Are north-eastern Australian beef producers’ learning experiences preparing them for the challenges ahead?

Allyson Lankester

Learning processes that lead to a transformation in people’s perspectives are deemed necessary for responding to social-ecological problems and moving towards sustainable land-use practices. This paper is based on mixed method research that examined beef producers’ learning in relation to changing to more sustainable land-use practices in the rangelands of tropical north-eastern Australia. The north-eastern rangelands are experiencing increasing uncertainty with climate change, biodiversity loss, agricultural restructuring and increasing regulation. Qualitative interviews aimed to discover characteristics of producers’ learning process in changing practices overall and to specifically improve land condition. A quantitative survey aimed to identify main sources of learning and how these sources influenced producers’ beliefs of their management practices. Interviews revealed that individual learning processes to change practices were characterised by becoming aware of a problem, learning from respected peers, a critical reflection of practices and ‘hands on’ experience. Facilitated workshops and producer groups working on grazing, land and/or financial management projects were important for generating elements of transformational learning. These experiences involved personal awareness, collective problem-solving, critical reflection of decisions and trust building. Changes in practices largely involved improving pasture condition and developing a more efficient and proactive business. The survey identified two main sources of learning: close networks (learning from close and immediate social networks and self practice) and wide networks (learning from experts and participation in facilitated extension experiences). Wide networks had more of a significant influence than close networks on producers perceiving themselves to be proactive managers, to be resting pastures and to have increased their participation in natural resource management forums over-time. In contrast, close networks had more of a significant influence than wide networks on producers perceiving that continual grazing has led to a loss of biodiversity over-time, that they have other livelihood options and that they have a strong interest in improving the business. These results suggest that social learning experiences in the north-east rangelands do not yet seem to be transforming perspectives to the extent that a ‘shift’ from a production orientated approach to land-use to a more ecological rational approach is apparent. This conclusion is based on producers overcoming individual rather than shared social-ecological problems, a lack of critical reflection on the assumptions guiding practices, an emphasis on improving business efficiency and pasture condition rather than all parts of the landscape, and the lack of significant difference between wide networks and close networks on producers’ beliefs of the sustainability of their management practices. A different kind of social learning experience that includes all stakeholders in a more holistic, critical and interdependent approach to addressing problems appears necessary to prepare producers for the challenges and uncertainty ahead.