

Effective property visits to pastoral owners and managers in the rangelands

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Abstract

The frequency of property visits to Australian rangeland properties by agricultural extension professionals has diminished in recent decades.

Although there is an increasing array of extension methods available to engage with remote rangeland-based property owners, property visits are still highly valued on these remote properties. Therefore, it is crucial that the effectiveness of property visits is maximised.

This paper presents a comprehensive range of practical recommendations to ensure that property visits are fruitful for geographically remote landholders and deliver meaningful professional development outcomes and successful careers for those people who provide an extension service in Australia's rangelands.

Keywords: Property visits, extension, rangelands.

Introduction

The rangelands areas of Australia are characterised by geographical remoteness, large land holdings and long travel distances. Investment in agricultural R&D reached a peak of 5% as a proportion of agricultural gross value of production in the late 1970s, but declined to just over 3% in 2007 (Nossal *et al.* 2010). The provision of agricultural extension services to the owners and managers has also changed significantly in recent decades (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry 2007). Government extension services have declined due to changing government priorities and the difficulty attracting and retaining extension professionals in the smaller district centres in rangelands. The private sector has partly fulfilled this role, however less than half (48%) of Australian beef producers are using private advisory services, which is significantly lower than all other Australian agricultural industries except the poultry industry (Nettle *et al.* 2021).

Widespread mobile and broadband connectivity across Australia's rangelands has partly compensated for the reduced presence of locally-based extension services. This has enabled the adoption of a wider range of approaches to agricultural extension, including the digitisation of traditional extension tools, for example, on-line beef industry newsletters. However, multiple methods of extension are required to deliver the message and reinforce the message in different ways (Vanclay 2011).

There are many options for engaging with rangeland owners/managers, including mass media, email, phone, video conferencing, group events (face-

to-face and on-line), information technology, and social media. Amongst the mix of extension methods is the property visit. While the frequency of property visits to remote properties has declined because of reduced extension services and increased connectivity, they are still a valuable extension practice to engender change on rangelands-based properties, and the development of extension professionals.

Background

A property visit is meeting and interacting with a landholder or manager on their property to identify and address any aspects of their enterprise. The frequency of property visits depends on the primary industry being serviced, experience of the extension professional, the roles and responsibilities of extension personnel, and the distance to be travelled.

Data from the author's yearly diaries from 1976 to 2022 clearly shows this across three phases of an extension officer's career (Figure 1). As a new graduate soil conservation extension officer in the grain growing area of southern Queensland (Kingaroy), an average of 196 property visits per year were made as a component of on-the-job training, high demand from grain growers for on-ground soil conservation works, and very short travel distances between properties.

During the second phase across a wider range of primary industries in far north Queensland (Atherton), the frequency of property visits was significantly lower at 127 property visits per year due to an increasing management role and slightly longer travel distances.

In the third phase in the beef producing rangelands of the Upper Burdekin (Charters Towers), property visits averaged only 53 per year. The region was characterised by large property sizes with long travel distances, including to cattle stations in western Queensland and interstate rangeland regions.

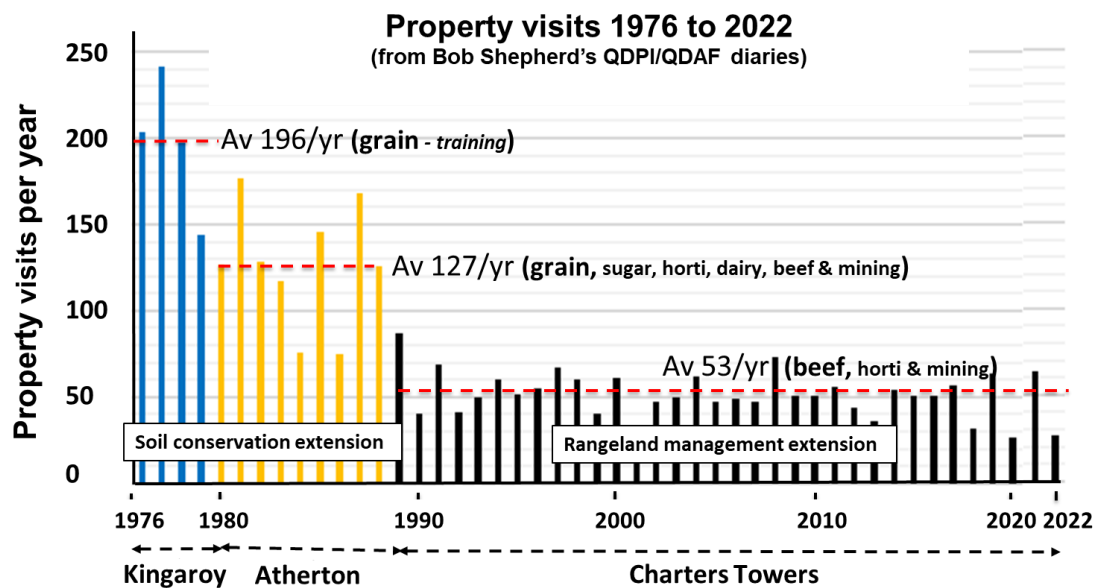


Figure 1 Property visits made by Queensland Dept of Agriculture & Fisheries extension officer Bob Shepherd across a range of primary industries and regions in Queensland from 1976 to 2022.

As the frequency of property visits declines, it is crucial to maximise their effectiveness by thorough preparation, identifying enterprise 'needs' versus 'wants', providing timely follow-up, building professional relationships, increasing the knowledge and capability of the landholder and the professional development of the extensionist.

Preparation

An understanding of the property and some of the likely issues to be addressed is important prior to the visit. Direct communication with the landholder, other local advisors and remote sensing (e.g. Google Earth, state and territory globes and packages such as Forage (Zhang *et al.* 2018) and VegMachine (Beutel *et al.* 2019)) will provide an early indication of possible issues and their extent. Printed maps and other visual materials, for example graphs, are more user friendly than viewing on tablets and smart devices during a field trip of the property.

A toolbox of material (either digital or hard copy) is essential on a property visit as it will increase the chances of providing specific information at the time of discussion. FutureBeef (<https://futurebeef.com.au/>) (Sallur *et al.* in-press) is the best compendium of material relevant to the north Australian beef industry. The site contains science-based information from the Queensland, Western Australian and Northern Territory governments and the red meat industry body Meat and Livestock Australia. Keeping abreast of the latest developments relevant to the rangelands, provides a clear indication to landholders that extension professionals are keen and passionate.

Developing an in-depth knowledge, understanding and proficiency in the practical application across a specific subject area early in an extension career, will build relevance and respect with landholders. Additional proficiencies must be developed throughout a life in extension to avoid the 'one trick pony' syndrome.

Although rangeland properties are large, a property inspection is usually essential. However, even allowing a full day for a property visit, only a fraction of large properties will be inspected. Travelling to the property late the afternoon before, will offset the long travel distances and allow time for field inspections. As the guest, always offer to bring any small orders from town to the property; fresh bread is an essential, or a bottle of wine if staying overnight.

On-property biosecurity is paramount. Therefore, ensure vehicles that have been in other regions and visited other properties are thoroughly clean inside and out, and observe on-property biosecurity protocols.

The property visit

Good listening skills are important and are best demonstrated by paraphrasing, seeking clarification, and asking astute and open questions. To prompt the memory later, take notes during discussions and field trips. Photographs, GPS locations of sites and commenting on interesting things, for instance examples of innovation, also demonstrate interest and eagerness to understand and learn by the extension person.

In the 21st century, family-owned rangeland properties are rarely managed by the patriarch alone. It is important to include the wider management team, including older children, if circumstances allow. Similarly on corporate properties, include assistant managers, head stockman, rangeland officers and others, for example, grader drivers or bore-runners on an as-needs basis, if possible.

Apportionment of time during a property visit will result in the best use of the day. Allow initial time at the house for discussion of issues and things to look at during the property inspection. Adequate reflection time back at the house before departing the property ensures a mutual understanding of issues, and listing issues to follow up, including possible training opportunities.

Reflection time will allow for the identification of needs versus wants. For example, only providing information on chemical control options for an emerging woody weed problem (a want) when overgrazing and the lack of the strategic use of fire is the cause of the problem. However, improving poor breeder herd efficiency to reduce stocking rates (a need) may be the underlying cause of poor grazing land management practices. Weeds are the symptom of a more serious and complex underlying problem in this scenario.

Follow up

While field notes are essential, additional information and impressions will be in the memory bank. An email to the landholder the next office day is a good opportunity to articulate this information in a concise, logical and clear manner, and address any issues that require only a simple response.

To address more strategic issues such as the woody weed scenario above, more work with the property owner will be required. Additional involvement of other professionals with specialist skills, and/or other property owners as mentors who have addressed similar issues, may be needed. Other sources of information, opportunities for relevant training and referrals must be provided to the landholder within a week; that is before it drops off the radar.

Progress with addressing issues can be followed up with phone calls, the landholder visiting the extension person's office, and subsequent visits to the property. This will help build a strong professional relationship.

Confidentiality in all interactions with clients is paramount and must be respected. A simple request to share information with others to address an issue will usually be well received.

Beyond the property visit

Similar issues often arise across multiple property visits and other enquiries that come during the year or season. This highlights the need for additional extension material such as timely newsletter articles, fact sheets, short YouTube videos, webinars and case studies, which will often alleviate the need to send individual emails on the same topic to many landholders.

A property visit is an excellent opportunity to identify the better managers in a region; that is those that demonstrate good land management, high animal welfare standards, well-maintained and functioning improvements, and contented family/staff. It may not be possible to ascertain the economic

performance of a business from one property visit, but if the above standards are met, there is a high probability that the financial performance of the business is strong.

These people are ideal to seek informed opinions on future research, development and extension (RD&E) projects, hosts for on-property extension events, and documented case studies, either whole of enterprise or for a component of the business. They are often suitable as mentors for other landholders and extension professionals.

A broad network is essential in the development of an extension career. Experienced extension officers should share their formal and informal networks to accelerate this process early in the tenure of new extension staff.

Extension professionals are not expected to be 'jacks of all trades', therefore follow-up property visits should include specialists from other fields of rangeland enterprise management. Likewise, new RD&E staff in an office should be included in property visits as part of their induction and industry/regional familiarisation. The initiative must also come from new recruits to actively seek out opportunities to visit commercial properties.

Extension professionals living in the region in which they work, will invariably develop friendships with people that they meet initially on-property in a professional capacity. This is normal, but it is important to be cognisant of not having favourites when it comes to the professional extension role. A broad interdependence between landholders and extension staff is ideal where each is comfortable in contacting and challenging each other in a constructive manner.

Properties that are severely degraded and poorly managed are often owned and managed by people who are difficult to engage in extension. These properties are often sold below current market prices due to poor land condition and run-down capital infrastructure. This presents an ideal opportunity to reach out to the new owner a few months after handover and offer to do a property visit; particularly if they are from another region. However, irrespective of the condition of the property, it is worthwhile engaging all producers that are new to the region.

Conclusion

By taking time to plan, listen, observe, question and follow-up, property visits will become one of the most valuable extension tools in the career of a rangeland extension professional. Property visits that meet the needs of property owners will also ensure they are highly valued and useful to all parties involved in the management of Australia's rangelands.

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