

Livestock Livelihoods

A Political Ecology of Australian Wool

Wool: A Place-Based Product

The Australian wool industry is illustrative of **clashes of the nation's paradoxes**: ecological stewardship is coupled with degradation, on-farm traditions are blended with an ability to adapt to changing markets, and sheep are subject to ethically-questionable procedures while simultaneously being held as a symbol of pride, resilience, and national identity. **Wool has a spatially and temporarily extensive commodity chain**, with production, processing, and marketing literally spanning the globe from Australia to China to the United States and other countries.



Shearing in South Australia
Photo compliments of Greg Snell



Future Woolgrower

Focus Question

What are the processes and forces shaping wool as a commodity and where does power to impact the industry lie?

Merino Wool: A Cultural Object

Overview of Forces Shaping and Shaped By Wool



Wool played a key economic role in **Australian Colonial History**.



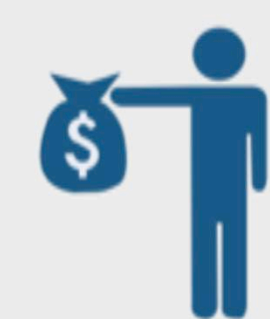
Folktales and legends, specifically of the bushman, have shaped **Woolgrower identity**.



Woolsheds, where wool is shorn, are a national symbol.



Marketing is export-oriented because most wool is sold internationally.



Farmers sell shorn wool through an **Auction System**.



Agriculturists face challenges due to the flat, hot, drought-prone **Biophysical Environment**.



Processing and final sale occurs abroad, with most processing in China.



Anti-mulesing campaigns have been led by PETA for **Animal Welfare**.



Farmers use **Moral Weighting** of animals in day-to-day management practices.

The Mulesing Debate

The PETA *Save the Sheep* campaign led to major changes within the wool industry. However, change did not occur in a direct, linear fashion. There were several factors that led to the relative success of the campaign:

- Portrayal of suffering of a “charismatic” animal that people can empathize with
- Economic conditions that drew growers away from Merino wool and towards lower quality wool or other agricultural practices
- A pre-existing desire amongst woolgrowers to find alternatives to mulesing

Although it may appear that the success of this campaign was due solely to consumer pressure, it is evident that there were a variety of other factors that contributed to its “success.”



Mustering Sheep in Western Australia

Methods

I spent two months travelling and working on wool farms across Australia. I used participant observation and interviews to examine member meanings amongst woolgrowers, shearers, and people otherwise involved in the industry. I performed content and narrative analyses to pinpoint major themes and concepts about what was important to the people I was working with. I then used this ethnographic data within a framework of political ecology to look at the effectiveness of one animal rights campaign on creating change within the industry.

Results

The wool system is a complex web of relations with direct impact between two actors being difficult and unpredictable. The effectiveness of the mulesing campaign is one example of how a combination of several unique instances (economically, politically, and socially) can align to allow consumer-driven change to be effective. Yet this campaign only led to improvements in the industry, it did not provide ultimate solutions.

Implications

- ❖ Activist campaigns provide industry transparency and challenge marketed narratives of production. However, they are in no way perfect venues for creating change within an industry.
- ❖ Understanding the variety of forces shaping a product and the complexities surrounding that product is necessary for consumers to understand how to impact change and why certain measures may be effective in specific instances.

“I wish those animal rights folks could just come down and see an animal dying from flystrike.”

-One woolgrower's response to the mulesing controversy

What is mulesing?

Mulesing is a procedure performed on lambs that removes swatches of skin from their rear in order to prevent the occurrence of “flystrike” or fly infestation that can lead to the death of the sheep. In 2004, this procedure was targeted by animal rights group PETA as being inhumane.



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