



Cape York Peninsula, Australia: A frontier region undergoing a multifunctional transition with indigenous engagement

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A B S T R A C T

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Within Australia's tropical savanna zone, the northernmost frontier regions have experienced the swiftest transition towards multifunctional occupance, as a formerly flimsy productivist mode is readily displaced by more complex modes, with greater prominence given to consumption, protection and Indigenous values. Of these frontier regions, Cape York Peninsula has become the focus for increasingly entrenched, complex contests about regional futures, with the transition towards complex multifunctionality demonstrated in the 1970, 1990 and 2010 tenure maps. Transition dynamics are explored in tables summarising functional trajectories at these benchmark years, also with an examination of non-Indigenous and Indigenous driving forces, actors, agendas, power relations and decision processes. In this increasingly contested arena, currently the pivotal divide is between traditionalist/localist against modernist/reformist/regionalist visions of Indigenous futures, with this divide influencing the agendas and strategies of other major participants, notably conservationists and state and federal governments. The most probable functional trajectory towards 2030 can be identified, based on the partial resolution of the current flux in land tenures, property rights, power relations and economic prospects. The peninsula yields further evidence on the links between multifunctional dynamics, contestability and shifting place identities.

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1. Towards an integrative approach in interpreting multifunctional dynamics

The multifunctionality concept has attracted a wealth of contributions among mainly European rural researchers over an extended period, as revealed in comprehensive reviews (Wilson, 2007; Renting et al., 2009). European research has been criticised for its preoccupation with farming systems and its lack of attention to the broader dynamics of rural change, within which agriculture is only one component (Lowe et al., 2002; McCarthy, 2005; Holmes, 2006). In their recent definitive review, Renting et al. (2009, p. S119), argue that ‘...different approaches have remained fragmented and developed largely in parallel...it is not just sufficient to further elaborate existing approaches. Instead, new meta-level frameworks of analysis are to be developed to make a decisive step towards a more integrated approach.’

The eight co-authors identify five key elements in this proposed decisive step, namely: (1) farming practices to be understood in terms of *co-production*; (2) characterized and dependent on spatial heterogeneity and temporal non-linear fluctuations, necessitating

the continuous *contextualization of processes and features*; (3) with mechanisms *operating at different scale levels*; (4) attention to *territorially embedded and interconnected nature of relevant actors*; (5) better understanding of the *role of consumers and citizens* (pp. S119–S121) (authors' italics).

In endorsing their case for ‘new meta-level frameworks’ and ‘a comprehensive and integrative transitional framework’, I need to reiterate my earlier position (Holmes, 2006) liberating the multifunctionality concept from its restrictive application solely to agriculture and recognising the multifunction rural transition (MRT) as a pivotal component in the reconstitution of rural space. This redirection can be interpreted as a transition from productivist monofunctionality towards complex multifunctionality, where consumption and protection values have emerged, contesting the former dominance of production values, with continuing diverse outcomes over time and space. Consistent with this approach, I argue that Renting et al.'s second ‘key element’ provides the necessary and sufficient foundation towards achieving a ‘comprehensive and integrative transitional framework, with the other four ‘key elements’ being ancillary and/or sequential.

Necessary components in this overarching theoretical construct include: acceptance that multifunctionality is an attribute of rural landscapes at large and not limited to farming systems; recognition

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of the dynamics of landscape functionality, including variability over space and time; attention to the current persistent trend towards complex multifunctionality (but, again, with variability over space and time and potential reversibility); greater recognition of the interplay between biophysical dynamics and anthropogenic processes in shaping ecosystem functionality; development of a generic typology (or typologies) of functionality, consistently applicable across diverse (multi)functional landscapes; and exploration of the driving forces shaping the current trend towards multifunctionality, involving the complex interplay between production, consumption and protection values, also involving multiple local and non-local actors.

Belated recognition of multifunctionality as an increasingly critical attribute in the human occupancy of rural landscapes has opened fresh avenues for innovative rural research, usually focusing on ecological and economic sustainability (Helming and Wiggering, 2003). The potential of a landscape framework is revealed by de Groot (2006) in an article appropriately titled 'Function-analysis and valuation as a tool to assess land use conflicts in planning for sustainable, multifunctional landscapes.' de Groot utilises a comprehensive three-stage research design, comprising function analysis, function valuation and conflict analysis with the final stage requiring an integration of analytical valuation methods with stakeholder participation techniques. de Groot's micro-scale methodology shows promise of fulfilling Renting et al.'s call for an integrative framework, when allied to 'meta-level... transitional frameworks' exploring complexity, variability and volatility of the multifunctional transition, (Marsden, 2003; McCarthy, 2005; Barr, 2005; Holmes, 2006, 2010a,b; Wilson, 2007).

In an attempt to interpret emerging regional complexity, I have proposed categorising generic modes of human occupancy of rural space according to the relative role of production, consumption and protection values as driving forces shaping divergent regional modes and trajectories within rural Australia (Holmes, 2006). There is an imperfect parallelism between these three proposed generic categories and de Groot's ecological, sociocultural and economic functional categories. As proposed in my 2006 article, modes of rural occupancy can be depicted within a triangular diagram depicting relativities between production, consumption and protection values. See Fig. 1, which contains two important

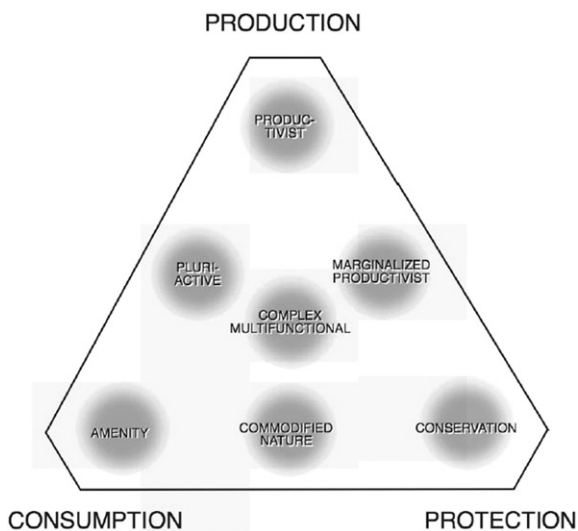


Fig. 1. Occupance modes in rural Australia, positioned according to the relative weights given to production, consumption and protection values in the valorisation of rural space. Source: Holmes (2006), amended.

revisions to that depicted in my 2006 publication in this journal. Firstly, a *complex multifunctionality* mode is recognised, replacing the so-called *peri-metropolitan* mode. This mode has emerged at the intensive and extensive margins of rural occupancy. The intensive margin is characterised by endemic, intense conflicts between production, consumption and protection values, most commonly occurring in peri-metropolitan zones, with their distinctive trajectories, within this complex mode. At the extensive margin, complex multifunctionality emerges when a flimsy mode of productivist occupancy provides an expansive space for the recognition of consumption, protection and any surviving Indigenous values. This trajectory is revealed in the federal lands of western United States and in Australia's northernmost frontier regions (Holmes, 2010b). The other revision is the removal of the so-called *Indigenous mode* from the classificatory schema. Contemporary Indigenous occupancy is tied to a distinctive set of ethno-cultural values and tenure/ownership criteria, with complexity and variability in functionality (Altman, 2005; Holmes, 2010b).

In my 2006 article, I explored broadscale spatial variability in rural Australia, by identifying and characterising seven generic modes of rural occupancy according to the relative weight of production, consumption or protection values as forces driving rural change. Tables 1 to 7 in the 2006 paper provide a structured framework for interpreting the increasingly differentiated territorial expression of the multifunctional transition. Within each mode, variability in the type, intensity and trend of resource use can be scrutinised through the identification of alternative *occupance trajectories*, as described in the tables in my 2006 article. Where an *occupance trajectory* leads to a shift in the relative weight of production, consumption or protection values, this shift can additionally be termed a *functional trajectory*, capable of depiction in the triangular functional diagrams, as shown for all tropical savanna regions (see below). Where a *functional trajectory* leads to a discernible shift to a different occupancy mode, this shift can be described as a *functional transition*.

2. Time-space variability in the multifunctional transition in Australia's tropical savannas

The broadscale, Australia-wide categorisation in my 2006 paper can serve only as a preliminary inquiry into complexity and diversity over space resulting from the multifunctional transition. It can be questioned on two counts, namely that it fails to engage in micro-scale function-analyses and lacks any supportive evidence comparable to that presented in de Groot's research; also it fails to capture transition dynamics, given that it addresses only variability over space but not over time.

In recognition of these deficiencies, I have recently been exploring time-space dynamics contributing towards increasingly divergent regional outcomes within Australia's tropical savanna zone, with postulated regional modes and trajectories from 1976 to 2006 shown within the production/consumption/protection triangular relationship (Holmes, 2010a,b). Supportive evidence was presented, with the most substantial being the objective record of changes in land tenure, land use and land ownership over the thirty-year period. This tenure record is a critical indicator, not only because of its clarity and verifiability but also because, more so than in well-settled zones, shifts in land title, land ownership and property rights are the most influential mechanisms in pursuit of functional transitions.

The occupancy trajectories for the three most marginal, 'frontier' regions (Cape York Peninsula, Northern Territory Gulf and North-west Kimberley) are shown in Fig. 2. For all three regions, the depicted trajectories indicate a sequence of transitions from

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