A pastoral field day

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In the more densely-populated areas of the State, the annual field days organised by the Department of Agriculture, have long been a popular form of agricultural education. On April 3, 1954, the North-West Branch staged the first field day to be held on a Departmental property in the purely pastoral areas. The venue was Abydos and Woodstock Stations, two adjoining properties in the spinifex area, 100 miles inland from Port Hedland.

The response to the invitations issued by the Department of Agriculture was particularly gratifying to the organisers of the field day.

Visitors arrived from stations more than 200 miles distant and it is doubtful whether there were more than six stations, within a 200-mile radius of Abydos, that were not represented at the gathering.

A CHEERY GATHERING

It would be difficult for people unacquainted with station life to appreciate the manner in which these men got together to extract the fullest possible instruction and enjoyment from the meeting. They brought food and bedding and settled in with everybody contributing to the real party atmosphere. Some unrolled their swags on the lawn and verandahs while others preferred the gravelly backyard or the sandy bed of the Coorong Creek.

Everybody seemed to be an old friend of everybody else although their individual homes were in most cases hundreds of miles apart and meetings only occurred at long intervals. Christian names were used by all and every visitor was rapidly absorbed into the group.

Departmental officers strove to provide whatever hospitality was possible but beyond lighting the copper fire they had little opportunity of contributing.

Mr. Agus Richardson, part-owner of Pippinarrra Station, butcher, businessman and chairman of the Road Board, provided and personally cooked the stew which fed the 30 people present and helped to put the seal of hospitality and goodwill on the proceedings.

Another deserving of special mention was Mr. Rob Lukis, manager of Munda-bullangana Station and president of the Port Hedland branch of the Pastoralists Association. He was responsible for much of the local organisation and is a progressive pastoralist who is exerting a valuable influence in the district and arousing enthusiasm in the younger station men.

INTERESTING ITINERARY

It must have been an exciting and satisfying day for Agricultural Adviser Hank Suijdendorp, who has worked toward it during recent seasons of experimentation with spinifex management, and there was abundant evidence that he has made a marked impression on the station people.

Fig. 1.—Visitors inspecting an area from which sheep were excluded but kangaroos could gain admittance. Note the butts of palatable Plectrachne severely eaten down in the foreground. The large tussocks are of unpalatable Woolly Spinifex.
The morning programme included an address by Mr. W. M. Nunn, Officer-in-Charge of North-West Branch, summarising the objective of the stations, followed by inspections of regeneration plots and buffel introduction plots on Abydos country.

In the afternoon, inspections were made of spinifex management and controlled grazing plots on Woodstock Station, with addresses by Mr. Suijdendorp at each stop.

In the evening, coloured slides depicting the work of the Department of Agriculture throughout the Murchison, North-West and Kimberleys areas were shown and short descriptive talks were given by Messrs. Nunn and Suijdendorp, and by Dr. Rumich, Agrostologist of the North-West Branch. These were followed by an address by Mr. A. M. Stewart, Assistant Director of the University Institute of Agriculture, who was able to make interesting references to pastoral experience in U.S.A.

Visitors were deeply impressed by the demonstrations showing the effect of continuous grazing in eliminating the more valuable pasture species and allowing inedible types to monopolise the country. The first plot visited was an area enclosed by a fence which excluded sheep but allowed kangaroos to graze as they wished. Here the grasses and soft spinifex were eaten back to such a degree that seeding had been prevented, while unpalatable woolly spinifex was untouched and seeding prolifically. The only young plants to be found were the inedible ones, and with this demonstration there could be no doubt in the mind of any visitor that continuous grazing, either by sheep or kangaroos, even at low stocking rates must eventually lead to a closed community of inedible types. All agreed that this may explain why stations in the spinifex regions now have much lower carrying capacities than they had twenty or thirty years ago, and why paddocks which then could produce good lambing percentages are not fit only for dry sheep.

**SOME SURPRISING RESULTS**

With this lesson well in mind the station men displayed the keenest interest in the management trials which set out to determine the carrying capacity of country under grazing methods designed to protect valuable species at susceptible periods, and to encourage their spread, while at the same time making intelligent use of the feed available.

It is far too early in this work to draw definite conclusions from these experiments, but it was apparent to all that grasses not to be seen outside the plots were returning in the plots which were control-grazed, while at the same time the grazing days added up to the astonishing figure of a sheep to two acres on country which popular local opinion would probably assess at about one sheep to 15 or 20 acres under ordinary paddock grazing.

**THE KANGAROO MENACE**

It becomes more and more obvious that the kangaroo population must be reduced. Then, and only then, will we be able to
control-graze our country and bring about the conditions necessary to return it to its former productivity.

Visitors were delighted to learn at the field day that arrangements are now well in hand for a team of research workers to commence a study of the kangaroo and methods of controlling the pest, using Woodstock Station as a base for operations. If their efforts are attended by anything like the success obtained by Mr. Suijdendorp in his management trials, then some real improvement is to be expected in the spinifex areas.
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