

MANAGING PASTURELANDS UNDER THE COMMUNAL LAND TENURE SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that our communal areas are being effectively destroyed at an accelerating rate. The enormity of the damage to pasturelands is evidenced by the universal concern shown by the World Food Programme in their emphasis that effective and immediate development of the world's grazing lands for the intensification of animal production be undertaken (UN 1972).

As our pasturelands are being damaged, desert-like conditions are encroaching on formerly useful land. Deterioration of rangelands carries not only the consequences of lowered livestock-carrying capacities and diminished economic returns from the land, but affects all other natural resources including wildlife. Such damaged areas become a source of erosion and disruption of watersheds. Under these circumstances, which prevail for most practical purposes in all our communal areas in the southern African subregion, the ultimate ruin of the communal land resources is virtually assured.

Perhaps the first question that one needs to ask is how aware is the community and each of its members that communal resources are strictly limited and that there is nowhere else to go when such resources are finished. The ability to recognise that each area of pastureland has a carrying capacity is extremely vital as a starting point. The notion that the pasture user can always move on into another area of grazing should be discouraged as this movement results in competition with other pastoralists who will have depleted their own pasturelands and are also seeking for fresh grazing. The resultant damage may be virtually permanent in its effects if awareness is not created and if this awareness is not followed by measures to combat resource degradation.

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LAND TENURE

The issues arising from land tenure systems have been subject for debate in several seminars. Many people believe that communal grazing is inherently unmanageable, and that unlimited communal access to pasture can only bring about depletion and ultimate ruin of communal areas. They believe that communal pasture rights are incompatible with range management, and that, conversely, individual or corporate group ownership of land is bound to promote good husbandry. There is something very compelling about this idea, especially to those with Western experiences. Hardin (1968) says that control of the use of natural resources under the communal land tenure is vested in no specific individual, group or community and that anyone has unlimited access to land.

There are others, on the other hand, who believe that the view expressed above is rather simplistic. Unlike Hardin, Hughes (1974) does not regard the communal land tenure system as one of free and open access to resources, because 'the group (community) regulates the rights and claims of each in a way as to obtain for all their share of the common benefits' (p. 42). This is a mechanism of control that needs to be understood and developed.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The main object of this paper is to show that it is premature to discount sound pasture management under the communal land tenure system. The issues affecting the apparent unmanageability are both technical and sociological. They are technical in the sense that the basic requirements for managing most pasturelands do not differ essentially whether grazing rights are communal or private.

More often than not, pasture damage occurs not because an area is grossly overstocked, but because the distribution of animals is uncontrolled. For example, grazing land that could potentially support one thousand animals may yet show serious denudation with a livestock population of five hundred if the animals are allowed to concentrate in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A variety of methods as means of influencing animal distribution over grazing areas have been suggested. These include the following:

- the provision of sources of salt or other desirable minerals in appropriate localities;

- location of areas in which supplementary feeding will be conducted, and
- where manpower is available, effective herding.

Perhaps the most effective and permanent method is through fencing, followed by a system of rotation and deferred grazing to allow certain pasture to recover. It is this method that has been and is still being adopted by most of our countries to remedy pasture deterioration. There is no doubt therefore that a series of technical requirements for sustained production of communal pastures are necessary in their management.

SOCIOLOGICAL REQUIREMENTS

The problems are also sociological because the degree of control that local communities can exert over their resources has not been understood and enhanced. Therefore this paper cautions against the over-simplification of the problem by adopting a single method of approach and looking for one 'stable' system of communal resource management which can be universally taught and applied.

This paper submits that there are features in each of our traditional systems which, if objectively studied, could offer a useful basis for future management of communal land resources. The correct sequence of activities is as important as the activities themselves in laying the foundations for local management of communal pastures.

Certain steps need to be taken as a prelude to efficient management of communal pastures. The first of these steps is to allocate grazing rights in a relatively small area to *bona fide* members of each local community. The primary objective of such an action would be to create awareness in each community that there is nowhere else to go once their common resources have been depleted.

Kenya's Swynnerton Plan, which resulted in the adjudication and registration of both arable and grazing lands was based on the 'tragedy of the commons' theory and proceeded to convert most of Kenya's commonages into private holdings. The results, as regards the pasture areas, have yielded neither the economic nor the ecological benefits intended. There are also plenty of cases of drastically overgrazed private farms within our subregion, illustrating that overgrazing is not confined to communal areas alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper advocates for means whereby the communal land system can be strengthened and modified to accommodate contemporary technical needs, rather than abandon it altogether. After all, it has so far served to protect the interests of the poor and the weak far better than imported systems of exclusive land rights. I therefore contend that communal areas presently degraded are in this ravaged state as a result, among others, of the decline of internal discipline which set limits to the greed or rapacity of individuals.

It is the weakness of the local control over local common resources that is the underlying cause of the present vulnerability of communal resources. The paper submits that the key to the management of communal resources is that the people who use communal resources should themselves control the manner and the rate of its exploitation. For this to be feasible, the community itself needs to be sufficiently cohesive for joint decision making, rule enforcement and mutual surveillance. This normally implies that the community should be small enough to enable its members to know one another by sight and live close enough together to meet and cooperate frequently. If the community is too spread out, concerted action and identification and restraint of offenders within the community becomes difficult, if not impossible. The size, density and cohesion of the community is therefore crucial to the success of communal resources management.

The communal pasture should not be so wide and far that the local community is unable to keep it under close surveillance. Communities' claims to specific areas have often proved weak because areas are so large and lacking in clearly defined boundaries. With increasing pressure on communal pastures, and the consequent need for better management, the delineation of boundaries should become an essential prerequisite for the development of local responsibility. There is evidence within the subregion that grazing rights in defined areas were traditionally allocated to members of certain descent groups or wards, and that others did not graze without permission in those areas.

The community must believe that their own communal grazing is a finite resource and that moving onto greener pastures once this one has been exhausted is impossible for, if such pastures exist at all, they belong to other communities. And more important than believing this proposition, communities must act on it! This is the basis of all conservation — the realisation that one can no longer exist by means of exploiting a resource to depletion and moving on to the next. Hence the need for awareness campaigns to achieve

an appreciation of the consequences of unrestrained exploitation of communal resources by unlimited numbers of people and livestock.

While the maintenance of stock within the carrying capacity of any land is essential, it should be encouraged through an efficient marketing system. This is an essential element of sound and profitable ranching as opposed to forced destocking.

CONCLUSION

The above few examples of the ways in which different communities exert varying degrees of management over their communal pastures suggest that the commonage is not inherently unmanageable. A common factor in all the cases is that small communities control small grazing areas. The people live close to each other, may be related, and there are strong formal as well as informal pressures within the group to urge conformity on its members. The approach to communal grazing through 'privatisation' is likely to lead to a situation of uncontrollably escalating inequality.

There is no doubt that communal grazing has become unmanageable. There is equally no doubt that rapidly growing livestock populations should not be permitted to graze unrestrainedly over dwindling areas of natural pastures. But this does not mean that the only available course of action is to partition the communal grazing areas into a number of group ranches under private and exclusive tenure. I am not aware of any example in Africa where a communal area is presently managed on individual basis. In Kenya, the transfer of communal land rights to private and exclusive interests has contributed to a massive problem of rural poverty, unemployment and landlessness (Sandford 1980).

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