

“Impacts of Absentee Landholders on Production and Conservation Initiatives in Central Tablelands, NSW”

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Introduction:

The 'Increasing landholder collaboration for landscape scale conservation' project of the NSW Environment Trust (Baumber 2016) found absentee landholders to be a key stakeholder group missing from interviews that were conducted to ascertain landholders' perceptions and preferences for collaborative initiatives towards landscape-scale conservation and productivity. The only concrete dataset on absentee landholders in NSW were surveys conducted by the Greater Sydney Local Land Services, and these surveys focused only on general demographic characteristics of absentee landholders.

The rising number of absentee landholders, and the lack of knowledge about their behavior and perceptions, hampers efforts for cross-property collaboration in Central Tablelands NSW. Meadows et al. (2013) argues the importance of cross property collaboration by pointing out that ecological boundaries rarely abide by human-imposed boundaries. Therefore, environmental management beyond individual property boundaries is required to protect and enhance biodiversity values across a landscape; further emphasizing the necessity for collaboration between absentee and resident landholders. Furthermore, initial findings of participatory rural appraisals (PRAs) conducted in a catchment area of the Central Tablelands of NSW for the aforementioned project found that rural residents were keen to collaborate with neighbors, especially absentee landholders with whom they share a fence line, on certain issues. However, this is complicated by the fact that absentee landholders are more difficult to reach than residential landholders (Morrison et al. 2015). Curtis et al. (2008) put it simply: "*NRM agencies often report that it is difficult to engage absentee property owners in NRM programs, as they can be difficult to contact during standard business hours and are less likely to have strong connections to the local social networks.*" Hence, a better understanding of absentee landholders' behaviors and interests, and improved ways to reach and engage them, can tailor collaborations on landscape scale initiatives between rural residents and absentee landholders.

Aim and objectives:

This research aims to enhance the understanding of the impacts that absentee landowners can have on the adoption of land management practices, and on their potential involvement in cross-property collaboration initiatives. To this end, the research has identified the following objectives:

- a) To understand the behaviours, values and motivations of absentee landowners.
- b) To examine the connectedness that absentee landholders have with their land, neighbours and to their local community.
- c) To examine ways in which absentee landholders seek out information on land management practices, and the extent of communication with government agencies, such as the Local Land Services.

The next section examines current knowledge gaps on absentee landholders.

Current knowledge on absentee landholders:

This section provides an analysis and synthesis of the current knowledge on absentee landholders, to identify knowledge gaps and to develop a better and more nuanced understanding of this group, in terms of who they are, their behaviors, attitudes and preferences.

Characteristics and demographic of Absentee Landholders

The need for improved understanding of the diversity of rural landholders is increasingly being recognized (Emtage and Herbohn 2012). Hence, it is important to first clearly define the term “absentee landowners” and understand the characteristics of this group, as Petrzelka and Armstrong (2015) demonstrate that absentee landowners are not a “homogenous group”. Therefore, absentee landholders can be broadly categorized into two groups: retired farmers who have moved away from their land, and people who have either inherited the land, or have bought the land for investment and recreational purposes, and live somewhere else (Buman 2007; Morrison et al., 2015). Furthermore, absentee landholders are more likely to reside in urban areas, with a higher chance of them owning the land for amenity rather agricultural productivity reasons. Because they do not live on their land, and most do not own their land for productivity purposes, absentee landholders are less financially dependent upon the land (Petrzelka 2013).

A study in the Noosa Hinterland of Queensland provided some details on absentee landholders in Australia (Meadows et al. 2014). The study found that most of these landholders possessed little or no natural resource management knowledge; and only engaged landholders that were highly active and aware of support programmes had a high level of natural resource management knowledge. This means that absentee landholders are less likely to engage in active management practices on their land (Petrzelka 2013). As mentioned earlier, absentee landholders are usually less financially dependent on their land and more likely to own land for amenity reasons than production purposes (Farmer et al. 2015). Additionally, they are less likely to have inherited their land, and less likely to be farmers or ranchers (Salmon, Brunson and Kuhns 2006 in Farmer et al. 2015). These factors could also partly explain the lack of engagement absentee landholder have with their land.

Implication of shift in land ownership demographic

Besides the need to better understand the characteristics of absentee landholders, it is equally crucial to understand how an increase of absentee landholders can impact on rural communities. In this regard, it is important to understand trends of ownership shift due to amenity driven migration¹, and then the implications of this shift which has seen an increase in absenteeism. One of the possible factors for increased ownership change is the high and rising mean age of farmers, which is leading to the likely increase of property transfer (Mendham et al. 2012). Research conducted in the early 2000s at Corangamite Watershed indicated that 40-50% of rural properties would change ownership in the following 10 years after the research; with higher levels of change in rural property ownership in regions with high population turnaround and amenity driven migration (Mendham and Curtis 2010).

¹ Amenity driven migration: An increasing trend of people purchasing rural property for the purpose of amenity.

Similarly, Gosnell et al. (2006) study around the greater Yellowstone national park showed that 23% of all land studied (less than 400 acres) changed hands in the preceding decade, with amenity buyers dominating land purchases. Gosnell et al. (2006) highlights that absentee landownership has been a component of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem's land tenure for over a century, but large-scale acquisitions of ranches by individuals with significantly different management philosophies is a relatively new phenomenon, that has accelerated and spread since the 1990s. This shift from traditional ranchers, typically full-time livestock producers, to a more diverse group of landowners, including absentee owners, has had an impact on land use, which has shifted towards amenity or conservation values. The same study showed new owners were open to proposed changes to land management, but lacked local knowledge such as dealing with problems regarding weeds and water, as longer-term owners moved away.

A similar pattern was found in Australia's Corangamite watershed (Mendham and Curtis 2010), where research suggests that rural areas formerly dominated by production values are changing into more heterogeneous landscapes with a mix of production, protection and conservation values. New owners appear less likely to be farmers, more likely to live off-property and their ownership is motivated more by conservation than production values. As well, new rural property owners behaved significantly different to longer term owners, adopting different management practices. However, they are self-reported to have lower levels of knowledge of land management, are involved in different land uses, and implemented different land management practices. Moreover, the influence of absentee landholders on investment, conservation, production, and marketing decisions can be substantial (Wunderlich 1993 in Constance et al. 1996). This shift in structural relationship between farming and land ownership can effect potential changes on who bears risk, who makes production and investment decisions, and who protects the environment and supports the community.

Overall, the migration of amenity related owners has resulted in fragmented landscapes, becoming increasingly varied in values, beliefs, motivations and economic circumstances (Mendham and Curtis 2010). Consequently, these amenity migrations have environmental impacts due to the "social and environmental relations that inform land use and land management being recast" by the values and activities of these new landholders (Ikutegbe, Gill and Klepeis 2015). The rising levels of absenteeism also represent an important change in social structure, and can present challenges to natural resource management practitioner's efforts to manage across property boundaries (Mendham et al. 2012).

Relationships between absentee landholders and tenants/managers

As some absentee landholders have tenants/managers looking after their lands, understanding this relationship, as well as the specific motivations for collaboration, is important as well. Prior research has shown that the relationship between absentee landowners and their tenants/managers is a factor influencing owner engagement with active management practices. This is because most research, done in the United States, points towards the fact that majority of land management decisions are made by tenants, and not absentee landowners (Ulrich-Schad et al. 2016). This aligns with previous findings of Constance et al. (1996), who observed that renters make almost all farm management and program participation decisions.

However, landowners have been found to be more likely than tenants to adopt sustainable land management practices, such as agroforestry. One reason tenants might be reluctant to adopt such practices is that returns on these types of investments may not be forthcoming during the tenancy period. Timing of financial benefits arising from conservation practices, alongside security of land tenure, have been found to be positively associated with adoption of sustainable land management practices (Arbuckle et al. 2009). Prior research of Soule et al. (2000) points out that landowners don't always succeed in requiring tenants to adopt practices with delayed financial benefits. Renters would be expected to be concerned about short-term profitability of land they rent, but less so about long-term value.

The aforementioned findings indicate the need for improved understanding of the decision by landowners and farmers behind acquiring or leasing land in the first place; their prior experience with land management; the extent to which landlords can require tenants to adopt a particular production or conservation practice; and thus the ways in which tenure patterns themselves evolve over time.

Communication and sourcing of information

A final issue identified from this literature review is communication, especially between absentee landholders, and rural networks and agencies. There is a growing acceptance that natural resource management is fundamentally about people management and communication, on top of understanding biophysical and economic factors (Emtage and Herbohn 2012). As absentee landownership is growing worldwide, the need to engage this group of people has become increasingly important as well; especially since Petrzelka (2012) suggests that absentee landholders are much less likely to have contact with Natural Resource Management (NRM) agencies programs and staff. The opposite is also true, with extension professionals having stated difficulty in engaging with rural lifestyle landholders in general (Ikutegbe, Gill and Klepeis 2015).

NRM programs are a crucial source of contact for information, as it can provide landholders education on the impacts of their actions and decisions. A lack of contact with NRM agencies can lead absentee landholders to a shortage of scientific and practical traditional management knowledge that could have been supplied by such agencies. This is especially problematic in some parts of Australia where lifestyle rural landholders make up for most of the landholders, occupy a sizeable portion of rural land in those areas, and are passionate about environmental issues (Ikutegbe, Gill and Klepeis 2015).

A lack of communication between the two parties can also lead to misinformation or information that is untimely (Buman 2007). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that absentee landowners seldom contact local NRM agency programs and staff in the first place (Petrzelka 2012). An earlier research by Redmond et. al (2004) found absentee landowners in Texas had little to no knowledge of land management expertise available to them from conservation organizations, nor were they aware of government related conservation programs, which led to a higher chance of improper use of natural resource management strategies based on faulty knowledge or poor advice from well-meaning neighbours or popular press articles (Redmond et al. 2004 in Petrzelka and Armstrong 2015). Similarly, Morrison et al. (2015) identified the lack

of engagement with natural resource programs as one of the reasons why landholders who are difficult to reach might be responsible for higher levels of environmental degradation.

Therefore, better communication between the two parties can allow agencies to gauge and better understand the decisions that absentee landholders make, and the factors driving them. This point is further emphasized by Moon et al. (2012), who argues that our limited knowledge or understanding of biology and ecological processes are not the reasons for decline in biodiversity; rather it is the lack of understanding of people, and the choices they make. They argue that landholders will be guided by their land management priorities, their attitudes towards various conservation initiatives and the organizations that offer them, and their past experiences with working with these organizations.

It is also worth examining the patterns of knowledge gathering (where and how) of absentee landholders. It has been suggested that a wide majority of absentee landowners do not utilize traditional sources of conservation information, such as local social networks or agencies (Petrzelka and Armstrong 2015). One of the reasons for this was attributed to distance; with the authors realizing that landholders living further away from their land are more likely to be isolated from social networks, and less aware of conventional sources of information. Hence, Petrzelka and Armstrong (2015) encouraged further research to examine this dissociation between landowners and conservation organizations; who and where are these landowners turning to for their information, and what does the lack of use of traditional sources of information mean for conservation implementation on the land.

Effective channels of communication with absentee landholders are just as important as effective outreach programs. Just because information is published or potentially available, does not mean it will receive landholder's attention (Emtage and Herbohn 2012). Motivation of landholders to gather information is another crucial factor; and it could be based on aspects such as perception of the magnitude of the problem, and the appraisal of the information source. Hence, outreach and marketing efforts need to be targeted, focusing specifically on absentee landholders; their physical and social isolation might make traditional and more conventional forms of communicating with other stakeholders ineffective. Finley and Kittredge (2006) suggest tailoring outreach programs and workshops to landholder's values in order to build better trust and communication. In their study, the majority of landowners placed priority on scenery, aesthetics, and privacy; as such, educational programs should focus on these values rather than typical landowner workshops that focus on development of management plans.

Lastly, effective communication between landholders and regulators are critical, not only to foster changes to landholder's existing land management practices, but also to build relationships. Landholders are more likely to participate in future conservation programs when they have a strong, respectful and continuous relationship with the implementing agency, involving face to face contact; signifying the importance of engagement and relationships (Blackmore 2013). The latter appears to apply to adoption of innovations in general (Pannell 2006). Trust of other people and organizations also play an important role in determining how landholders will respond to public policies and programs designed to improve natural resource management, particularly to their appraisal of information sources (Emtage and Herbohn, 2012).

Methodology:

The research on absentee landholders was conducted at the Central Tablelands, given this area is part of the larger project on 'Increasing Landholder Collaboration for Landscape Scale Conservation', funded by the NSW Environmental Trust.

Data collection techniques

Most of the data for this research were acquired through online surveys, and interviews that were conducted either face to face or through the phone. Surveys were conducted to gain a representative sample and a better understanding of what the absentee landholder population's views and perception. Interviews followed to provide more in-depth and detailed explanation as to why absentee landholders held these views and perception. The design of the survey and interview questions were guided by the research objectives, and the methods gathered through literature review. The methodological framework was composed by the following steps:

- a. Set the objectives of the survey and interview: the aim is to get a better understanding of the demographic of absentee landholders, their attitudes, behaviour and level of knowledge. A second aim is to examine tenants/operators; what proportion of absentee landholders have tenants and operators, and what is their relationship with them; along with the tenant/operator's attitudes, behaviour and level of knowledge in land management practices of tenants/operators. Additionally, another relationship to examine is the one between absentee landholders and their neighbours, and the willingness of absentee landholders to collaborate with their neighbours on initiatives. The final aim was exploring approaches of communication used by absentee landholders, more specifically, what sources do they go to in order to seek information on land management practices; what is the proportion of absentee landholders who are aware, and use, programs and measures established by agencies?
- b. Having established the objectives for the survey and interviews, the questions were then constructed. The survey questionnaire went through multiple pre-testing with colleagues, and staff from Greater Sydney Local Land Services with experience in surveying absentee landholders. This was done to obtain feedback on the format, content and wording of the questionnaire, in order to maximize the response rate from absentee landholders.

The survey and interview questions were approved by UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel E. The survey was promoted through various networks, such as Local Landcare and Local Land Services, via their monthly newsletter or Facebook page; inviting absentee landholders to complete the online survey. Promotion of the online survey through these networks was another crucial step, as most absentee landholders might choose to ignore the survey if awareness was not raised by a recognized information source, and if absentee landholders are not informed of their importance to the survey. Promoting it through a recognized information source was also a way to gain the absentee landholder's trust, and establish the project researcher's credibility amongst the population.

Promoting the survey to absentee landholders was a challenge, as we needed to reach enough absentee landholders in NSW to ensure a reliable sample size for the research survey. This challenge was compounded by the fact that there wasn't a single database containing all the

absentee landholders in NSW. The project needed to reach out to absentee landholders from various networks, to minimize bias and to obtain a sampling size truly representative of the entire population of absentee landholders. While the focus of this research was on the Central Tablelands region, the survey was sent out to the whole of NSW in order to reach a large proportion of absentee landholders, to maximize coverage and obtain a representative sample of absentee landholders.

The survey stage was completed with a sample size of 88 respondents, with the sample being representative of the absentee landholder population of Central Tablelands. Following that, 17 semi structured interviews, in-person or over the phone, were conducted with absentee landholders willing to participate in this second stage. The main criteria applied to select the interviewees was: a) purpose of owning their property (income generation vs recreation), and b) whether the landholders had tenants/managers. The selection also looked into geographic diversity in the form of different postcodes, to minimize oversaturation of information from landholders of the same area. The interviews allowed for more in-depth and specific data to be collected; as opposed to the short multiple-choice answers in the survey questionnaire.

Results and discussion

Behaviors, values and motivations of absentee landholders

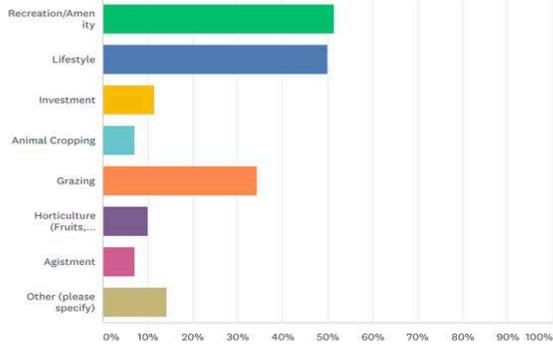
The first research question examined behaviors, values and motivations of absentee landholders. This was examined through various questions, as shown in figure 1 (A to F).

Figure 1A, shows that 50% of the respondents use their land for the purpose of amenity and/or lifestyle, while grazing made up a sizeable portion (>30%) as well. The remaining categories such as investment, animal cropping, horticulture, and agistment each made up close to 10%. In the “Other” categories, about 30% of the responses wrote down conservation as their purpose of owning land. In Figure 1B, recreation was the main reason for acquiring the land for more than 50% of the respondents, with investment the second biggest reason for owning the land at slightly over 20%. Additionally, it has also been observed that owners who have owned the land for 0 to 5 years made up the majority (>35%), while owners who owned land for 6 to 10 years are the second largest groups (>20%), meaning slightly more than half of absentee landholders were relatively new owners who have owned land for a decade or less (Figure 1C).

The aforementioned results reassert the findings of our initial literature review. Firstly, the results from figure 1A and 1B reaffirms the notion that there is a higher chance of absentee landholders owning land for amenity and recreation purposes rather than for agricultural productivity. This finding agrees with prior research of Buman (2007) and Morrison et al., (2015) that categorized absentee landholders as people who have bought the land for investment and recreational purposes (Figure 1B). Moreover, with over 50% of respondents owning their land for a decade or less (Figure 1C), this could suggest the increase in absentee landownership have been a recent occurrence that started in the past couple of decades.

What is the primary use(s) of your property? (can choose multiple)

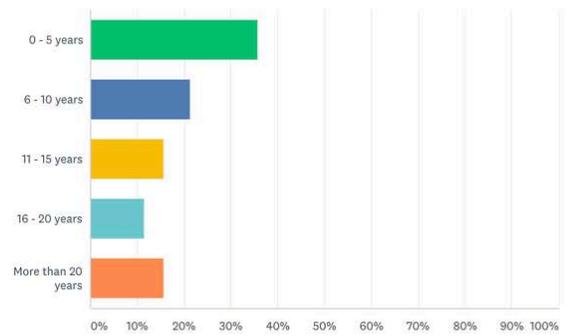
Answered: 70 Skipped: 18



1A

How long have you owned this property for?

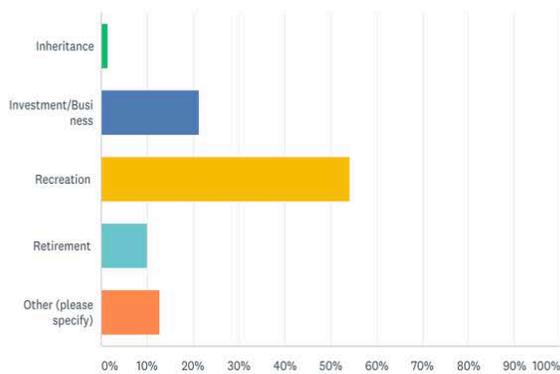
Answered: 70 Skipped: 18



1C

What was the main reason you acquired this property?

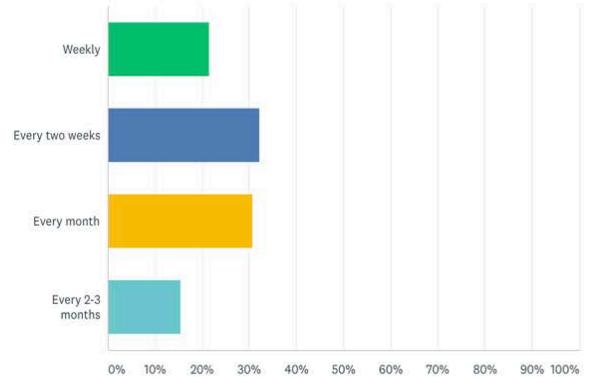
Answered: 70 Skipped: 18



1B

How frequently do you visit your property?

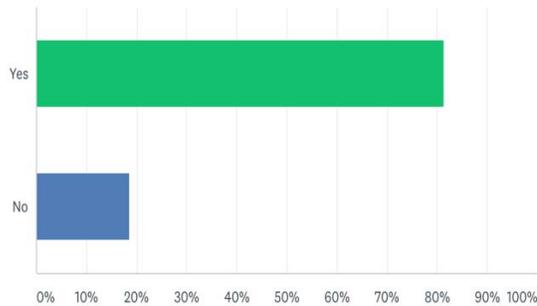
Answered: 65 Skipped: 23



1D

Do you manage your property on your own?

Answered: 70 Skipped: 18



1E

How would you rate your knowledge and experience of the following land management practices:

Answered: 69 Skipped: 19

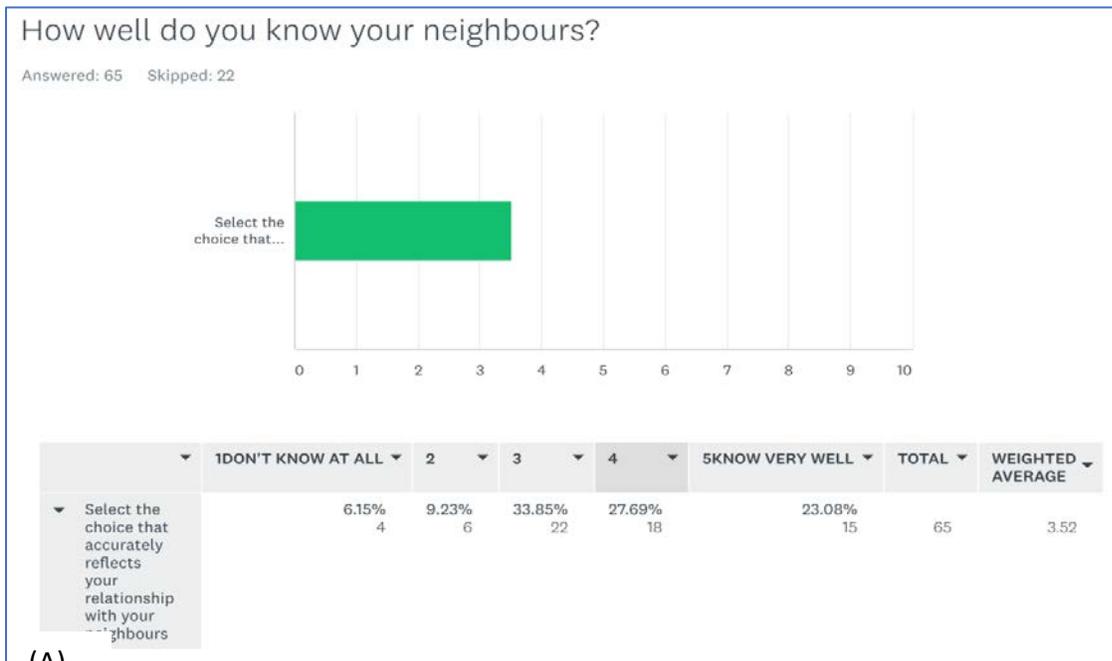


Figure 1: (A) Primary uses of property (B) Reasons for acquiring a property (C) Duration of owning property (D) Frequency of visits to property (E) Do they manage their land on their own (F) Knowledge and experience in land management practices

In terms of frequency of visits, more than 60% of respondents visited their land once every two weeks or once a month (Figure 1D), meaning absentee landholders might not be as actively engaged to their land. However, when asked to rate their knowledge on several aspects of land management practices on a scale of 1 to 5 (Figure 1F), majority of respondents rate themselves 3 or higher in all aspects, meaning they felt they had adequate knowledge and experience in these aspects of land management practices, perhaps explaining why majority of the respondents (>70%) are able to manage their land on their own (figure 1E). However, since these ratings are based on the respondent’s own subjective judgment, they might be a distorted perception and not an accurate reflection of their actual knowledge and experience. With that being said, the results (Figure 1F) are in contrast to literature review findings (Mendham and Curtis 2010; Meadows et al. 2014) which report absentee landholders to have relatively low experience and knowledge in land management practices.

Connectedness to land and the community

The second objective of our research was to examine the connectedness respondents had to their land, their neighbors, and the local community. Slightly over 60% respondents visit their property once or twice a month (Figure 1C), evidencing a low level of active engagement with land. Yet Figure 2A indicates that most respondent’s relationship with their neighbors are pretty close, with majority giving a score of 3 or a 4 (‘I know my neighbours well’) on the Likert scale; providing an average score of 3.92 out of 5. This is also reaffirmed in figure 2B, with over 70% feeling connected to their community through their familiarity with their neighbors, followed by attending local community events, and workshops and seminars.



(A)

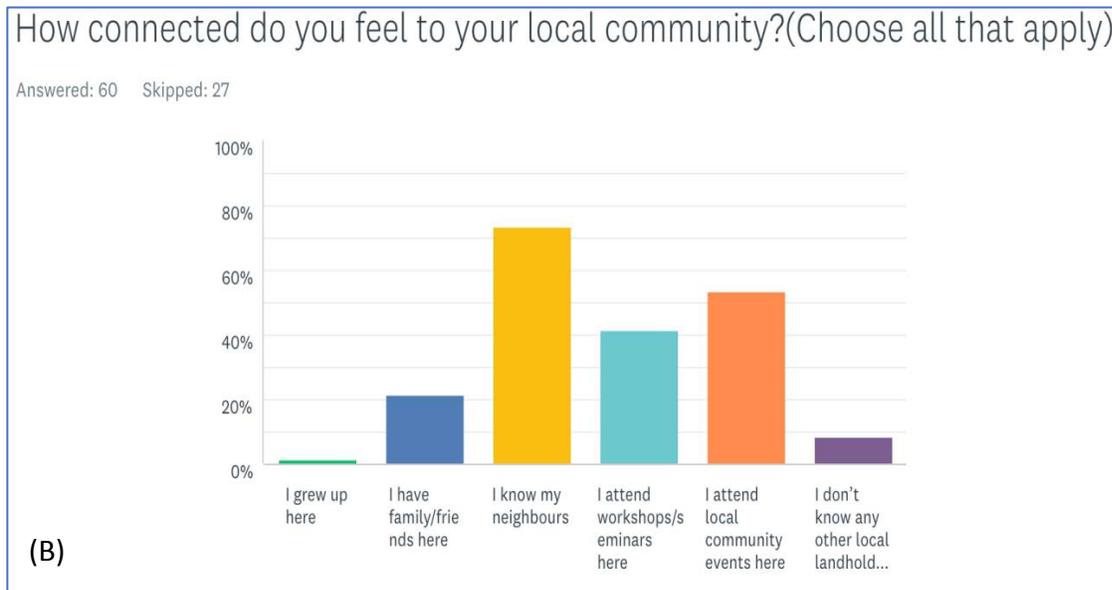


Figure 2: (A) familiarity with neighbours; (B): connectedness with local community.

Ways to source information on land management practices

Another major aspect examined was how these absentee landholders sought to acquire information regarding land management practices. Questions were formulated to capture information on the ways in which absentee landholders seek out information, what is the extent of their communication with government agencies (such as Local Land Services), and the usefulness of these information sources. From Figure 3A, it can be noted that respondents use a wide variety of sources to acquire their information. Local Land Services is main source of information for most respondents (more than 80%), with neighbours and internet the other two sources being used widely by absentee landholder respondents (close to 70%). Close to half of respondents also use Landcare and Department of Primary Industries as sources.

Figure 3B represents the respondent's views on the usefulness of these information sources. The respondents were asked to rate this on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least useful and 5 being very useful. Majority of respondents rated Local Land Services as very useful, perhaps explaining its popularity as an information source (Figure 3A). The majority of respondents also rated their neighbours as very useful information sources, providing further evidence of their somewhat close relationships with them, as shown in Figure 2A. Noteworthy is that over 75% of respondents do not use the Landsmart App, and close to 60% do not use the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage as information sources. Further research could examine if absentee landholders were unaware of these sources, or if they found them to not be as relevant or useful as other sources of information.

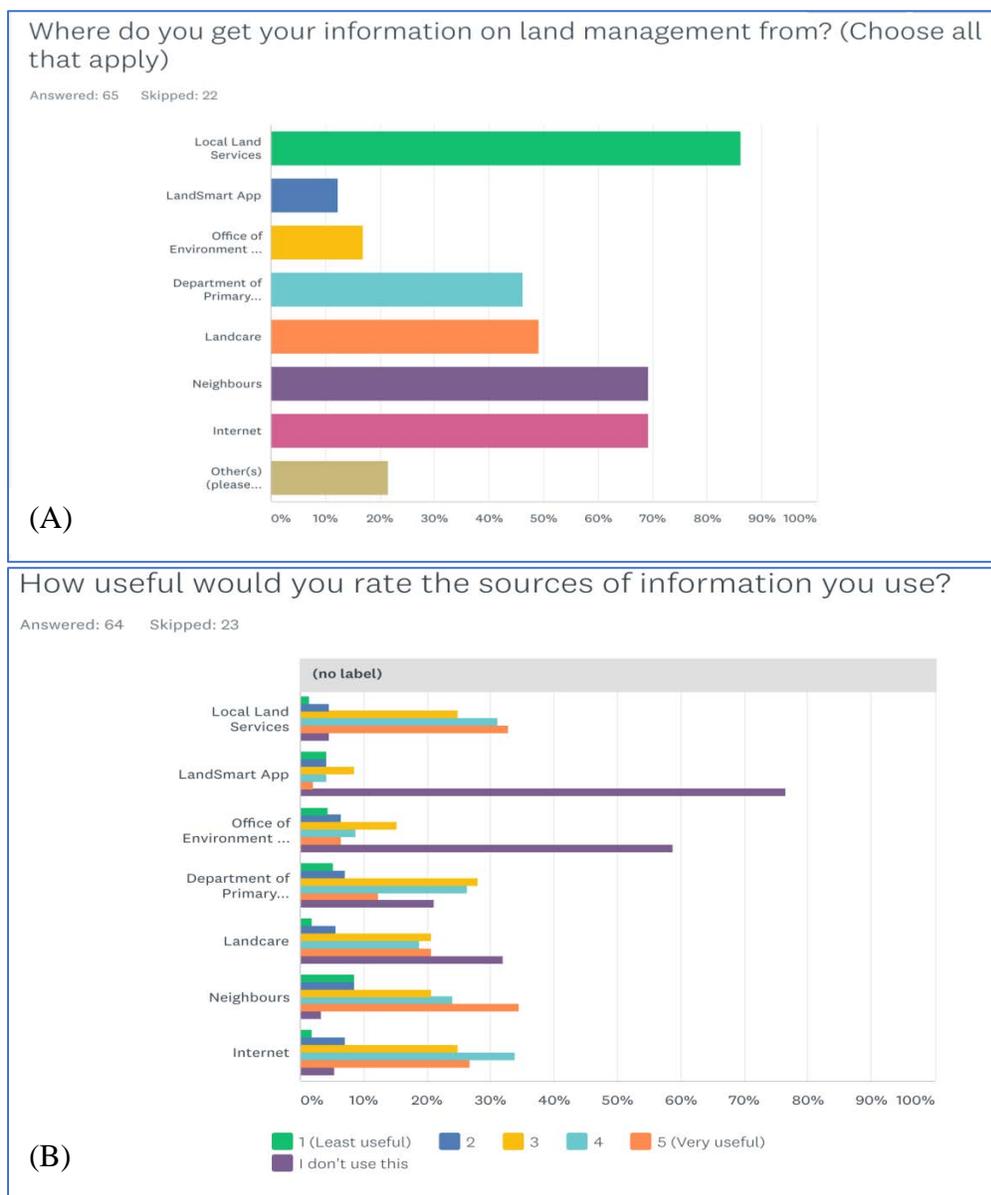


Figure 3: (A) Sources of information on land management practices for Absentee Landholders
 (B) Usefulness of these sources of information

Drivers of engagement with local landholders for landscape-scale collaboration

This section analyses the influence of behaviors, values and approaches of information gathering for the engagement of absentee landholders in local landscape-scale collaborations. Figure 4 shows that 90% of respondents were interested in both weed management and pest animal control, with riparian zones and revegetation following relatively closely (over 60%). Overall, absentee landholder respondents were more interested in conservation initiatives, as compared to productivity initiatives (branding and marketing of produce, ecotourism and collective purchase/hire of products and services). This is somehow expected, as most respondents own land for recreational and/or amenity reasons, rather than for investment. This, along with the fact

that most respondents visit their land 1 to 2 times a month, perhaps explains why interest in productivity initiatives remains low.

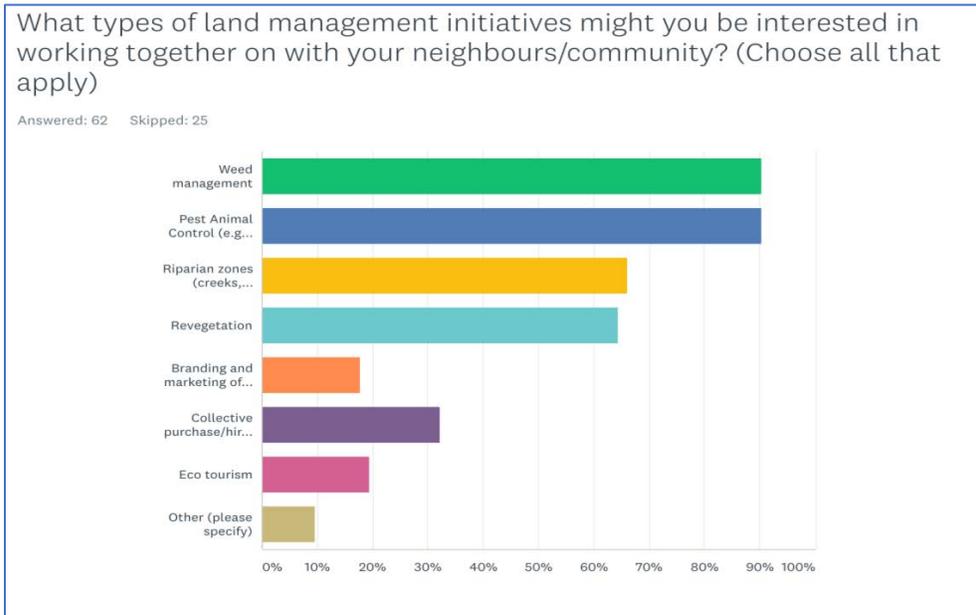


Figure 4: Types of initiatives Absentee Landholders are interested in collaborating

Location of Absentee Landholder's Main Residence and Rural Property

Figure 5A is a cartographic representation of the areas in NSW in which respondents have their main residence. Most of the absentee landholder respondents reside around Sydney city area, or nearby, with few scattered around NSW, confirming findings from the literature review that most absentee landholders take up residence in urban areas. On the other hand, Figure 5B depicts the location of properties acquired by absentee landholders that participated in the survey, and it indicates that most rural properties of these respondents are sparsely distributed all over the state of NSW.

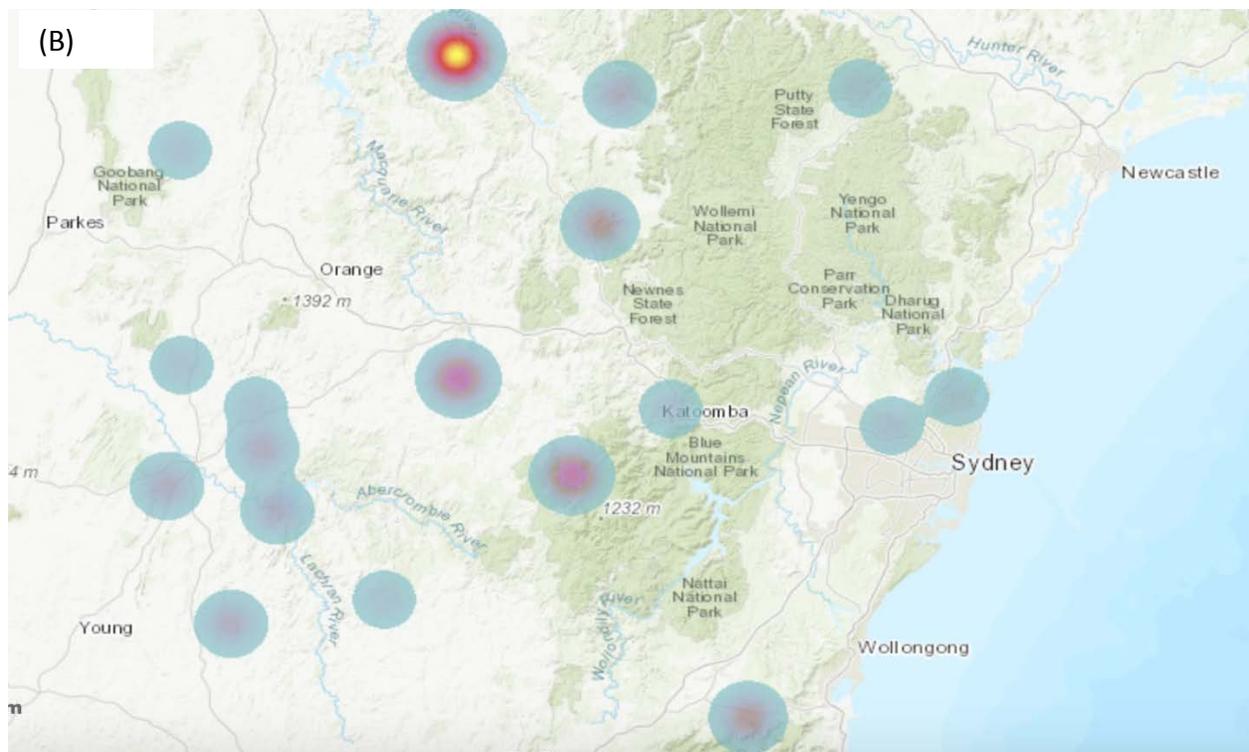
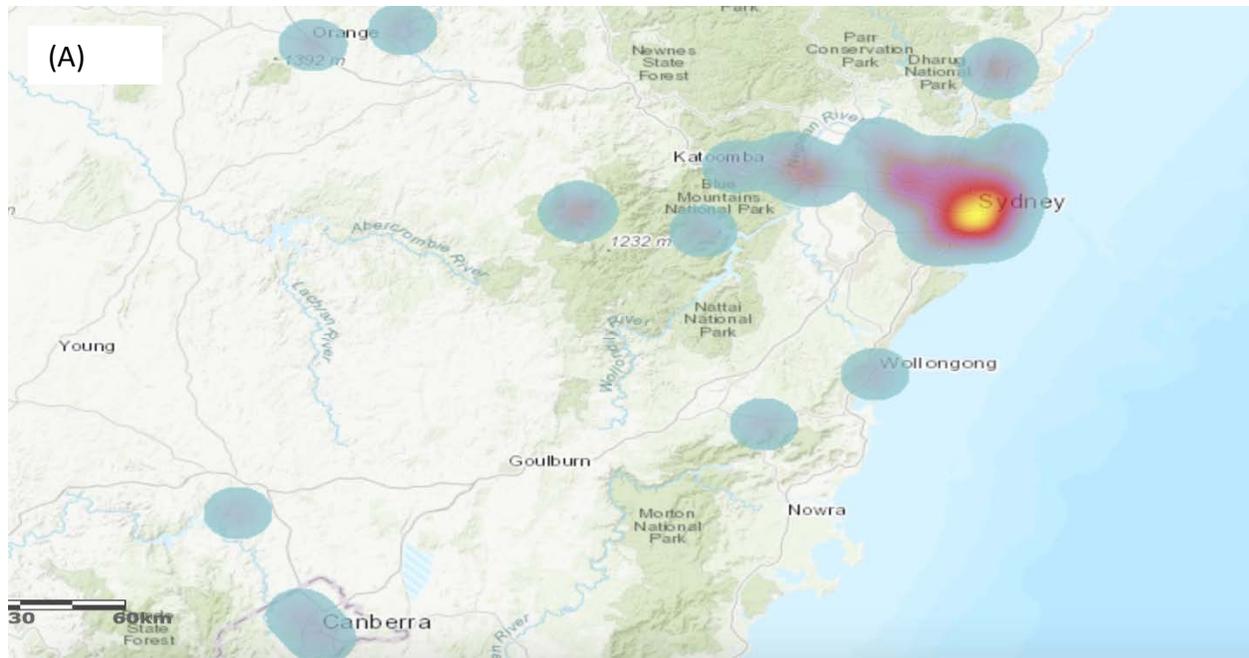


Figure 5: (A) Map of the main residences of Absentee Landholders; (B) Location of rural properties of Absentee Landholders

Synthesis of main findings:

The survey results (Figure 1A - 1F) evidence that the majority of respondents use their land for amenity or lifestyle, most acquired it for the purpose of recreation, and slightly more than half of the absentee landholder respondents were relatively new owners who have owned land for a decade or less. Additionally, our results also illustrate that most respondents are not as actively engaged with their land, with more than 60% of respondents visiting their land once every two weeks or once a month (Figure 1D); these results were consistent with our literature review findings. In terms of knowledge and experience in land management practices, majority of respondents rated themselves 3 or higher in all aspects, meaning they felt they had adequate knowledge and experience in these aspects. This could perhaps be a reason why majority of the respondents (>70%) feel that they are able to manage their land on their own (Figure 1E). Another reason could be their familiarity with their neighbors, as most respondent's relationship with their neighbors are pretty close, and this was reaffirmed in figure 2B, with over 70% feeling connected to their community through their familiarity with their neighbors.

With regards to information sourcing, it can be noted that respondents utilize a wide array of sources to acquire their information. Local Land Services is main source of information for more than 80% of respondents, with neighbours and internet the other two sources being used widely by absentee landholder respondents (close to 70%). Additionally, majority of respondents also rated their neighbours as very useful source of information, providing further evidence of their somewhat close relationships with them as mentioned earlier. Absentee landholder respondents were also found to be more interested in conservation initiatives than productivity initiatives, and this was proven in Figure 4, which shows that 90% of respondents were keen on both weed management and pest animal control, with riparian zones and revegetation following relatively closely (over 60%). This is unsurprising, as majority of respondents own land for recreational and/or amenity purposes rather than for investment. Furthermore, most respondents visit their land 1 to 2 times a month, perhaps explaining why interest in productivity initiatives is low and impractical. Lastly, Figure 5A shows that most absentee landholders reside around Sydney city area or nearby, with few scattered around NSW, confirming prior research findings from elsewhere in Australia and the USA that most absentee landholders take up residence in urban areas.

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