

Understanding Rural Victoria



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April 2005

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Acknowledgments

This research is an outcome of many years of research and many other projects. It began life as a part of an after-dinner presentation shared with farmers groups and others. This speech was an attempt to share with others my own attempt to make sense of the rapid change I was seeing in rural Victoria. The journey from informal discussion to research report could not have happened without the contributions of many people and organisations- far too many to mention in a short acknowledgment.

This report was funded by the 'Our Rural Landscapes' program of the Department of Primary Industries. The ideas that led to this project were funded by the Murray Darling Basin Commission, the National Land and Water Audit and Land & Water Australia. Land & Water Australia has funded a fellowship to allow this report to be further transformed into a book with a more human approach to the story of rural Australia.

Many colleagues have played important roles in the development of these ideas. They include researchers Glen Ronan, John Cary and Roger Wilkinson. Many experienced extension officers have been a valuable window on the changing rural community. Prominent among these are the late Gyn Jones and the now retired Roger O'Farrell. Both were Department of Agriculture extension officers dedicated to the sustainability of their communities.

Finally, the most interesting and valuable information comes from the Victorians who have shared with me their stories of living in rural Victoria.

Introduction

This report documents the authors' developing understanding of the changing social structure of rural Victoria. By rural Victoria we are referring to the Victoria that is beyond Melbourne and provincial centres. Over the past 20 years there has been much publicity about the decline of rural communities. The withdrawal of services in the 1980s and the continued decline in population in some small towns has been a recurring theme in the media with the release of each new set of population statistics. This report is focussed particularly on agricultural industries and the community that works in these industries or supports them. This reflects our longstanding personal and professional interests in the 'structural adjustment' of farming. Although a relatively small and still declining segment of Victoria's population, the farm community manages a disproportionate share of the state's land. Understanding the future forms of this community is important for the management of Victoria's land, water and biodiversity resources. Being informed about the social trends that will shape the future farm community will assist us to identify the potential for, and limits to, government policy in rural areas. Although not directly addressed in this report, the implications for sustaining rural communities are being explored as part of an associated research process initiated by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries. Most importantly, we hope that the topics explored in this report are useful for rural Victorians who are seeking to build the sustainable social landscapes of rural Victoria. Understanding is part of empowerment.

The report is purposely structured to sequentially introduce the social trends that are influencing the evolution of rural Victoria: improving productivity in agriculture and the food supply chain, amenity migration, Australia's changing demographic structure, and changing community values. It is the interaction of these trends that is creating a patchwork of social landscapes following divergent trajectories. The interaction is examined by exploring the recent trends and potential futures of a small number of typical landscapes: the production landscape of the Wimmera–Mallee, the rural amenity landscape of north-east Victoria, the transitional landscape of south-west Victoria and the irrigation landscape of the Goulburn-Murray irrigation district. Within each of these landscapes we examine the changing demographic and social structure of key industries: cropping, beef, dairy and wool production.