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Comment 1 on ‘Natural resource management’ by Pannell, Doole and Cheung

Gavan Dwyer[†]

Natural resource management economics has evolved considerably over the life of AARES. Pannell et al. (this issue) provide a sound identification and summary of key watermarks in the profession.

As the authors draw out, in early days, areas of interest related to on-farm problems. This broadened to spillovers but usually with an on-farm productivity implication. Over time, as community concerns turned to broader scale environmental problems, the focus and reach of NRM economics followed those concerns. The ‘hot issue’ of the time usually evolved more from the science and the activism of pressure groups and less from the analysis of NRM economists.

The scope of NRM economics has now evolved to the point where most issues of concern or serious intellectual inquiry are those outside the farm business. It is now primarily focussed on broader landscape scales and usually linked to large public reserves or resources that are subject to vulnerabilities that may justify some form of public intervention.

AARES economists responded by generally bringing more nuanced and at times uncomfortable perspectives and solutions to problems – the economics of doing nothing, dissecting the effects on incentives and behaviours, the use of market instruments and non-market values.

At times, NRM economics has led the debates, and on some issues, inevitably the economics was playing ‘catch-up’ to the pace of public policy, which was responding to rapid change in community concerns. The economics of our members played roles such as weighing options, finding the most efficacious solutions and preventing ‘dumb ideas’ from gathering too much pace and creating unwelcome or unintended outcomes. Our members played an important role in generally raising economic literacy in the institutions where ideas were decided. Over the life of our society, the willingness of public policy institutions and programme deliverers to entertain and indeed seek economic perspectives has generally grown, and this has further nurtured the development of the economics of NRM in the profession. Some of this has been aided by the requirements of central agencies for NRM initiatives to undertake benefit cost and regulatory impact

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assessments and the general pressure on institutions to deliver programmes more cost-effectively.

Corresponding to the evolution of scope of NRM economics was the transition of agricultural and resource economists from agriculture and NRM departments into the broader bureaucracy and public policy institutions and more routine public testing of the regulatory impacts of policy changes. A challenge for any historical perspective on the role of AARES in NRM economics is the large volume of unpublished literature that has grown within key policy setting and delivery institutions.

The Journal has been an important testing ground for new instrument design; however, AARES economists have also contributed to a wide array of internal documents and consultancy reports that have shaped thinking and broadened the capacity of institutions to grapple with choices in the world of second and third best.

Assessing the role of AARES in ‘the economics of natural resource management’ has an anthropomorphic quality. We can lose sight of the fact that while the profession has created an area of discipline, ‘the economics’ has always been an individual pursuit. In developing new ideas and finding solutions to wicked public policy problems, it has been ‘my’ or ‘your’, ‘his’ or ‘her’ rather than ‘the’ economics that has mattered. With this in mind, individual members of our profession have played critical roles behind the scenes in the leading NRM public policy debates.

We should also not overlook the role our society has played in nurturing and inculcating a culture of critical inquiry and robust evidence-based evaluation for those in such positions. Our members have also shaped the education and training of several generations of students and young professionals who sought specialised training in the wide array of natural resource management courses that blossomed in recent decades and who have subsequently taken up leadership positions in key policy and delivery institutions. While the AARES has provided a forum for the development, testing and transfer of ideas, it has also been an important vehicle through which public policy officers could establish and maintain relationships with leading researchers and served as a mechanism through which those individuals could form and maintain a professional identity and world view in an era of contested ideas and values.