

EMU in central Australia

Many land managers across central Australia are faced with problems of erosion, soil loss and declining productivity. Because these problems are so wide spread and often inherited, land managers can be overwhelmed by the situation and find it difficult to know where to begin in terms of improving condition. In 2009 the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA) implemented the Ecosystem Management Understanding (EMU) project to assist land managers in making effective management decisions and real change on ground.

Ecosystem Management Understanding (EMU) introduces land managers to the ecological management of landscape and habitats by learning to recognise and read landscape processes, condition and change. The process recognises that people have an important historical and future place in the landscape and play a key role in land management.

The EMU process begins with land managers recording their property knowledge in a baseline mapping overlay exercise. This is followed by air and ground assessment of key areas, landscape-scale management planning, and in many cases on-ground rehabilitation of the prioritised management issues. Habitat monitoring techniques are also included and provide a means of tracking change and making strategic management interventions in prioritised areas.

A key feature of the EMU process is that all stages are completely voluntary and lead by the land managers in terms of the level of information provided. Furthermore the information collated is confidential and kept on the property unless otherwise arranged. This builds a foundation of trust and ensures a sincere interaction between land managers and scientists.

To date 14 pastoralists have participated in the EMU process in the NT, with many more in nearby areas of arid SA and Qld. The total area covered in the NT alone equates to some 3840100 ha, with many more large properties set to participate in 2010 increasing this area further. Participating properties are also joining up across the landscape, making for cross-property and eventually cross-tenure land management at a grand scale.

Participants have said they now read the landscape with 'EMU eyes' as they go about their day to day operations and now recognise the various processes affecting their property and the changes that are occurring. Many have prioritised their restoration projects and are in the process of implementing rehabilitation works to address the critical issues affecting the condition of their property. Some pastoralists have changed their herd management and in certain cases de-stocked in key areas. Others have sought funding from stewardship programs and environmental grants. Ultimately land managers have become actively engaged in strategic and effective land management.

The EMU project will continue throughout 2010 and is expected to be successful with the number of participants increasing via word of mouth. By building on the knowledge base of land managers and passively encouraging change in management practice the EMU process is set to leave a legacy of positive environmental change throughout central Australia.