Changing ideals and realities: a longitudinal view of rural Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

This state-wide and long-term overview of rural change in Western Australia employs Craig Colten's hierarchical categorisation of rural change into transitions and adaptations. It identifies two major transitions in the nature of human use of Western Australia's rural land. The first was the shift from a localised subsistence economy and society spanning tens of millennia, as practised by the Indigenous population, to a commercially productive and imperial system between the early nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries as British colonisation and Indigenous dispossession progressed. Then, from roughly the mid-twentieth century onwards, there has been a 'multifunctional rural transition'. Whereas commercial and productive activities have remained an important function of rural Western Australia, these have been increasingly complemented by, and may even be in competition with protection of the state's pre-existing environments and ecosystems, and consumption of non-metropolitan Western Australia's aesthetic and recreational resources by a predominantly urban population from within and without the state. Adaptations have continued throughout and across both transitions, but they have become more frequent and necessary as global rates of technological, political and social change have accelerated. A case study of the social, economic and land use shifts in the Margaret River region illustrates these processes.

KEYWORDS: Rural change, Transition, Adaptation, Subsistence, Productivism, Protection and consumption of rural areas, Multifunctionality, Margaret River wine region

Manuscript received 15 February 2023; accepted 8 April 2023

INTRODUCTION

In assessing agriculture and other rural activities in Western Australia, the contention attributed to Heraclitus that change is the only constant in life can be accepted as a truism. However, it is the nature, rate and direction of the many changes in rural Western Australia, some of which are continuing, that require attention if trends and patterns are to be identified. The historical geographer Craig Colten used a hierarchical categorisation of change into (fundamental) transitions and (contingent) adaptations in a historical study of coastal management in Louisiana (Colten 2019). Although such change can be studied through a range of lenses, from the empiricism of traditional historical geography to theoretical approaches such as Marxism and evolutionary economic geography (Flood Chavez *et al.* 2023), Colten's categorisation is useful in this context because it can accommodate varying scales in both space and time. Coltern's framework provided the basis for a highly localised case study of rural change on the coastal plain in the Shire of Dandaragan (Jones *et al.* 2022), and is used again in the present overview of Western Australia's rural past, present and prospects.

Colten (2019, p. 417), sees adaptations as 'human actions taken in an effort to *perpetuate* (my emphasis) a society, even if modified in some way'. As such, they may change how people undertake agriculture, or any other rural activity, but they do not change the reason(s) for these activities. Therefore, adaptations 'do not fundamentally alter society' and, even though 'they often take place over years or decades, [they] are often local or regional in scale' (Colten 2019, p. 417). By contrast, transitions result from 'multiple adaptations, deliberate or ad hoc, coordinated or uncoordinated' (Colten 2019, p. 417). He cites the transition from hunting and gathering to agricultural lifestyles as an example of a major shift in human history incorporating numerous adaptations that 'thoroughly infused multiple aspects of society and demanded social, political, technological and economic transformations' (Colten 2019, p. 417). He therefore sees transitions as arising at larger temporal and spatial scales than adaptations, and as bringing about significant changes in human lifestyles and attitudes, whereas adaptations seek to preserve at least some aspects of the status quo.

In Western Australia, three periods of rural occupancy, separated by two transitions can be discriminated. The most clearly defined was the ca. 50,000 – 60,000 years of Indigenous occupation, when land use was largely localised and at a subsistence level (Hallam 1981; Clarkson *et al.* 2017; Dortch *et al.* 2019). This ended with the transition brought on by British colonisation and the development of a commercial and, at least initially, imperial system of agriculture, mining, forestry and fishing between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A less clear-cut but nonetheless significant shift, which Holmes (2006) terms a 'multifunctional rural transition', has taken place since then. Over this period,

the commercial and productivist value system, which had characterised rural Western Australia since colonisation, has been increasingly complemented by the values of protection of the environments and ecosystems that pre-dated colonisation and consumption of the state's rural landscapes and resources as a 'lifestyle product'. Such changes have largely been by visiting recreationists and new residents such as retirees, tree changers, electronic cottagers and second homeowners (Curry *et al.* 2001; Burnley & Murphy 2004). These transitions and their contingent adaptations are described in more detail in the sections below, in terms of ideals and realities, followed by a case study of rural transitions in the Margaret River region.

TRANSITIONS AND ADAPTATIONS IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Indigenous occupation and adaptation

Indigenous groups of people have lived in Western Australia for some 60,000 years (Clarkson *et al.* 2017; Dortch *et al.* 2019). During this period, they operated an economy based on local subsistence and a value system based on sustainability, thereby developing a strong cultural and spiritual attachment to each group's specific territories (McDonald 2020). Noongar elder Noel Nannup (2006) has described this local role and relationship as being 'the carers of everything'.

Whereas the arrival of the first humans to settle in Western Australia could be considered a transition in itself, Indigenous occupation across the state spanned tens of millennia and was characterised by the maintenance of a subsistence and sustainability-oriented lifestyle at a local scale. However, this did not mean that there were not numerous and significant adaptions. As the first human inhabitants of Western Australia diffused southwards from their first foothold in the Kimberley, they exchanged a tropical monsoonal environment, initially for an arid one and subsequently for the highly seasonal temperate conditions of much of the southern part of the state (Dortch *et al.* 2019). There is evidence of Aboriginal occupance at Devil's Lair in the far South West as long ago as 48,000 years BP (Turney *et al.* 2001), which provides a broad time frame for the spread of Indigenous people across the state from north to south. The first inhabitants were required to make significant adaptions during their first 10 millennia or so in Western Australia to survive in different, but generally challenging, physical environments across the state. Nevertheless, over many generations, individual Aboriginal groups developed extremely sophisticated knowledges of their local resources and the most sustainable means of using them. This included the use of fire to clear pathways through the bush, facilitate hunting and selectively encourage plant growth (Hallam 1975). The extent to which this Aboriginal use of the Australian environment was agricultural rather than hunting and gathering is a subject of current debate (Pascoe 2014; Sutton & Walshe 2021). However, as early as 1837, George Grey described turned-over yam grounds north of Perth as more than he 'could have believed in the power of uncivilised man to accomplish' (Grey 1841, cited in Broome *et al.* 2020).

The Aboriginal occupants of Western Australia were obliged to adapt because of environmental variations not only over space, but also over time. During the Last Glacial Maximum, the most recent advance and retreat of global ice sheets, which reached their maximum extent around 25,000 years BP, much of Australia experienced significant drying (Broome *et al*. 2020, p. 12). This climatic shift was also associated with a fall, followed by a rise, in sea levels. Bolton (1992, p. 6) pointed out that '[a]bout 15 per cent of the continent's land surface has sunk below sea level since the first Aborigines settled on it' whereas Williams *et al.* (2018) provided a figure of a 22% reduction in Australia's land area relative to its largest extent. Adaptation to major climatic and environmental change is by no means a recent phenomenon in rural Western Australia.

The information provided in this section relies primarily on archaeological evidence, which is still being collected and assessed. While much Indigenous knowledge has been retained through oral traditions, these sources provide only a partial picture of Aboriginal adaptations to changing environments over time given the serious disruptions to Aboriginal knowledge transmission systems, such as songlines, which accompanied the transition brought about by colonial dispossession.

Commercial and imperial agricultural expansion

The British colonisation of Western Australia from 1826 onwards saw the arrival of a population with extremely different views of the land and their responsibilities in relation to it, and their spiritual and economic roles, compared to the earlier occupants. The prevailing Christian, and especially Protestant, view of the British population in the early nineteenth century was that 'man'—meaning particularly white, Christian men—was separate from and possessed divinely granted domination over 'nature' (Tawney 1964). Furthermore, because the British crown had claimed Western Australia, the colonists saw themselves as being at liberty to develop it for their personal gain, albeit subject to such property and other regulations imposed on them by the colonial and imperial authorities. However, for much of the nineteenth century, such regulation over this large and sparsely populated area was inevitably limited (Bolton 1992). Colonisation and Aboriginal dispossession therefore represented a clear transition whereby the localised and sustainability-oriented land use patterns of the Aboriginal population were supplanted by commercial systems of agricultural and pastoral production, together with forestry, fishing and mining, which were characteristically oriented to supplying the needs of a motherland half a world away.

The colonists had to accept that they were not farming in Britain and that there were limits on the extent to which British farming practices could be transferred to Western Australia. As Powell (1974, p. 15) argued, '[t]he physiognomy of rural Australia is predominantly a continuing expression of the efforts of European people adapting their changing aspirations to an increasing but still relatively slender knowledge about the physical environment'. For the first Western Australian colonists, this adaptation commenced soon after they realised that the soil fertility of the Swan

River Colony had been vastly overestimated by the first British explorers and that poisonous plants were common (Cameron 1981). Shepherds noticed that their flocks rapidly ate out the more nutritious grasses and that their animals' hooves rapidly degraded the fragile soils. This caused them to keep moving to new pastures thereby extending the pastoral frontier from the Avon Valley to the most remote parts of the state in less than a century. Another nineteenth-century adaptation was the admission of convicts into what had been intended to remain a 'free' colony from 1850 onwards to boost the agricultural labour force and prevent economic collapse. Nevertheless, the ideal of creating an English landscape of small, family-run farms died hard. Premier John Forrest's promotion of a 'bold yeomanry' of this type (Tonts 2002) was reflected in Western Australia's land settlement and infrastructure policies extending into the early twentieth century. Their imprint can still be seen in the relatively dense pattern of rail lines and designated town sites provided for the development of the wheat belt in the early twentieth century (Glynn 1975), which almost immediately were rendered obsolete by the onset of motorised road transport, and has been in a state of ongoing adaptation ever since.

Alongside these what might be termed political and economic shifts, farmers, fishers, foresters and miners were constantly making adaptations to their methods of production. These were in response to both the understandings they developed of the potentials and pitfalls of the local environments in which they operated and the increasingly rapid technological advances, such as new machines, crop strains, stock breeds, pesticides and fertilisers—in short, entirely new methods of production—available to them. Tonts *et al.* (2010) provided an illustration of this process with reference to cattle breeding.

In spite of the massive technological and socioeconomic changes that took place during the first century of (predominantly) European settlement in Western Australia, in Colten's terms this period can still be considered as one of adaptation. While changes in the sites and methods of production transformed the colony's/state's non-metropolitan areas between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western Australia's farming, fishing, forestry and mining industries remained productive, profit-oriented and largely British Empire-focused throughout.

The multifunctional rural transition

Holmes (2006, p. 143) discerned three 'impulses' towards a multifunctional rural transition, which gained momentum across Australia and many other parts of the developed world as the twentieth century progressed. The first impulse, which is related to productivist advances, he termed 'agricultural overcapacity'. He argued that technological and other agricultural adaptations, some of them political, have led to commodity and therefore to (farm)land surpluses. This can render some farmland redundant for productive purposes, thereby making it available for alternative uses. Secondly, he identified 'the emergence of market-driven amenity-oriented uses'. The increasing affluence, mobility and leisure time of urban populations over this period provided them with greater opportunities to reassign at least some of the rural areas for recreational, tourism and even residential purposes. This enabled some rural land, particularly if it was scenic or close to metropolitan areas, to gain what he termed an 'amenity premium' in its land value. It therefore became more profitable to reallocate such land to consumption-related uses, rather than to continue using it for productive purposes. Finally, the twentieth century has seen 'changing societal values' with respect to both the environment and social justice. These concerns, especially those relating to sustainability, the maintenance of biodiversity and Indigenous land rights, have given rise to political movements and subsequently government policies to protect at least some rural areas from the environmental degradation resulting from productive rural activities such as land clearance, forestry and mining.

Taken together, these impulses have changed—that is, they have brought about a transition in—the ways in which Western Australia's rural resources are appraised, allocated, used and managed. Overall, this multifunctional transition has yielded 'increasing diversity, complexity and spatial heterogeneity in [the] modes of rural occupance' (Holmes 2006, p. 144). Holmes identified several generalised modes of human occupancy that he claimed are identifiable in contemporary rural Australia. One of these, the conservation and Indigenous mode, in which protection values are emphasised, correlates closely with the period of sole Indigenous occupation when Country was cared for to support local populations sustainably at a subsistence level. Another, the productivist agricultural mode, in which production values are dominant, characterised most, if not all, of rural Western Australia by the end of the first century of British colonisation. A third, the rural amenity mode, in which consumption values are dominant, can be discerned in highly localised forms in the contemporary countryside. These include hobby farms, tourist resorts and rural residential subdivisions. In his three other modes (pluriactive, peri-metropolitan and marginalised agricultural), production, protection and consumption value systems interact.

What is currently intensifying the 'diversity, complexity and spatial heterogeneity' of rural Western Australia, therefore, is not only the local dominance of production, consumption and protection values in specific rural areas of the state but also the intricate sets of processes whereby these three value systems interact with each other, either negatively through competition or positively through complementarity. These processes are illustrated below in a case study of rural change in the Margaret River wine region, by considering how these value systems have contested and collaborated as the region's rural economy and society have both transitioned and adapted over time.

CHANGING IDEALS AND REALITIES IN THE MARGARET RIVER WINE REGION

Indigenous groups occupied this region for tens of millennia (Turney *et al*. 2001), adapting to the specific conditions of the local environment and to long-term climatic changes. They refined their hunting, fishing, gathering and, arguably, agricultural practices to

ensure sufficient resources to maintain themselves at a subsistence level on their local territories in the short and long term. Whereas the purpose of their occupation of this region remained constant over a long period, this did not mean a lack of innovation. Archaeological finds at the Devil's Lair site, for example, provide evidence of some of the oldest symbolic objects (in this case jewellery) found anywhere in the world (Bednarik 1997).

British colonisation resulted in the arrival of a population with vastly different ideals to those of the Indigenous population. The first European settlers in the area arrived in 1830 and were possessed of a frontier ideology that perceived the local resources as inexhaustible (Sanders 2005; Flood Chavez *et al.* 2023). Nevertheless, initial attempts to develop agriculture in the region met with limited success. Fishing and whaling fared a little better, especially at Augusta/Flinders Bay, though the whale stocks were rapidly depleted (Gaynor 2014). However, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, adaptations such as the introduction of convict labour and partial mechanisation in the form of railways and steam-powered mills facilitated the development of a significant timber industry. This activity was clearly productivist, but the scale of its operations proved unsustainable with supplies of accessible timber declining by the end of the century.

During the timber operations, spectacular limestone cave systems were discovered along the ridge between Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin. It was at this point that the first impulses towards a multifunctional rural transition became apparent locally. Not only did this add consumption values to the area as the caves became one of the state's first rural tourist attractions, but it also brought about protection initiatives. In 1900, the WA government created a reserve of 6,600 hectares around the cave sites, undertook an inventory of the cave systems and set up a caves conservation committee (Rundle 1996; Flood Chavez *et al.* 2023). This early mixing and, in many ways contesting, of production, consumption and protection values presaged much larger and longer-term interactions between them in the twentieth century.

However, the next major rural initiative in this area, the Group Settlement Scheme (Gabbedy 1988), was solely productivist and strongly imperial. The state government was seeking to both diversify the economy and offer more widespread employment opportunities in the aftermath of the gold rush and the First World War. Following the modest success of its initiatives for the expansion of the wheat belt (Glynn 1975; Tonts & Horsley 2019), in the 1920s the state entered into a partnership with the British government to bring out migrants who would, it was hoped, establish dairy farms in the South West, particularly in the region surrounding Margaret River (Fig. 1). This scheme strongly adhered to John Forrest's ideal of a bold yeomanry and was widely promoted in Britain as a process of 'giving away farms' (Brayshay & Selwood 2002). In practice, however, it was a spectacular failure. The British migrants, almost all of whom had no prior experience of farming, were provided with manifestly inadequate support and guidance. They were set unrealistic targets and timelines for clearing their land, and establishing herds before they were expected to commence repayments for their passage, their land and the initial support offered to them. For the minority who struggled on to the end of the decade, the collapse in agricultural prices following the 1929 stock market crash and the 1930s depression was, in most cases, the final straw (Bolton 1994).

Although the vast majority of Group Settlers abandoned their properties within a few years of their arrival (Brunger & Selwood 1997), the basis of a road network had been established in the area and numerous small agricultural plots had been at least partially cleared. In the more favourable economic circumstances following the Second World War, the state government again used these assets in the hope of developing a local dairy industry, this time with Australian soldier settlers (Sanders 2005). Again, this met with limited success. It was not until the 1960s that this rural region embarked upon a far more multifunctional and what until now appears to be a more sustainable trajectory of economic and social development.

Early attempts at productivist development in the South West ignored the environmental reality of a finite timber resource, and the economic and social realities of setting up a dairy industry from scratch while using a labour force lacking in capital, skills and local knowledge. In the 1960s, however, an agricultural scientist (Gladstones 1965) pointed out that the soils of the Leeuwin–Naturaliste limestone ridge were eminently suited to the production of premium wines. Fortuitously, the state was going through a mineral boom at that time, and local investors with sufficient capital to cover the time required to develop vineyards and quality wines were both available and interested. This development also coincided with a considerable increase in demand from a variety of groups for consuming aspects of Margaret River's rural environment, including surfers, alternative lifestylers (hippies), retirees, second homeowners and 'electronic cottagers' (Gold 1991; McDonald-Lee 2016; Curry *et al.* 2001; Sanders 2005). All these groups were attracted by the natural assets of the Margaret River environment, such as the surf breaks, the scenic coastline and the (remaining) karri and jarrah forests, all of which facilitated a rapid growth in the area's tourism industry from the 1960s onwards.

Over the intervening decades this area—in contrast to many of the state's other rural areas—has experienced significant demographic and economic growth during which the combination of production, consumption and protection values has generated numerous synergies. The local production of premium wine has succeeded with many Margaret River wineries winning national awards and establishing a global reputation. They have also become tourist (and consumption) attractions offering cellar-door sales and, in many cases, dining facilities showcasing other local produce including lamb, seafood and organic and heritage vegetables. This has stimulated the local creation of a range of typically niche, agricultural enterprises supplying such products as venison and gourmet cheese.

Perhaps the most advantageous combination of production, consumption and protection is to be found in the aesthetics of the viticultural, agricultural and forested landscapes of the region, which remain an attraction for tourists, retirees, second homeowners and electronic cottagers alike. A section of the 'incomer' population that is perhaps more idiosyncratically West Australian are the

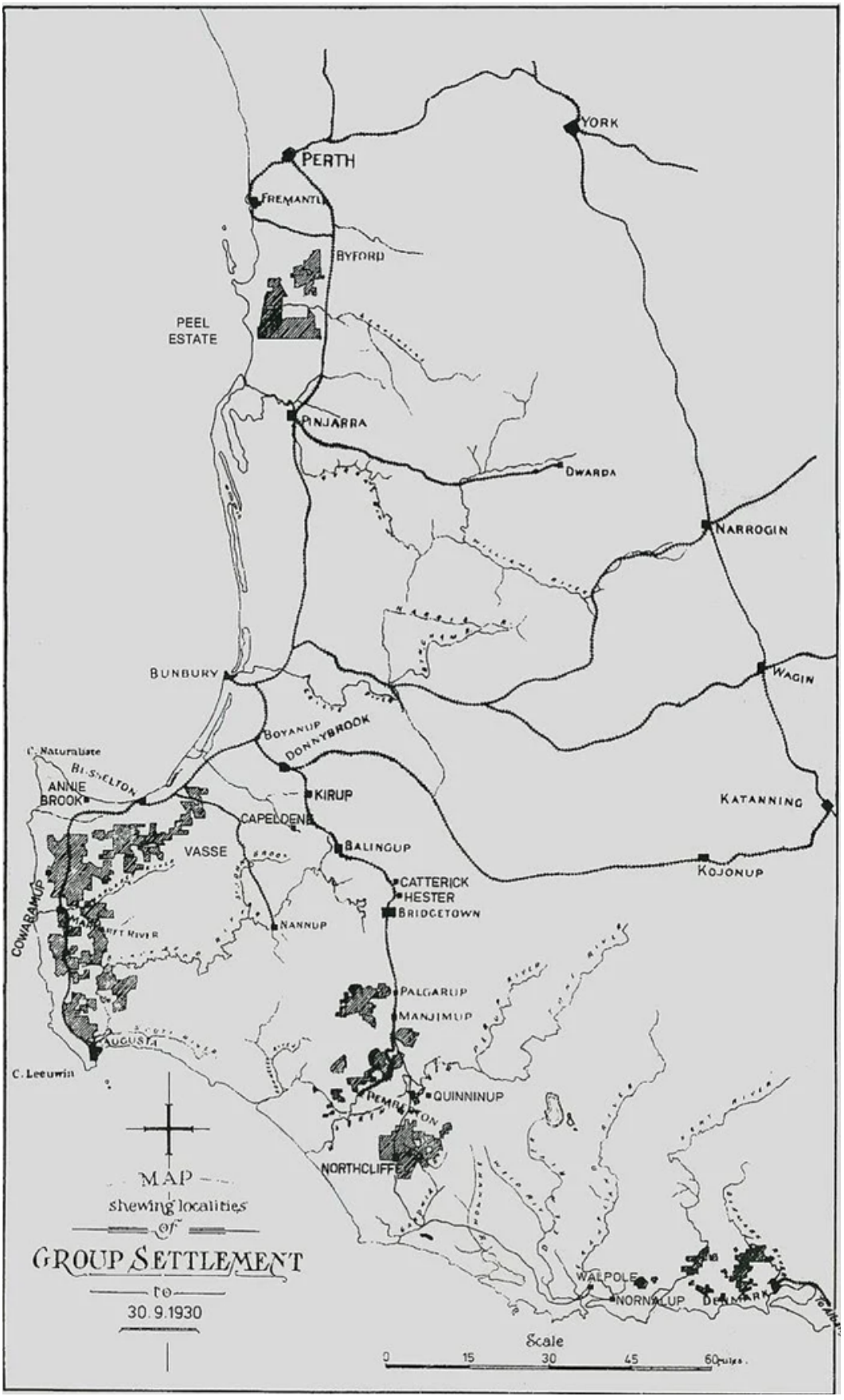

Figure 1. Group Settlement in Western Australia. Source: Gabbedy (1988).

FIFO (fly-in, fly-out) families whose wage earners live in scenic, temperate Margaret River but work in the mines of the state's North West. The protection and preservation of this landscape is therefore vital to those involved in production—the vignerons and other agriculturalists—and in consumption for tourism operations. Recent studies (Jones *et al.*) underline not only the high levels of environmental concern among large sections of the local business and wider communities but also an awareness of how relevant this concern is to the sustainability of the area's agricultural and tourism industries. Findings from surveys and focus groups (Jones *et al.* 2010) indicated that vignerons and tourism operators alike saw pursuing high environmental standards for their operations, and thereby achieving major environmental accreditations, as a valuable tool for attracting and maintaining future custom. For example, in 2012, Margaret River became the first place in Australia to join the global Transition Towns network.

The Margaret River region provides an example of the transition to rural multifunctionality in Western Australia. It is one that has been replicated to a greater or lesser degree in other climatically, scenically and/or locationally favoured areas of the state—that is, those benefiting from an 'amenity premium' (Argent *et al.* 2014). Inevitably, the colocation of proponents of these values in small but growing rural areas like Margaret River will lead to competition and even conflict. As long ago as the 1990s, an article on 'growing pains down south' (Amalfi 1994) referred to the Margaret River region as 'Cape Fear'. At the same time, the shire planning officer in the smaller and more remote settlement of Denmark was expressing concerns over his shire becoming 'like Margaret River' in terms of its population growth and development controversies (Selwood *et al.* 1996, p. 222), while Greive and Tonts (1996) referred to 'creative destruction' in Donnybrook, another South West country town. In all of these cases, both long-term and more recent residents raised concerns about what they saw as the negative impacts of further population and economic growth.

As Selwood *et al.* (1996, p. 223) observed, 'increasing numbers of residents, visitors and investors in coastal Australia are deeming a number of demographic trends, economic flows and physical developments good or bad by virtue of their different ways of seeing and thinking about these trends. The different ways in which these diverse groups react to such trends will pose an increasing number of problems for local planning systems.' Almost three decades on, these differences (of vision) and concerns (over local realities) remain. Hopefully, Margaret River will adapt to its multifunctional transition in a manner that is more sustainable than that which resulted from colonial dispossession almost two centuries ago. However, whether it be from economic necessity—such as the development of farm and station stays—or government regulation in the form of environmental restrictions, most rural areas in the state are now affected by the addition of at least some consumption and/or protection values to those of production as their residents, governments and investors plan for their futures.

CONCLUSION: REALITIES AND IDEALS IN SPACE AND TIME

The environmental realities of changing climatic, pedological and physiographic conditions over space have ensured that varied forms of occupancy have always characterised Western Australia's diverse rural and remote regions. Over time, the human realities of economic, technological, political and social changes have ensured that the rate and intensity of rural adaptation have increased significantly. This accelerating but simple trajectory of adaptation to the realities faced by Western Australia's population can be contrasted with the increasingly complex ideals possessed by these same inhabitants as a multifunctional rural transition progresses.

The first rural transition, from Indigenous to colonial occupancy, supplanted one set of ideals with another. In Holmes's terms, largely protectionist values were replaced by predominantly productivist ones through the often violent process of colonisation. In each period—before and after this transition—a single set of values or ideals was held, if not by the whole population, then at least by those controlling Western Australia's destinies. By contrast, the second transition came about through the replacement of a single set of ideals, or values, by a multiplicity of them. Whereas these ideals/values can be expressed as a simple triad of production, consumption and protection, this does not adequately describe how these values are actualised either on the ground or conceptually. Just as multiple values are manifested in place—for example by a vineyard with a cellar door, gourmet restaurant and waterwise irrigation system, or by a pastoral property offering station stays and ecotours—these values are also balanced and integrated by enterprise operators, land managers and politicians who oversee and regulate these places, and by the population of non-metropolitan Western Australia.

Ultimately, the future of agriculture and other rural land uses in Western Australia can be assured only if some of the ideals from its distant past, notably sustainability, are balanced against the economic, political and environmental realities of its complex present. In the United Kingdom, Cloke & Little (1997) have written of 'Contested Countryside Cultures' and of the marginalisation of certain rural groups. Rural Western Australia, from Noonkanbah (Hawke & Gallagher 1989) to Northcliffe (Crawford & Crawford 2003) via Ningaloo (Jones *et al.* 2007), has also experienced bitter disputes over values in the past and will likely continue to do so. Nevertheless, the contemporary, if not always harmonious, juxtaposition of such ideals and values in Margaret River, the site of one of the state's most spectacular agricultural failures, may offer some pointers to a more sustainable way forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Dr Graham Thompson of Curtin University and Dr Joseph Christensen of the University of Western Australia for their advice on earlier versions of this paper.

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