

PROJECT SUMMARY

Perceptions of derived (modified) vegetation communities in NSW

Description:

Perceptions of derived vegetation communities in NSW: A study on how people value derived vegetation communities and the implications for policy and management. Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW). (\$6,000). Project Leader Dr Joanne Millar, Honours student Emily Sharp, Co-supervisor Dr Peter Spooner. February 2006 to November 2006

Objectives:

1. How do Catchment Management Authority (CMA) staff, regional centre residents and landholders value derived vegetation types?
2. How do they perceive changes to native vegetation?
3. What factors influence their values and perceptions of changes to native vegetation?

Methods:

1. Focus group interview with 8 staff from the Central West Catchment Management Authority in NSW.
2. Qualitative interviews with 7 town people.
3. Qualitative interviews with 7 landholders.

Use of photographs showing 1. Open Grassy Woodland 2. Open Woodland with Shrubby Understorey 3. Open Woodland 4. Thinning of vegetation. 5. Thickening of vegetation.

Key Findings:

Participants held multiple, complex values for derived vegetation communities which did not necessarily fall within a production versus conservation dichotomy. Open grassy woodland held positive values for all participants. Open woodland with a shrubby understorey was the only one of the three derived vegetation communities to elicit strong negative values from some participants. Most participants agreed that open woodland held positive agricultural production values but disagreed about levels of biodiversity value. Perceptions of vegetation thinning were related to aesthetic attractiveness, vegetation structure and

composition, and perceived production, management and vegetation health benefits. Vegetation thickening generated a mixed response among townspeople and CMA staff. Landholder perceptions of vegetation thickening were negative and influenced by external drivers, such as economic, physical, time and legislative constraints. Local context is also important in expressions of value. Most participants expressed a deep sense of place and a responsibility to care for the land which transcended the production-conservation dichotomy.



Policy implications:

Perceptions of vegetation health and what constitutes good management practice (eg. active versus inactive management), will require extensive negotiation. Native vegetation policy will not be accepted simply through further education of landholders about biodiversity values held by scientists and the public. Scientific methods underpinning policy decisions must seem logical to the experiences and local context of landholders and the general public. Extension efforts aimed solely at production and/or conservation outcomes may miss opportunities to engage landholders at other levels. Acceptable and effective policy must address not only environmental outcomes, but also the social and economic imperatives faced by landholders attempting to balance numerous external constraints.

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