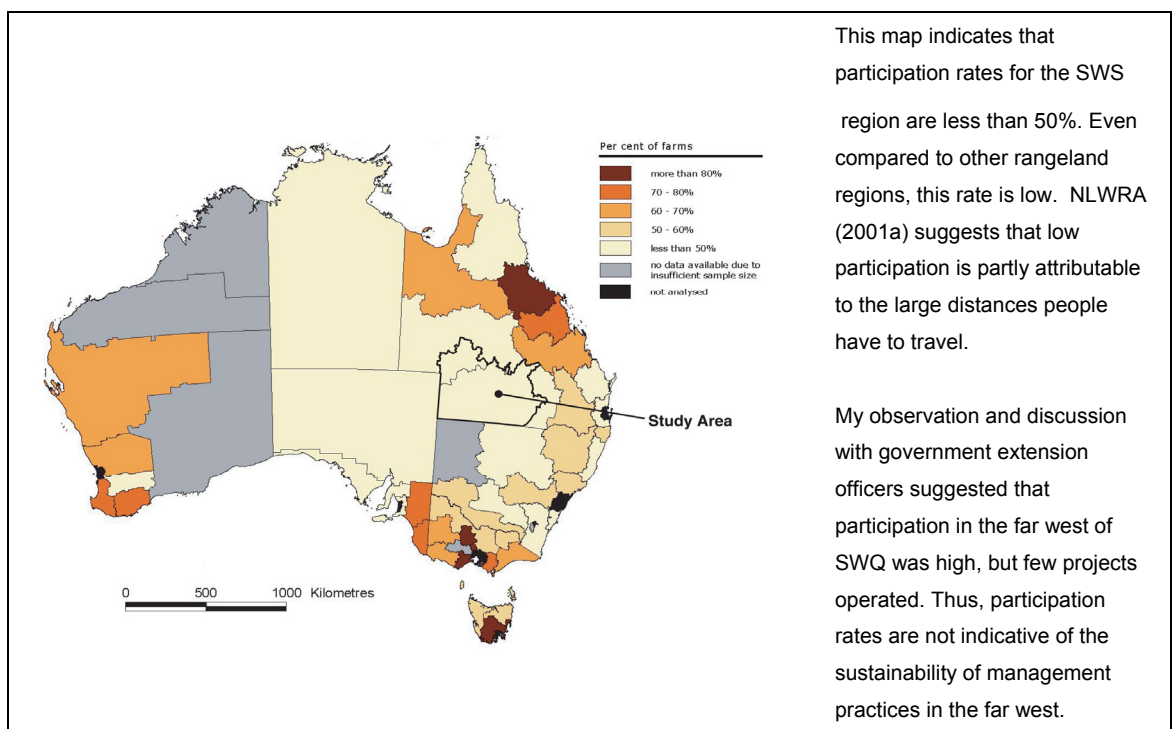


Figure 5.7 Participation in recent training (adapted by Hilliker from NLWRA 2001a²⁶)

The SWS group has made a point of encouraging participation within the region. This region has had a long history of involving the landholder community in planning government programs. Empowerment of participants, along with community participation and inclusivity, was a key element of the SWS. The SWS Paper (SWS 1995) promoted effective *community empowerment*, stating that the Strategy was a genuinely community-led and administered program (SWS 1995 p. 4). People were encouraged to become involved in decision-making

²⁶ The participation rate as a percentage of farms participating, indicates whether or not the owner or manager (regarded as the primary decision-maker for the farm business, ABARE 2000 p. 61) has attended a property/environmental management course or workshop during the 3 years July 1996 to June 1999 (NLWRA 2001a: *Participation in recent training*). This map was presented

about future projects. My observation is that landholders' opinions were sought, and were accepted when provided, and incorporated into decisions made by government officers. Local people were heralded as key players in the decision-making processes about NRM programs and projects.

The SWS group has attempted to be inclusive. The initial Board had about 30 members, comprising representative members from a wide spectrum of interests: rural and urban social groups, Chambers of Commerce, government departments, industry groups and financial institutions. The Board members were nominated by community and industry groups. In the late 1990s the Board was rationalised, as the large number of members was considered too cumbersome, and discussions were too lengthy and therefore overly time consuming for the decision-making processes.

The SWS group engaged with the community at various stages and scales, both externally and internally within the region. Links were formed with other regional groups. The SWS region overlaps with several programs and regional groups, and some extend across state boundaries. This has led to working relationships with other regional groups including the Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group, the Great Artesian Basin Consultative Council and the Murray–Darling Basin Commission. Extensive community consultation was undertaken across the region during the planning and development phase, with community meetings held in several centres around the region, and the organisation of bus trips and information kits.

One factor that seemed to set the SWS apart from other regional initiatives at this time was that it attempted to incorporate the social dimension into environmental and economic programs. The SWS group (1995) identified this program as an integrated regional development initiative, to help on-going adjustment to changed markets and other conditions and thereby to develop a more robust regional and economic base. Initially, natural resource management issues were given a high priority within SWS programs. Funding was sought for three main areas: total grazing pressure incorporating a safe carrying capacity project, conversion of bore drains to reticulated piped systems, and a feral goat and kangaroo management program (see Box 4.4 for description of projects). However, it was recognised by the Board and others that many of these natural resource issues were inter-related and should not be considered in isolation from other programs of the strategy (SWS group 1995). Within a couple of years, a financial and personal centre was established in Charleville, offering individual support and programs related to

with the proviso that the ABARE farm survey provided data for only some regions, and even then the small samples mean that the data is incompatible with meaningful regional assessments.

suicide, domestic violence, child care and a range of other social issues. Links were also formed with the urban and small business regional development committee.

Most of the points above emphasise the importance of understanding the context of participation, and thus the context of power relations in participatory resource management programs. The general extent, trends in, and representativeness of participation in this region all support the SWS region as being an information-rich case study for research into power relations. We shall now turn to the final major consideration of factors affecting power relations: the impact of rural culture on people's capacity to cope with the changes in the rangelands.

5.2.5 Cultural context

In this section we examine some of the underlying cultural beliefs that seem to be the cause of differing perceptions, and which confuse communications and power relations among land-users, scientists and policy makers. In this thesis, culture is defined as a "shared meaning system" where shared ideas, customs, knowledge, values and beliefs are used by the group to understand the world (Fiske 1987; Johnson 1995; King 2000). Differences between people involved in land management occur worldwide (Waters-Bayer et al. 1999 p. 34) and in Australia. For example, government scientists and other analysts suggest that rural decline will continue and that more farmers will leave the land (Fisher 1999; Lockie and Bourke 2001; Morrisey 1999; Vanclay and Lawrence 1995). However, many farmers are reluctant to accept the economic reality of declining viability and declining ecological systems, and remain determined to stay on their properties. The cultural characteristics of rangeland people are closely aligned to those of rural culture generally in Australia.

Australian landholders vary in their perceptions and understanding of economic decline, and the extent and causes of land degradation. Many rural people want to protect the special features of the land (Martin 1999) and have an emotional attachment to it, especially if the land has been in the family for generations (Flannery 1994). Morrisey (1999) suggests that many farmers are optimistic: they believe that agricultural decline is cyclical and that better times are ahead. Other research (Stayner 1997 p. 112) suggests that many landholders are motivated by intrinsic rewards such as interest in their work and maintaining family traditions, rather than by instrumental rewards such as their money-earning potential or a secure future. In my experience, even when the individual's income derives from off-farm sources, many landholders still identify themselves as rural people.

Rural identity and rurality

The meanings of *rural* and *rurality* are usually assumed to be self-evident: *rural* is that which is different from *urban*. *Rural* is often reduced to characteristics or measures (Pratt 1996), such as types of social, cultural or economic practices; or to indicators of social and economic welfare. In Australia, Gray and Phillips (2001) and Bauer and Giles (1999) suggest that rural people have an identity and a culture that are different from the identity and culture of urban people. In this sense, the term *rural* is a normative construct — *rural* is a set of norms or rules against which the degree of “rurality” can be measured and compared against *urban* (Pratt 1996). The notion of a rural–urban divide prevails in everyday discussions and in the literature (Bauer and Giles 1999; Bourke 2001; Finkelstein and Bourke 2001; Gray and Phillips 2001; Nas and Silva 1999).

In this study, landholders and government officers commonly differentiated between themselves as groups, by characteristics such as degree of practical skills, life skills and their different forms of language, although age differences may also play a part. In contrast to people from other regions in Australia, south-west Queenslanders maintain an identity that is strongly and traditionally rural.

However, this denies the multiplicity of communities (Rose 1996a) that contain individuals with their own specific characteristics and unique context. Aslin (2004) explains that rural Australia in the 21st century is altering rapidly with its changing rural constituencies and rural social landscapes (Aslin 2004). To use Pratt’s (1996) terminology, we have many “rurals”, with many different perceptions of the meaning of *rural*.

In rural Australia, most landholders identify strongly with their way of life and the rangeland environment, as it provides them with a strong sense of self-worth (Holmes and Day 1995; Steel 2003). Their culture with its strongly shared value orientations is both a weakness and a strength for people in the rangelands. These cultural values can be a barrier to their ability (a) to adjust to changing goals for the rangelands (Holmes and Day 1995; Hunt 2003), and (b) to accept economic decline, which leads to a rejection of welfare and adjustment programs. Taylor (2003) also found that rangeland pastoralists are not well equipped to deal with social and structural change. The close cultural links within rangeland communities and between landholders and the land, means that envisaging dramatic changes is difficult for people as it threatens their individual identity. As these authors suggest, cultural factors do limit rangeland landholders’ ability and power to adapt, and help explain their slow response to changing circumstances.

On the other hand, these cohesive cultural bonds are a strength that can be used to achieve sustainable regional communities. The rangeland context is very dynamic, and rangeland people have managed these changes and the adversity of the harsh environment for years. As Taylor (2003) highlights, pastoralists in the rangelands are often very good at adapting to changes in biophysical and economic factors affecting their production systems. Rangeland people may be individualistic in many ways, but many have strong networks, and sharing things is often integral to their way of life — perhaps more so in the past than today — but especially in times of adversity, they tend to work together and are very supportive of each other during floods, fires and personal crises. More broadly, the same applies to many other rural communities, and Edwards (2002) talks about social trust being one of the great assets of our Australian culture (see Section 3.2.3 *Rationality: truth and universals*). However, the demographic shifts in rural communities (see Section 5.2.2 *Environmental issues in the rangelands*) mean that the culture and networks within rural communities are changing. This may be inevitable, but if we are to work effectively with participation in the rangelands, we need to remain aware that the values and principles of traditional rural culture are the building blocks of social capital.

Trust

Trust is one of the central themes embodied in the idea of *social capital*, and is an important factor in power relations. According to Pretty (2002a; 2002b) the four themes of social capital are (a) relations of trust, (b) reciprocity and exchanges, (c) common rules, norms and sanctions, and (d) connectedness, networks and groups. Putnam argues that social capital is embodied in “horizontal networks of civic engagements” (1993 p. 176) where power relationships are less likely to be hierarchical. From my experience, this is one reason that rural people dislike being seen as the leaders; they prefer to maintain a level of equity within their rural community as this helps to maintain their support networks for the difficult times. Despite the rhetoric about dying rural communities, my experience is that social capital is still reasonably high in terms of social networks, even if it is declining in many rangelands communities.

Building trust, maintaining equity and sharing power are required for collective action, so necessary for sustainable land management and sustainable communities. Building social capital helps to keep this power in rural communities, which is essential if the communities are to survive. Participatory learning is a mechanism for building social capital, for when different stakeholder groups interact constructively, they listen to each other, learn from each other and build trust. As Pretty (1999) has stated, agriculture can provide an important entry point for rebuilding social and natural capital. Unfortunately, social capital, particularly in terms of trust, is lacking in many communities in the Australian rangelands.

A social context of relationships which lacks trust is a major impediment to community engagement in natural resource management. Societies today are pervaded by a distrust of government (Dukes and Firehock 2001; Pretty 2002a; Saunders 2002), and this includes Australia (Bourke 2001; Carson 2000; Cox 1995; 2001; Sobels et al. 2001). I agree with Dover's view (2000) that the loss of trust is deeper in rural and regional Australia, exactly where trust and cooperation are needed to solve the complex problems of NRM and ESD.

Trust relates to power relationships. As Putnam found in Italy, citizens in regions with low social capital feel exploited and powerless, with frustration highest at the lowest levels on the social ladder (Putnam 1993 pp. 109–111). Conversely, regions where people felt empowered to participate with government and in collective deliberations were those with well developed civic communities based on strong networks of social solidarity (Putnam 1993 p. 115). Putnam (1993 p. 176 and p. 181) argues that the decrease in trust reduces the ability (or power) of governments to promote social capital and economic development. Where there is distrust, cooperative arrangements and shared power in decision-making are difficult to establish.

The current lack of people's trust in government, and in one another, can be related to the ideology of economic rationalism (e.g. Edwards 2002). The building blocks of social capital, trust, reciprocity and co-operation are the antithesis of the principles of economic rationalism, which calls for competition and accountability. If as Australians we do not trust each other or our institutions, then participatory approaches, collective action and cooperative decision-making are fraught with tension. Trust is easy to lose but difficult to rebuild, especially in a context dominated by this economic discourse. However, while Australian citizens are becoming cynical, they are not completely apathetic (Carson 2000). Participation may have become more difficult because of deteriorating trust, but certainly remains possible as people are still interested in being involved.

Economic rationalism, one factor which is at odds with trust, is the underlying force of self-interest. Self-interest is a key tenet of economic rationalism, which poses problems for participation and power sharing. Saunders (2002) points to the lack of attention to relational factors in a world where people are supposed to choose for self-interest and profit; where market solutions rule (Lockie 1997). Dovers (2000) says that the rise of economic rationalism poses difficulties for participation as citizens and institutions have been redefined — citizens are now consumers; institutions and organisations also have been “marketised” and are now run along corporate lines (Dovers 2000). Passfield (1998) suggests that economic rationalism rewards conformism and individual passivity.

These definitions of “consumers” are not those of a citizen likely to embrace civic responsibility, and the responsibility for power in decision-making to achieve sustainable NRM and cohesive rural communities. Such an economic imperative is not conducive to equity in power relationships. Problems of economic rationalism (Edwards 2002) have been discussed in Chapter 3, and refer to the erosion of trust and social capital.

This section (Section 5.2.5 *Cultural context*) has highlighted some of the ideological and cultural factors that influence sustainable land management come from Western culture, while others are more specific to rural and rangeland people. The cultural divide between government and community, the pervasive distrust of government, the dominant doctrine of the market and the hierarchical structures of some organisations can contribute to power struggles and have a negative influence in building equity and social capital. However, some aspects of rural culture, such as supportive networks, need to be fostered and encouraged.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the environmental, socio-economic and cultural contexts of the rangelands, and provided an outline of participatory activities in government programs for landholders in south-west Queensland. All of the above contexts are interrelated, and all have direct and indirect influences on power. The questions: Why rangelands? Why regions? Why south-west Queensland? were used to examine and relate the regional context to the central questions of power relations. Overall, these discussions have been used to explain and justify the selection of south-west Queensland as (a) a politically important case because community participation in the SWS viewed by state and federal governments as being well done; (b) a typical case because the environmental, socio-economic and cultural contexts are typical of the Australian rangelands, and (c) an intense or information-rich case, because it has had a long history of community involvement in agricultural and natural resource management programs.

The different environmental, socio-economic and cultural circumstances of the various participants in NRM programs influence people’s views about power and the way they interact with each other in participatory NRM programs. These different voices and their perspectives on power relations are the topics of the next chapter.

