Predicting native pasture growth in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory

A thesis submitted by

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to the

School of Agriculture, Food and Wine
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The University of Adelaide, Australia

as fulfilment of the requirements of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2006
Declaration of Originality

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Acknowledgments

The successful completion of this study has involved considerable assistance from many people throughout the planning, research, analysis, and reporting phases. The efforts of the following people are gratefully acknowledged.

Funding: The fieldwork and GRASP model calibration reported in this study were funded by Meat and Livestock Australia’s (MLA’s) North Australia Program. In addition, MLA’s provision of a Junior Research Fellowship allowed me to concentrate full time on finalising this thesis. Their contribution has been central to the completion of this work.

My principal supervisor Dr Bill Bellotti (The University of Adelaide) for encouraging me down the post-graduate path, always being available for advice when needed during the preparation of this thesis, and his quiet insistence that I produced work of a high standard. The role of supervisor is crucial to a student’s candidature, and I have been very fortunate having Bill’s guidance throughout my study.

My co-supervisor Ken Day (Qld Dept. of Natural Resources and Mines) for a great many things. He provided advice on field data collection, collaborated with me during calibration of the GRASP model, and reviewed my work many times. Mostly, however, I thank Ken for his undying faith, patience and friendship throughout the course of this study. This work would never have been completed without his commitment, and for that I am indebted.

Dr Greg McKeon (Qld Dept. of Natural Resources and Mines) for his repeated efforts to educate me about the GRASP model, his endless enthusiasm for the quest to improve landscape use by the northern Australian pastoral industry, and leading me to think in ways I never knew were possible. It has been a privilege to work with a scientist of his calibre.

Former NT Dept. of Primary Industry and Fisheries (now DPIFM) staff: Tom Stockwell for the job; Rodd Dyer for being a great friend and demonstrating work ethic like I’d never seen before; and Anne Lyon, Bruno Hogan, Linda Cafe and the staff of Victoria River Research Station (Kidman Springs) for being good mates and for assistance with collection of data in the field, sometimes under very difficult conditions.
Neil MacDonald, Robyn Cowley, Trudi Oxley, Kieren McCosker, Annemarie Huey and Caz Smith who are the current generation of bright minds at Katherine Research Station furthering our understanding of sustainable pastoralism in the semi-arid tropics of the NT. It is a great motivating factor to know the outcomes of this work will (indeed already do) play a significant role in ongoing pastoral research.

The NT Cattlemans Association and the producers of the Victoria River District for allowing me to conduct field research on their properties, for access to confidential property data, and for their hospitality and open-minded discussions over many years. This thesis is ultimately for them, the people who manage the landscape.

Shafiq, Ali, Eun-Young, Yasmine, Bagarath, Juan, Vahid and Bandara: the international postgraduate students at The University of Adelaide’s School of Agriculture, Food and Wine for befriending me, broadening my mind, and who present their theses in English - to them a second language. As challenging as things got sometimes, nothing in my study was as hard as that.

The many other people with whom I interacted during this study and who provided encouragement when the path forward seemed long, arduous and unclear.

Most importantly, I thank Cath for putting up with my long absences, understanding my need to see this study through to completion, and supporting me when it was needed most. Her faith in me carried me through many moments of doubt.
Abstract

Pastoralism is the major economic activity in the Victoria River District (VRD), and is dependent on sustainable pasture use. Analysing grazing practices for sustainability requires knowledge of annual pasture production, but little quantitative data is available. A study was undertaken to develop the capacity for predicting native pasture growth in the VRD using systems modelling. Twenty one field sites were studied for two years using a standard methodology, and the Grass Production (GRASP) model was calibrated using this field data. End of growing season total standing dry matter (TSDM) was well predicted (mean = 2513kg/ha, \( r^2 (1:1) = 0.966 \), RMSE = 132kg/ha, and 98% of predictions within measurement variance).

Developing generic parameters for common soil and pasture types allowed extrapolation of the model. Predictive skill declined when using generic parameters (\( r^2 (1:1) = -0.265 \), RMSE = 807kg/ha and 64% of predictions within measurement variance). However, observation and prediction means were very similar, indicating that generic parameters are suitable for broad scale applications, but site-specific parameters are necessary if a high degree of accuracy is required. Parameters controlling plant water uptake largely determine pasture growth in low rainfall years, while nitrogen uptake and dilution parameters limit growth in high rainfall years. Pasture growth is constrained by nitrogen supply in 91% of seasons in the northern VRD, and in 25% of seasons in the drier south.

Example applications of the model were demonstrated. Current and expected future levels of pasture utilisation in the district were calculated, showing a current average of 16%, rising to an expected 20% in the next decade. These levels are within the safe utilisation rates recommended for the region. Economic analysis shows positive returns ($4.54 million per year) from pasture augmentation with introduced legumes if past problems with establishment and persistence can be overcome.

Model performance would be improved by accounting for simultaneous wetting of the entire profile in cracking clay soils, calculating growth of perennial and annual pasture species separately, and simulating variation in nitrogen uptake and dilution between years. Incorporation of these processes must be balanced against the increased complexity of the model and the additional data required for calibration.
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