

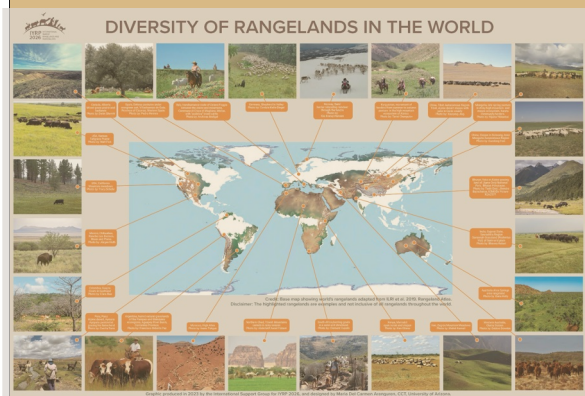


Global Significance of Rangelands and Pastoralists



Dr. Maryam Niamir-Fuller
United Nations Civil Servant - retired
Global Alliance for Rangelands and Pastoralists

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<https://iyrp.info>




First, let me welcome you to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.


The reason we have an International Year is because 102 countries in the United Nations recognized that rangelands and pastoralists are an issue of global significance.

I hope to show you why, and how engaging with the IYRP this year can help increase awareness, knowledge and policy change.

During the next few days, you will hear more about the IYRP in different sessions, and I invite you to join us in this year-long journey.



Significance of rangelands and pastoralism around the world



Grazing benefits to rangelands

Sustainable pastoralism: multiple species and products

Source: McGahey et al. 2014. Pastoralism and the Green Economy. IUCN and UNEP.

It goes without saying, among this illustrious audience, that rangelands and pastoralists are very significant for the planet and our economies. Almost every country in the world, with the exception of the Pacific and Caribbean islands, has some type of rangeland where domestic or semi-domesticated animals graze and browse, under the stewardship of pastoralists. Rangelands are the dominant land category in some countries, such as Mongolia, Lesotho, Morocco, Senegal, Turkmenistan and Uruguay, where they cover 98–100 per cent of the territory. In Africa, pastoralists contribute from 10 to 44 per cent of the GDP, and that doesn't count the vast informal sector. In Mongolia, the livestock sector employs about a third of its population and contributes to 84% of agricultural GDP. In Ethiopia, 90% of livestock exports are sourced from pastoralists' herds.

The IYRP Global Alliance has been advocating for a stronger recognition of the value and significance of rangelands and pastoralism, as a production system distinctly different than confined, factory farmed livestock systems. Through its 10-year journey, it has become a multi-disciplinary network of practitioners and researchers, from anthropologists and economists to veterinarians and range managers, and a multi-stakeholder alliance of pastoralists, scientists, governments and civil society.

Today, more than 410 organizations worldwide have pledged their support. Our thematic Working Groups are consolidating information and distilling them for dissemination to policy makers and the public. Regional groups carry out many activities tailored to their countries.



A pause for definitions



The definition of rangelands adopted by IYRP is that of the International Rangeland Congress report prepared by Allen and others in 2011. Where rangelands are lands on which the indigenous vegetation ... is predominantly grasses, grass-like plants, forbs or shrubs that are grazed or have the potential to be grazed; it is a native or semi-native ecosystem used by grazing livestock and wildlife. Rangelands may include grasslands, savannas, shrublands, deserts, tundra, and alpine vegetation.

Both the USGS and the International Livestock Research Institute have concluded that rangelands span 54% of the earth's landmass. That's half of the world, and yet, so little attention is given to these landscapes compared to forests and cropland.

Defining pastoralists is a more difficult. The report I helped prepare for UNEP in 2019, entitled: *A case of Benign Neglect*, explained that the lack of a unified definition of pastoralism is a major challenge. Estimates of the numbers of pastoralists worldwide range from 22 million to more than 1 billion, depending on the definition used. For the purposes of the IYRP, we have adopted a broad definition, where we say that pastoralists are people who raise domestic and semi-domesticated animals predominantly on rangelands. Some of you here may be pleasantly surprised to hear that you too are pastoralists. A broad definition is useful because the main objective of IYRP is to raise awareness across the globe and foster exchange of experiences.



Common myths around the world

- **Myth:** pastoralism is an archaic form of production that needs to be 'modernized'
- **Myth:** Livestock destroy the planet, and meat is bad for you
- **Myth:** Rangelands are degraded forests and deserts are empty and expanding
- **Myth:** Pastoralists are poor and/or a drain on society
- **Myth:** Pastoralists need to settle in towns to get good services
- **Myth:** Women have little to do with raising livestock
- **Myth:** Rangelands should be converted to 'better' use

My purpose today is to talk about what we have in common across the globe. And I will start with myths.

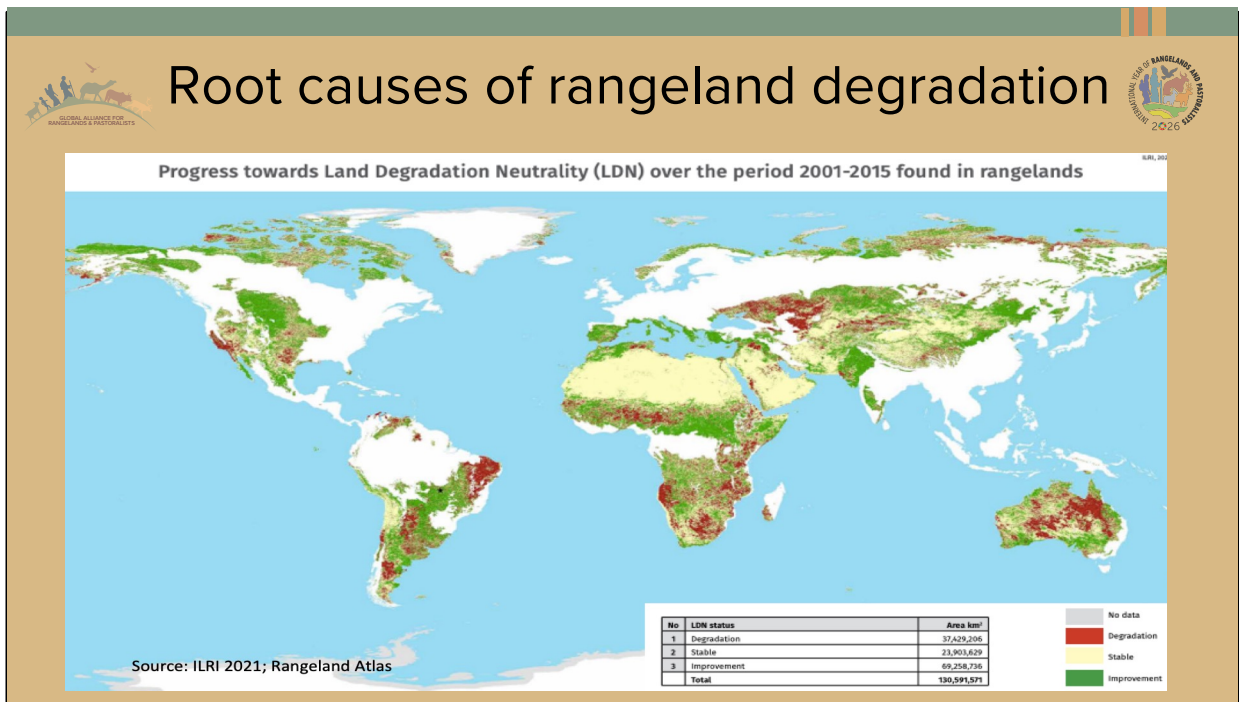
A very influential set of actors say that pastoralism is an archaic form of production that needs to be 'modernized'. Many have concluded that livestock destroy the planet, and meat is bad for you. Some think that rangelands are merely degraded forests and that deserts are empty and expanding.

Quite a few economists and policy makers think that pastoralists are poor and a drain on society, and that pastoralists need to settle in towns to get goods and services.

Our aim for IYRP is to dispel the many myths that are held in the public's mind, by collecting scientific evidence and disseminating them to the public. And we create a space for the voice of pastoralists to be heard.

Do women really have little to do with raising livestock? Is pastoralism a lesser land use on rangelands?

Let me focus on some of these myths now.



Do livestock destroy the planet?

Rangelands do degrade when badly managed, but the root causes of degradation often go beyond grazing. They can include extreme droughts, floods, and very cold winters; or the conversion and fragmentation of rangelands that block access to the best parts of the land; the neglect of remote and mobile population; indiscriminate mining and dumping of waste on rangelands, and much more.

In Europe, there is even evidence to show that the abandonment of rangelands has led to ecosystem degradation – because these lands have been shaped by millennia of use by animals, and under-grazing is just as bad as over-grazing.

Sadly, the extent of rangeland degradation globally is not being monitored systematically. Estimates range from 17% to 50%.

There is no consistent methodology across estimates making it impossible to compare or agglomerate.



Indeed, one of the main headaches we have had in promoting the global significance and benefits from rangelands and pastoralism through the IYRP has been the lack of globally comparable data.

This is partly due to the lack of attention and funding for rangelands and pastoralism by the research community. We found the number of publications in SCOPUS between the years 2000 and 2018 and containing the words rangelands and pastoralism to be miniscule (that tiny red dot at the top) compared to all the other topics. Of the 13 recent global environmental assessments carried out in the same period (such as by the IPCC or the Global Biodiversity assessments), none mention rangelands and pastoralists.

The lack of research data is compounded by the insufficiency of national statistics in most countries. While the USA and a few other developed countries have excellent databases, the same is not true elsewhere. In most countries, rangelands are either classified as agricultural land, or as forest land, which leads to immense difficulties for disaggregation. Any change from rangeland to cropping, for example, is not picked up by these national data platforms.

One good news is that the International Livestock Research Institute in collaboration with many institutions is now developing a global rangeland data platform. In addition, our Rangeland mapping Working Group will be working throughout 2026 and probably beyond, to improve global maps by bringing together scientists and pastoralists. Co-producing reliable and up to date data across the world is a vital part of busting the myths and encouraging governments to take tough decisions.



Most critical : rangeland conversion



Expansion of cropland causes land degradation and takes the best rangelands



Fencing of the Greater Mara bodes ecosystem collapse in Kenya @ M. Lovschal



Erosion of Ethiopian highlands under cultivation @ R.W.Fuller



Construction on Tibetan Plateau Rangelands @ M.Foggin

Other root causes of conversion:
privatization of common land
urbanization
mining and other industries
afforestation or strict conservation

Arguably one of the more urgent and pressing issues is that of rangeland conversion. There is enough evidence to show that we are witnessing another wave of massive land use change around the world, this time from rangeland to cropland. Jeff Herrick and others called it a “revolutionary land use change in the 21st century”. In many countries, rangelands are seen as “wastelands” that need to be brought under “production”. In other words, use by livestock is inferior to use for crops. A recent survey of the Province of Saskatchewan, Canada concludes that 55% of the grasslands have been lost to crops, and only 16% of the land is under native grassland. WWF reports that 2 million acres of grassland were eliminated for crops in the Great Plains in 2024. Most of the demand for conversion comes from cropland expansion, but urbanization, mining and other industrial use, strict conservation, and indiscriminate afforestation also play a role. Such conversion squeezes livestock into smaller land areas, causing degradation, and perpetuating the myths.

It just seems as if the more success we have in avoiding deforestation, the stronger the negative spill over effect on rangelands. And the more animals are fed on cultivated feed, the less rangelands we have. There is something wrong with this picture!

There is a second type of conversion also happening: and that is the appropriation of lands and livestock by outside investors, leading to fewer and fewer smallholders, and privatization of common land. WWF reports that two-thirds of BLM land in the USA is used by only 10% of permittees who are mostly investors, mining companies and public utilities. In Africa, “armchair” pastoralists are city folks who buy a herd, pay a herder and fence off the common land, with no regard to management guidelines, community rules, and cooperation. In the Greater Mara region of Kenya, fenced off areas have increased by 20% between 2010 and 2016. A scramble for land and ecosystem collapse are inevitable unless laws are enacted and enforced. We are creating a momentum worldwide to recognize the significance of rangelands and pastoralists and avoid land conversion.



Policies to protect rangelands from conversion



Sheep grazing in forest land, India
@ SEVA



Montenegro's Minister of Ecology, speaks to Citizens' Initiative Save Sinjajevina, July 2025 @ Mers.gov.me



South African rangelands
@ Samuels



Karamoja, Uganda @ H. Longole

In addition to protecting what we still have, we must also consider two other urgent matters: first, restoring degraded rangelands, and second, returning or recovering converted lands back to viable rangelands. After decades of rangeland rehabilitation and restoration, we know that it costs money, but, in many cases around the world, all it takes is a protection of the rangeland, increasing mobility of livestock, and other changes in management – actions that cost little in monetary terms but a lot in political will. Advocacy on this issue in the past decade has helped some countries pass policies that protect rangelands from conversion. For example: the Indian Forest Rights Act now allows pastoralists to graze their animals in regulated forests; South Africa recently passed laws protecting rangelands; and in Montenegro, the Prime Minister has decided not to create a military base in an ecologically sensitive montane grassland used by generations of pastoralists. Sometimes it requires an international coalition of countries to influence change, for example, when the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning the government-sanctioned acquisition of pastoral land in Karamoja, Uganda, by international hunting and tourism businesses.

In many countries, recovering rangelands is a major perhaps even impossible challenge, but markets can often drive it when the true economic and environmental value of rangelands are recognized. If you have information and ideas on this topic, please join our Working Groups on Economics of Pastoralism and Rangeland Restoration.



The governance of rangelands is another common challenge around the world. This is partly because policy makers have bought into the myth that says pastoralism is out-dated, inefficient and takes up too much land. While this is a common myth, it manifests itself differently around the world. In developing countries, pastoralists are fighting to secure rights to land and development, including strengthening land tenure laws, protecting common property and land-use systems that support mobility of livestock, and securing women’s rights. There are some good successes. For example, in the African Sahel, cross-border transhumance has been supported by special passports agreed to through a regional inter-governmental body.

Recently, the Karnataka State Assembly in India has passed the Traditional Migratory Shepherds Bill, 2025, to safeguard them from atrocities committed by the general public due to ignorance of the value of pastoralism. The Spanish Parliament has passed a bill that re-establishes ancient transhumance routes – these are corridors and routes that allow livestock to be trekked between range landscapes - and this is celebrated every October with a symbolic migration of sheep through the streets of Madrid – because Madrid in fact sits on one of these routes. Similarly, for the past 10 years, the Sheep Drive has passed through London Bridge, with celebrities leading the march. And this year herders in Germany will organise another sheep march to lobby European policymakers in Brussels. It’s an idea that is worth replicating everywhere!



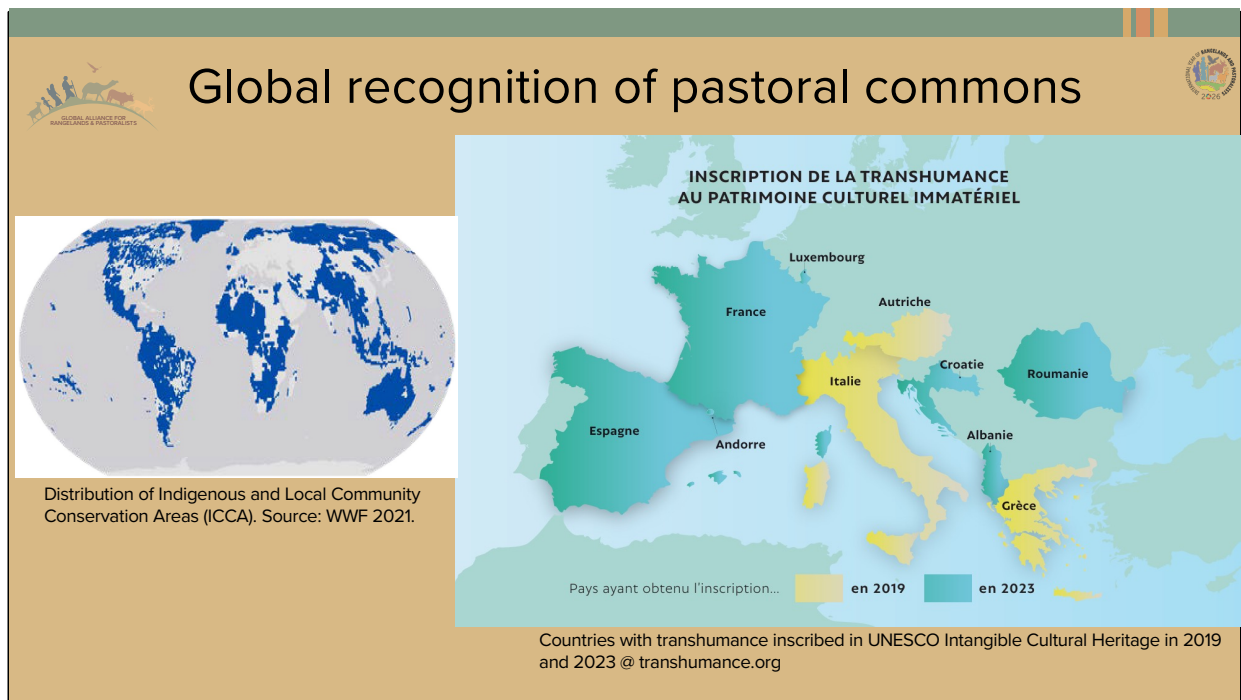
The case of pastoral commons



Yaks on the Tibetan range @ M.Foggin

“Pastoral commons” are those rangelands that are collectively managed by a local community, local government or a higher public entity. They are important resources for many reasons: they are supplementary in times of drought or fire, available for seasonal rotation, and as biological reserves. When managed properly they act as an insurance policy in times of stress. They can be found in all pastoralist systems, because they are an adaptation to the seasonality and variability of rangeland productivity. Well regulated pastoral commons are important for keeping animals mobile and rangelands healthy, but they are vulnerable to conversion unless laws exist to protect them for the benefit of pastoralists. Pastoral commons differ by how they are managed. In Africa and Asia customary legal systems managed by local communities have evolved over millennia and many are still viable. In Senegal, laws have been passed to legally recognize and protect these systems.

In developed countries, a public entity usually has authority to manage these lands; in some systems private users pay a fee. In Italy, the Regional Park of the Dolomites was initially created by the government and later handed over to a local community group to manage. In developing countries, usage is often free but regulated through decisions made collectively by the communities and relying heavily on the principle of reciprocity. The Fulani of Senegal are experimenting with grazing fees, which has been made possible because of the legal recognition of their rights and responsibilities.



Managing the commons is no easy task and has been tainted by the myth of the “tragedy of the commons”. Yes, it is a tragedy when these commons are not legally recognized or managed. Research in Africa, Asia and Europe showing the value of pastoral commons has led to adoption by International development organizations and many governments of the concept of Indigenous and Local Community Conservation Areas. In addition, transhumance – the practice of seasonal droving of animals – has been recognized as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, and already several countries in Europe are part of the inscription.

We encourage all communities and countries to join in inscribing their systems and being recognized worldwide. To help highlight the value of rangeland commons, and protect them from being privatized and converted, our Working Group on Pastoral Commons is producing a scientific brief this year. You are welcome to join this effort.

Healthy food and animal welfare



Somali women and camel milk
@ T.Martin VSF Swiss



Goats in Argan tree,
Morocco @ D. Watts

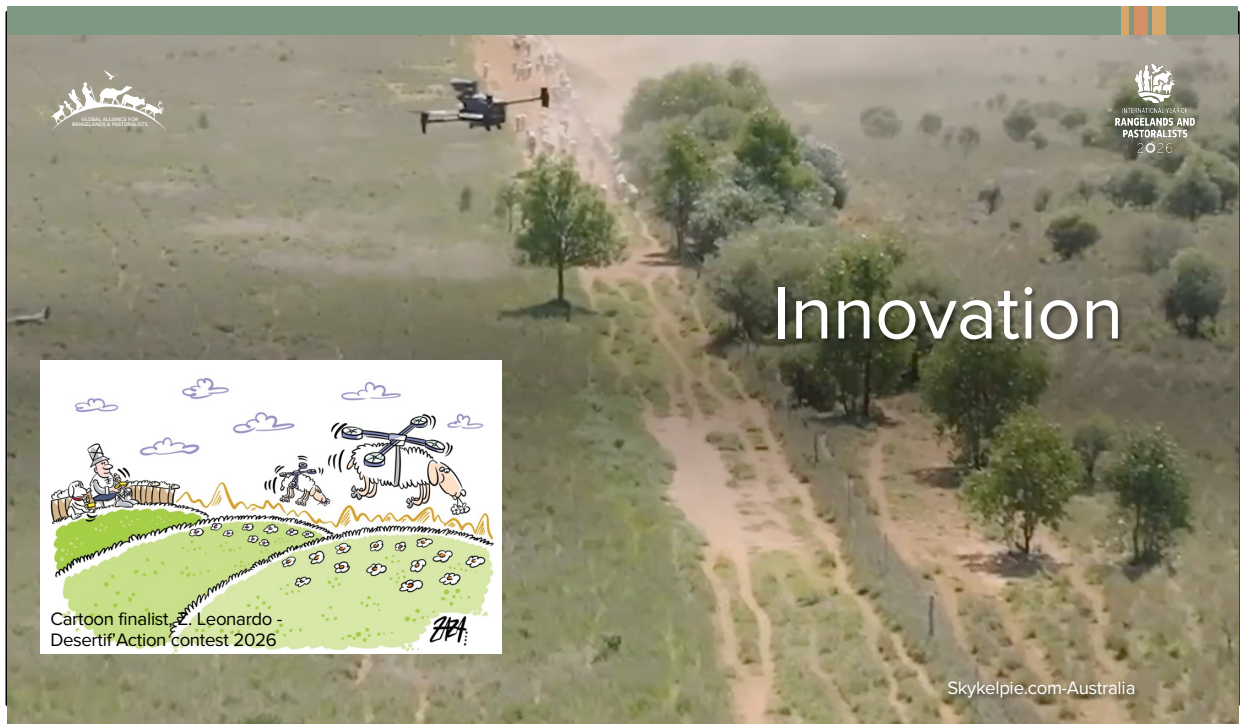


Mongolia @ Jasil

Let's take a look at the myth that meat is bad for you.

Public perception of animal protein has undergone a dramatic shift to the negative in many developed countries, to put it mildly. However, nutritionists, civil society and several UN Agencies have shown the value of animal-based protein for reducing malnutrition, and in the case of camel milk, managing diabetes. Plant-based proteins do not have an essential amino-acid that humans need.

Much has been said about the cruelty of confined livestock systems, but in pastoral systems animals are treated kindly and are highly domesticated. How else can you allow your babies to sit on a giant yak? The public is largely unaware that many of the products they rely on come from rangelands, such as Argan Oil used in cosmetics and other products – which is extracted after it is digested by goats who graze the seeds on the Argan tree. We will use the opportunity provided by IYRP to highlight such benefits and therefore to secure the social license for pastoralists to operate. The public and policy makers need to appreciate the differences between nature-based pastoral and rangeland systems vs confined systems. Our statistics and researchers need to disaggregate data and show the benefits that pastoralism brings for producing healthy food, protecting biodiversity, and sequestering carbon.



Pastoralists can no longer be stereotyped as ‘disorganised’, ‘ill informed’, poor, and ‘hostile to change’ as they have been for decades, especially in developing countries. I can give you so many examples:

Maasai butchers, who also generate bio-gas to sell to the community, are practicing vertical economic integration.

Community-held conservancies in Kenya that mix livestock and wildlife are innovating with diversification and tenure security.

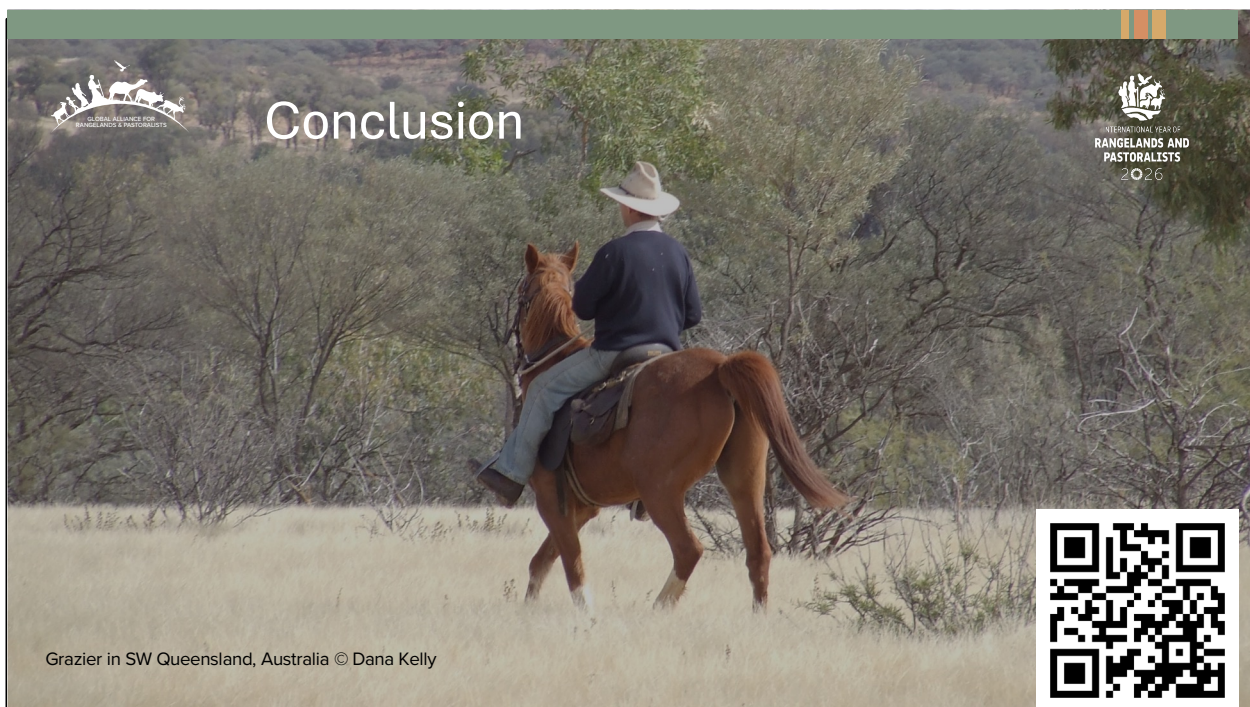
In many countries, pastoralists are increasing their influence on government policies by establishing associations and networks, lobby groups and electing parliamentarians.



Certification schemes can create good incentives for land management while enhancing economic benefits to pastoralists. For example, Kalahari grass-fed beef is the first beef of its kind to be certified in Africa, and ‘bird-friendly’ beef certification is now practised on the South American pampas.

In northern Nigeria, Fulani pastoralists are adopting micro-chipping, as a way to trace stolen livestock, and to ensure traceability in the meat market thus bringing them higher prices from the organic dividend and health-certified. Perhaps one day traceability can help stop cattle rustling and conflict in Africa altogether. Some certifications focus on the process (such as Fair Trade), or on single products (such as the Sustainable Fibre Alliance), while others verify good soil and land practices (such as Regenerative Organic Certified and Land to Market).

The Global Alliance has been instrumental in helping to establish the Rangeland Stewardship Council. It aims to create a comprehensive global certification standard for sustainable rangelands that takes into account the process, the product, the land, and additional issues such as land tenure, pastoral identity and much more. In the coming months we aim to hold wide consultations on these foundational standards - please get involved.



Decades and decades ago, the prevailing paradigm was that confining animals and bringing feed to them, is economically efficient and good for the land. This paradigm (in the form of development aid projects) went from the developed countries to developing countries. Sadly, this resulted in destruction of many viable traditional systems in developing countries, and when combined with other economic forces, caused migration of the work force towards cities, and poverty for most.

Today, the paradigm has changed considerably: we acknowledge that animals need to keep moving, and that they should walk to the feed rather than have the feed brought to them. Around the world, there is talk of regenerative agriculture, of rewilding, of re-establishing livestock routes and corridors, and many other exciting new management approaches. There is growing consensus on what sustainability means for rangelands and for pastoralists.

I may be accused of painting too rosy of a picture today. But despite the differences, despite trade barriers and competition for markets, despite the drop in funding for research and extension, and despite the many other challenges we now face, in my humble opinion, there are more things that pastoralists and rangelands share around the world than what divides them. We share concerns about making a good living, protecting our environment, and putting healthy food on peoples' plates in such a way that it can be sustained over generations to come.

At the very least, IYRP is an opportunity for us to celebrate the many accomplishments. But we can also join hands across the globe, this year and in the coming decade, to bust our common myths and be a force for change.