A Coalition of scientists, environmentalists and drovers has joined forces to campaign for the preservation of a vast network of outback stock routes they believe is being threatened by the NSW and Queensland governments.

The 3m ha network, crisscrossing the face of the interior like a fine craquelure, was founded in many instances on Aboriginal pathways picked out of the landscape long before James Cook’s landfall. The routes, most importantly, are in public ownership.

Hugh Possingham, director of the University of Queensland’s ecology centre, tells the HES that while the primary purpose of the network is to move stock, “a lot of the routes would have been determined when explorers and early pastoralists were moving through the countryside. They would often have indigenous trackers taking them down particular pathways with access to water. So the tracks are often down river valleys or connected water holes which indigenous people would have used for an extremely long time.”

While many an inland road was laid over a stock track, many remain as interconnected rural pathways, in some cases more than 1km wide, used for the seasonal grazing of travelling stock.

Possingham says Queensland and NSW are reviewing the management of the stock routes which, because of intermittent grazing, had been able to support a unique ecology.

“This would be threatened under any move to continuous grazing which he says is likely if these public tracks are sold or leased to individual farmers.”

Possingham is one of 500 scientists, including 22 professors, to sign an open letter to premiers Anna Bligh and Morris Iemma calling for the urgent protection and management of the entire network.

Appended to the letter is a scientific statement that details the ecological values of stock routes.

“The relevant roads and reserves that make up the travelling stock route networks have nationally important environmental, cultural heritage, economic and recreational values,” the letter says.

“They cover 2.6m ha in Queensland and 600,000ha in NSW. These multiple values make them a national asset for the Australian community.

“While the network has been managed publicly for generations, it is under immediate threat from the changes in ownership or delegated management being considered by your governments. This is at a time when it offers vital resources to help Australia’s live-stock industries adapt to greatly increased oil prices and Australia’s biodiversity adapt to climate change.”

The industry representative group for Queensland cattle farmers, Agforce, responded to the scientists’ concerns with a statement that says proposed administrative changes to the stock routes in Queensland would “create managed grazing that will improve the biodiversity and ecological significance of the stock route.

“Changes proposed in Queensland will not threaten the future health, functionality and integrity of the stock routes; quite the opposite, because they are designed to provide a viable framework to ensure the routes are retained and managed for future generations.”

Trunk route. Hugh Possingham and Luke Slattery are concerned about remote education.