

Review of Day One (Thursday 2 November)

Dr Bruce Walker

Director, Centre for Appropriate Technology, Alice Springs, NT

Speech delivered: Friday 3 November

It is a constant source of amazement to me that the level of interest Desert Knowledge (DK) has generated, to the point that we can have over 330 people prepared to travel, some from abroad, and spend two days searching for ways forward at a symposium.

Add this to the 180 researchers involved in the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), the 299 businesses involved in the Desert Knowledge linked business network project and the three hundred organisations involved in the CRC consultation process that led to the network.

From a creek bed vision 7 years ago we have a Stat Authority, a CRC and a Precinct and regional network hubs. None of these things were there 5 years ago. Desert Australia is a place where you can get things done.

Taken together there is an investment of over \$130 million over the next 7 years on desert knowledge. This is a remarkable outcome and a great window of opportunity to make a difference. And in terms of timing things could not be better.

Desert Australia is growing though not necessarily in ways that may be desirable. Demographic change, the predominance of Government support and welfare dependency, point to increasing investment in interventions and social services.

Yet for desert Australia wealth creation and the ability to reduce income differentials across the population is the sustainable driver of improvement in health and education.

So my interest has been to explore the development and role of markets compared to the fiscal transfers from the coast. Desert solutions for desert people can have a down side.

If Desert Australia is to grow it must attract people who can sustain the services and wealth creation activities of the region. Desert Australia is in competition with coastal regions for resources and the attention of politicians and bureaucrats.

Desert Knowledge faces some difficult decisions; whether to pursue knowledge that has evolved in part from a predominantly welfare driven environment or alternatively to pursue knowledge that might arise from adjustments to this prevailing environment to one with greater private investment. Or whether it should try to do both.

I might return to this later.

Ken has an eye for detail and I am a bit more big picture so hopefully we will be able to pick up a range of things in this review.

The day began with a welcome from Lhere Artepe with one of the most impressive welcome clips I have witnessed. Then followed a roll call of who is who.

The Chair, and the Chair, and her worship the Mayor provided a start to the day. (that's the end of the rhyming verse)

Then Minister Kon announced a solar gain for Alice Springs and DG Cheryl committed Minister Ford from WA, to strong support and something to pay?

Chair squared plus one, Harold, provided a view of the past and future and a very clear rationale for the DK movement. He reminded us that the DK was an attempt to add a new layer to the economy of the desert that

complemented the commodity based activity and the welfare base to the regional economy. I felt we might have been starting to lose this a bit as we continually reconstruct our vision.

Harold also reminded us that we have wealth in the desert but we don't have a good distribution system for that wealth as it leaves the desert. We need to suck out the value on the way through.

I sat through the session marvelling how history is created, occasionally rewritten and adopted by countless new people as they come into the movement. We certainly have some ongoing challenges as we document our progress and grow.

Our platinum sponsor Chair Shirley of ILC provided us with a range of examples of the positive interventions and partnerships of the ILC in the pastoral, tourism, management support services and a hint that infrastructure and transport might be next.

Morning Tea – started the scrum as the lobbying and learning began in one of the most impressive business show cases I have witnessed in the big room.

Our two keynote presentations by our international guests opened many eyes.

Dr Mohammed Sherzad gave us a lesson in imagination and observation. Here were a series of housing issues that would make Minister Brough blush.

Overcrowding, sand floors, limited water supply, environmental health concerns, using wind power to find water – an absolutely amazing lesson in the interplay of climate, landscape and culture.

Tony Rinaudo and Tougiani Abasse described their farmer managed natural regeneration in Niger.

Tougiani reminded us that this complex and intricate system is ultimately driven by people for the benefit of people and how they organise themselves and share their knowledge is critical to success.

Of the many challenges presented by these three speakers I was reminded of our aspiration to market DK to the world and how foolish we could look if this is not tempered by good intentions and patient listening to local knowledge and understanding. I suspect it is less about the traditional knowledge and more about the approach used by people conditioned by the system.

I think like many of you I had a moment of self-doubt about tampering with complex systems through the application of sectoral ideology and targeted interventions.

It is impossible to develop sound policy and research questions on the back of ideological or wishful thinking in the absence of good science and understanding how this complex system works.

Our future in the desert is heavily dependent on our understanding of the system not the parts, although we can not dismiss the parts. Our ability to respond to external forces is greatest when we understand the whole system. Opportunists understand whole systems. To survive in the desert you have to be an opportunist. But we will have to wait for MSS to write the Science of Desert Living.

I was reminded of an earlier DK seminar where Indigenous people described the way they lived with the desert and evolved a system of belief and practices that sustain life in that environment.

Non Indigenous people attempt to tame the desert and impose themselves on the landscape in order to modify environment and extract value from the resource. This deconstructed approach was summed up in Dr Mohammed's slide of the new architecture swallowed by the sand and stood in distinction from the Minister's view that the desert was a resource to be exploited.

I must admit I shudder a little from my little understanding of DK about the winds of change blowing across the Australian desert driven by big policy debates in the other place. I immediately thought of the knock on effects of the re-jigging of Indigenous affairs at the present time. The drought debate was ringing bells in my head at this point.

Harold's map that superimposed the discrete Indigenous communities around the service towns raises a number of questions about levels of preparedness for what Sarah Holcombe described as the migratory model.

I must admit the scientist in me was stirred with Dr Mohammed comment that particularly with traditional designs it is sometimes not possible to analyse them through conventional scientific analysis.

I recall when CAT sought a structural certificate for the VIP latrine for cyclone rating the engineers advised it was basically impossible to analyse.

Lunch, great spread, energetic discussions, tough lamb.

As Ken and I looked at how we would get around the menu of offerings through the afternoon it occurred to me that the program was organised in a very structured and scientific way in segments around business, natural resources, sustainability, education, water, energy – yet we have spent the morning learning and appreciating that the secret ingredient was the integration of multiple factors in an intricate and complex system of knowledge, culture and belief.

I suspect in 10 years time we will find that we have underestimated the impact of values, personalities, beliefs and identity on our work. I believe there is a sense of spirituality and identity that permeates true desert dwellers and makes sense of our sectoral decision making.

In the afternoon sessions I could see evidence of tension in ideas.

John Mendelson and Selma el Obeid spoke of their work in Namibia and posed some direct questions around what was so glamorous about rural development. For rural people of Namibia cash security was more important than food self sufficiency.

They raised questions about land based rural development. John noted the economy raised more money from shooting trophy animals than people grazing goats and sheep.

There was a suggestion that we attempt to preserve culture at the expense of health and welfare.

Will Sanders provided a bet each way on the merits of local and regional models of governance. Multi settlement regionalism is a new initiative of the NTG and it will be interesting to see how well they have anticipated the system response.

For me this again raises a number of issues about scale and whether there are scales of critical mass for health and welfare services and whether these are the same or different size to technical services, or education etc and whether they are the same or vary. How big does a region have to be before it supports real markets?

Sarah Holcombe provided a contrast to John Mendelson with a paper on the dis-benefits of the migratory model and the benefit of a circular mobility around hybrid economy.

There are some real issues for the DK to address around whether desert economies can ultimately thrive where there is market failure and a preference for investment in social capital rather than accumulation.

I only picked up the end of Sally Martin's presentation on the Tanami partnerships and can only agree that training might get you a job but retention

and career path issues are far more significant. People need to be skilled before they can run a business.

Ifor Fwocs Williams reassured me why the DK has taken off. For a concept that people have trouble defining, DK has given us a common agenda that motivates and does not threaten.

Ifor challenged us to think what are our priority areas of competitive competence.

His picture of the street in Pakistan where the carbon tipped scissors used in open heart surgery are handcrafted then sold on to a German supplier was an eye opener. Equally his reason for the decline of that business was sobering. The industry was in decline because the local training institution had not kept up with changes in the community. They had sat on their laurels and failed to engage with the locals and became part of the clutter.

We learned to differentiate between Clutter and Cluster and were encouraged to look for smart firms in small towns.

Ifor takes DK around the world and I was heartened to hear him report the development of a movement in 13 countries around the Baltic modelled on and inspired by the DK model.

Joy Taylor has driven the video network with huge support from Mike Crowe and significant doses of her energy and huge success.

Bell's Milk Bar in Broken Hill and their heritage hand made syrup recipes had been stimulated by the virtual trade fair that Joy organised.

Usiel Ndjavera described community based tourism in Namibia. The presentation stimulated a thought about the role of the community sector (NGO's specifically) who often have a development agenda and personnel to

match. What happens when the community initiative needs to grow and operate as a business?

This raises a much larger question of the role of the mix of state, community sector and market in dispersed communities.

Across desert Australia over the past 3 years the community sector has been severely wound back.

Is there a role for a more professional and organised and resourced community sector? What is the real role of Government and is the private sector interested in small dispersed markets or will they need to be subsidised to the same level as welfare support or funding of the community sector?

And at the end of a long day Garry Fry left me with one of those bug questions.

What will the next generation of traditional owners want?

I would like to leave you with a piece that hopefully will help us crystallise where we should critically invest in order to achieve a thriving desert economy.

Create a Capacity for Searchers

In a book titled the White Mans Burden, William Easterly (16 years economist with World Bank) looks back on five decades of the West attempting to solve the problems of the Rest.

He says the tragedy of the worlds poor is that

“the West spent \$2.3 trillion on foreign aid over the last five decades and still had not managed to get twelve cent medicines to children to prevent half of all malaria deaths. The West spent \$2.3 trillion and still had not managed to get four dollar bed nets to poor families.

In a single day, on July 16 2005, the American and British economies delivered nine million copies of the sixth volume of the Harry Potter childrens' book series to eager fans. Book retailers continually restocked the shelves as customers snatched up the book. Amazon and Barnes & Noble shipped preordered copies directly to consumers homes.

There was no Marshall Plan, no international financing facility for books about underage wizards. It is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to rich adults and children, while it can't get twelve cent medicine to dying poor children.

Easterly calls the advocates of the traditional approach the Planners, while the agents of change in the alternative approach are the searchers. The short answer on why dying poor children don't get twelve cent medicines while healthy rich children do get Harry Potter, is that the twelve cent medicines are supplied by planners while Harry Potter is supplied by searchers.

The mentality of searchers in the market is a guide to a more constructive approach to how the viability of a community may be enhanced. Searchers are empowered through demand responsive policies.

In other terms Planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out: Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them: Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply: searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blue prints and strategies; searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge at the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom.

A planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance and believes

that poverty is a complicated tangle of political, social, historical, institutional, and technological factors. A Searcher hopes to find answers to individual problems only by trial and error experimentation. A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A Searcher believes that insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions and that most solutions must be home grown.

A Final Word from Harry Potter

Lest you all think I hate Harry Potter I would leave you with a memorable quote

I was struck by a great line in one of the Harry Potter movies when Harry asked the wise Dumbledore why he wasn't in Slytherin (the bad side).

Dumbledore answered

“it is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”