Lessons from Australia â?? the environmental crisis, dingoes and deer!

Description

The environmental crisis is Australia has been back in the news because of the record temperatures â?? an average maximum daytime temperature of 41.9C was recorded this week â?? and the fires burning out of control. The fire in the Wollemi National Park, which I had wanted to visit 6 weeks ago, has now been burning for over 8 weeks and destroyed an area of almost 500,000 hectares, an area larger than the whole of the Cairngorms National Park. People trying to protest in Australia against the failure of their government to take action on carbon emissions are being arrested (see here). What a terrible country one might think.

This, however, is the wrong way to see it. The mining and energy businesses that control the government in Australia and are responsible for pumping carbon out into the atmosphere are no different to those that are currently making a fortune out of north sea oil (see here). Scott Morrison, the Australian Prime Minister, is still saying coal mining is good because it creates jobs, a line little different from the Scottish Government which still supports investment in the North Sea becauseâ?¦â?¦â?¦.err, well, it creates jobs. Indeed we in Scotland owe a degree of responsibility for what is happening in Australia, not just because of the carbon we are currently extracting from below the ground but because of our own historical legacy of coal mining. The extreme heat in Australia is global in origin just like the increased flooding in the British Isles which has caused so much destruction in England the last couple of weeks.

Set aside their climate change denying politicians, however, and there is a lot that we in Scotland could learn from Australian thinkers and doers. If you have not read them, Tim Flanneryâ??s books the Future Eaters (1994) and the Weather Makers (2005) are brilliant and he has now been bold enough to write a Natural History of Europe. Tim Lowâ??s books, including â??Where Song Beganâ?• (2014) â?? a challenge to our historical understanding of bird evolution which has been through a European lens â?? â??The New Natureâ?• (2002) and â??Our Feral Futureâ?• (1999) â?? which cover the related themes of how human have impacted on nature and invasive species â?? have caused me to re-think much of how I see the world. And there are moreâ?¦â?¦â?¦â?¦

This post, however, will take a look at a book by an Australian doer, someone who is trying to show how the environmental destruction caused by livestock farming could be reversed. It has lessons for farming and re-wilding in Scotlandâ??s National Parks.

Farming in Australia

By comparison to Australia, Scotlandâ??s overgrazed hillsides look undergrazed. The continued removal of trees desiccates the earth and without rain there is nothing for livestock to eat. Note green fenced forest on skyline

Farming in Australia is brutal. My own family experienced the boom and bust. The story goes that one of my great great greats, as a young man, drove cattle up from Victoria to Queensland â?? it took him and his mate the best part of a year. Once there he made a fortune and bought a huge tract of land before, a few years later, losing everything â?? and I mean everything â?? to drought.

Unlike Europe, Australia there is no system of agricultural payments or subsidy and even now most emergency assistance in the drought is in the form of loans (see here). Not much help if you are already in massive debt. Farmers are on their own and its each for themselves.

During the current drought the Murray and Darling Rivers, 2520km and 1470km long respectively, which flow to the west of the Great Dividing Range and have made much of Australian agriculture possible have dried up to an unprecedented extent. The disappearance of what were once mighty rivers has been hastened because of the way water is used for irrigation, siphoned off to cotton farmers in Queensland for example, and environmental degradation which accelerates rates of water run-off

from the land.

Legal disputes about water, including claims against government, are common and there is a whole body of law that deals with water (see here), something fundamental to human life. Rather than collectively addressing problems, individuals are fighting to the death.

Around Orange, the country town where I stayed for a time, I was told that six local farmers had committed suicide in the last year. Suicide, as Durkheim showed in his classic 19th century sociological study, is closely associated with bankruptcy.

The land around Orange, just West of the Blue Mountains, used â?? like the Murray Darling basin â?? to be some of finest for farming in Australia. Much of the rock is basalt, which creates far more fertile soils than sandstone areas. It now risks becoming a desert.

Most of the land farmed in Australia is far too poor for crops and is used for livestock. When Britain annexed the lands that made up Australia, it declared them terra nullius â?? nobodyâ??s land â?? dispossessing the aborigines . The new states then sold or leased out the land to European settlers. A large proportion of the land in Australia is still owned by the state governments, crown land as its called (see here), and is leased out for pastoral purposes. After 150 years of overgrazing â?? sound familiar? â?? most of that is now seriously degraded.

The Wooleen Way â?? Renewing an Australian Resource

Wooleen is one of 285 stations in the Southern Rangelands in Western Australia. This area covers 850,000 square kilometres 85% of which is managed under pastoral leases. Wooleen was established in 1886 and itself is about 1/3 the size the size of the Cairngorms National Park. It includes 36km of the Murchison River and Wooleen Lake, both of which only hold water occasionally.

Historically farms under pastoral leases have experienced cycles of boom after rain and then bust after drought. Livestock start by eating the best grasses, move on to eat the less palatable and then on to shrubs and trees â?? there are strong parallels to overgrazing Scotland â?? but with many animals eventually starving to death. Then, after rain, grasses would quickly re-appear and farmers â?? in part to pay off debts â?? would quickly put as many livestock as possible back onto the land. This gave the land no time to recover: perenial grasses, for example, have in large part disappeared and only annual grasses that have time to seed before being eaten survive. Its a vicious circle which gets worse after each drought, livestock numbers have collapsed and with that jobs â?? Wooleen once employed 17 people but for 30 years has barely supported one family. The Wooleen Way, which I was lent by an Uncle while in Australia, is about how David Pollock, the author, recognised the history of environmental destruction on the property he leased and of what happened when he removed the livestock to give the land a chance to recover.

What David Pollock has done bears similarities to what Wild Land Ltd has been doing in Scotland, most famously in Glen Feshie through a radical reduction in the numbers of red deer, and to the Knepp Estate in Sussex, the subject of the book â??Wildingâ?•. However, unlike Anders Povslen, the billionaire owner of Wild Land Ltd or the Burrells, landed gentry who have found new ways of using agricultural subsidies, David Pollock had no money. His father bought the pastoral lease for Wooleen for just over $1 million and inherited most of the debt. By removing the livestock in 2007, he removed his main source of income and, and despite attempts at diversification, most successfully into tourism (see here) , has lived on the breadline for much of the time since. There are crofters who have taken on and are facing similar changes.

Ecologically the book fascinating. There is, for example, an explanation, illustrated with photos, of how soils denuded of grasses get washed out by rain when it does fall, reducing soil fertility and the carbon held in soils, and how rapid run off deepens creeks preventing water from flooding over the land as it used to. There are descriptions of the relationship between artificial waterholes and overgrazing, how bore holes have allowed not just cattle but kangaroos to survive (increasing numbers from perhaps 20,000 to 4 million in the Southern Rangelands) and how location of boreholes leads to grazing pressures.

In an attempt to stop kangaroos replacing the cattle David Pollock shut off the artificial water holes. This worked until it rained and c20,000 Kangaroos â?? soft footed so they do less damage to soils than cattle â?? turned up at Wooleen Lake, attracted by the new grasses growing there. David Pollock recounts how he shot no less than 3,340 kangaroos in 56 hours without any obvious effect on the numbers coming in till he could no longer afford the ammunition. It makes our attempts to reduce deer numbers appear pathetic!

While wondering what to do, dingoes came back and solved the problem for him. The dingoes not only dispersed the kangaroos â?? just like how wolves have famously dispersed deer at Yellowstone allowing vegetation to recover â?? they killed all the feral goats, which are much easier than kangaroos to catch, and were responsible for much of the grazing pressure. They also killed the foxes and changed the behaviour of feral cats which have been responsible for the near extermination of many native Australian species. The cats were forced to keep much closer to trees enabling ground nesting birds to return to the grassland of Wooleen Lake. The impact on vegetation regeneration was startling with trees, grasses and sedges quickly returning. Inspirational!

While the dingo is persecuted all over Australia because it, like the wolf, will destroy a flock of sheep cattle will see it off. David Pollock wants livestock farming to have a future â?? he is very much a farmer â?? but believes for this should be alongside nature not at the expense of the natural environment. The book explores how this might happen with some suggestions, based on his experience, at the end. There are strong parallels and lessons I believe for the â??experimentsâ?• in livestock farming that are happening in our National Parks, at Lynbreck Croft in the Cairngorms and Glen Finglas in the Trossachs (which I hope to cover next year on parkswatch).

The book also contains a sustained critique of how government has allowed the land to degrade: there are descriptions of how the baseline for environmental monitoring keeps changing and then, when the results are still bad, how agencies stop collecting data; critiques of government policy (e.g. farmers get help to kill dingoes but not feral cats); and entertaining descriptions of attempts to engage with government officials and Ministers. Again, in all of this there are strong parallels with Scotland â?? inspiration from across the world for all those who care about how we as a species are destroying the natural environment to keep going in 2020!

Wooleen is, according to Amazon, due for release in the UK in April 2020. Have a good Xmas!

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. climate change
2. conservation
3. restoration
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