

NACC's Landcare Bus Tour in the NAR

Landholders, representatives from production and landcare groups, community volunteers and interested NRM and/or environmental professionals recently participated in a free bus tour to view sustainable farming practices.

The tour was organised by Stanley Yokwe, the Landcare Facilitator of the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC), and incorporated visits to three farms. During the tour the group got to learn, see and hear first hand practical experiences from local innovative farmers who have adopted sustainable farm practices/technologies in the region.

The tour visited farms in Geraldton, Pindar, and Irwin. Key presenters were Yvonne Marsden (Geraldton - Mt Magnet Rd); Mike Kerkmans (Pindar, east of Mullewa) and Craig Forsyth (Irwin, near Dongara). Participants saw a vast alley oil mallees enterprise; a grazing enterprise with wheel cell grazing systems and a combination of subtropical perennial grasses, annual pasture and tagasaste paddocks; and the use of biodiversity plantings.

The event was organised to deliver on NACC's commitments to the Australian Government's National Landcare Facilitator program; and to demonstrate the benefits of implementing sustainable farm practices in the region.

CASE STUDIES

Speakers' stories

Speaker 1: Yvonne Marsden

Yvonne's Wahroonga Farm is about 25 km east of Geraldton at Mt Magnet road. Yvonne is the Deputy Chairperson of the Northern Agricultural Catchments Councils (NACC) and a former president of local landcare community group. She is a passionate supporter of NACC and is a promoter of WA's biosecurity program.

Yvonne's Story

"I'm a passionate supporter of WA biosecurity program: I believe it's always important that people who are visiting paddocks should wash their feet in dip to reduce the risk of transferring weeds, pests and diseases from one farm to another.

I believe in sustainable farming. For over 20 years, I have been implementing on-ground works to address the problem of climate change and weather which is confronting us in this part of region and to reduce stock erosion issues. In 1995, I started adjusting my paddock fences and introduced contours to manage our surface water runoff. We live in a dry country therefore it's



Picture by: Stanley Yokwe, Landcare Facilitator, NACC

important that we conserve the little runoff we get to keep moisture in the paddocks.

Another interesting component which I have implemented on our farm is I have installed new fences adjacent to the existing plain wire to make revegetation corridors. I believe that by dividing our paddocks with vegetation corridors we can help reduce erosion from prevailing winds. Revegetation also has other important benefits. It acts as habitat for some essential biodiversity and provides shelter and shade for stocks (i.e. helps reduce energy to keep the animals cool during hot summers).

On the lower part of the farm I have introduced perennial pastures into my farming systems. Integration of perennality into our farming systems has added tremendous value – it provides ground cover during summer when annual crops and pasture residues are often unable to protect the soils from erosive winds. These subtropical grasses, with proper grazing management have been providing the stocks with green feed in summer and autumn, allowing animals to be turned-off in peak condition year round.

Recently, I have been successful in gaining a financial incentive from the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council (NACC). This incentive has enabled me to strategically revegetate 5.3 hectares with 5500 plants; establish 75 hectares perennial grass and install four water points.

On our farm there are two springs and four windmills that help our water sources. In the south west of the farm there are about 55 ha of perennials which I have divided into four sections (6.5 – 19 ha). I have done this to help manage my stock grazing. Next year I'm planning to have another 27 paddocks added.

My take home message is that 'there is no silver bullet, things don't happen overnight so don't stop asking questions & learning, life is a learning experience for us all. It takes investigation and planning. My son Glen says "all of the above and a lot of hard work" ."

Speaker 2: Mike Kerkmans

Mike's Marlingu farm is at Pindar, 135 km north-east of Geraldton. Mike is a passionate supporter of oil mallees and is an out-spoken former president of the Oil Mallees Association.

Mike's story

"I first moved to the property in 1988 and since then I have planted over 500,000 oil mallee trees, which are a small Eucalyptus. By doing this we have been able to demonstrate the benefits of oil mallees and how they can be combined with a regular farming system. The planting of oil mallees is beneficial as it assists in improving the condition of the land and water resources as they draw water from the ground and lower the water table which helps minimise salinity.

The trees also play an important role is wind erosion abatement as they are planted on the side of the hill which leads to the drainage areas. As a result the trees slow the water flow and keep more water where it falls. I



Picture by: Stanley Yokwe, Landcare Facilitator, NACC

have also implemented controlled traffic alley farming. The benefits include the reduction in compaction of the soil, and increase productivity as it produces better growth and yield with better water filtration.

We try to crop around 5000 ha every year and have another 5000 ha rested or fallowed to help give longevity to the paddock. Everyone used to do fallow, that is nothing new; you rest the paddock for one year to conserve moisture for the following year the crop has access to two year's rainfall. We get 200ml annual rainfall during a year and we can grow a two tonne per hectare wheat crop.

As far as carbon farming is concerned, there are times we don't get rain. Thus instead of relying on wheat crops, we can have trees on our farms, giving us another stream of income, and hopefully matching long-term lease or wheat-crop costing. Once a tree is in the ground, you don't have to worry about anything else, it just grows. We have planted oil mallees every 300 feet within our wheat crops. We grow them for carbon. We are working on a target of making about \$100 per hectare. We plan to have 10-15% of our farm planted to oil mallee trees. You get paid around \$350 to plant a hectare of trees, so if you plant 100 hectare a year, that is a good little cash injection."

Speaker 3: Craig Forsyth

Craig's Avoca farm is in Irwin, 20km from Mingenev and 30km from the coastal town of Dongara.

Craig's Story

"Eight years ago we made a decision to leave broad acre cropping to concentrate on livestock, so we decided to move to a wholly grazing enterprise.

I spent a considerable amount of time on fencing to set up a 'wagon-wheel' cell grazing system, where fences have transformed about 2,800 arable hectares into 54 paddocks, each with access to one of eight watering hubs. Electric fencing involving three plain wires has effectively contained the pastoral cattle and about 300 breeders. Generally each wagon wheel will consist of a combination of perennial grass paddocks, annual pasture and tagasaste, with stock generally rotating within each hub.

Establishment of the wagon wheel cell grazing system is an ongoing work. Once the system is fully established, we plan to turn-off 4,000 to 5,000 head annually while maintaining low stocking rates in the summer months to ensure sustainability.

The problem of raising a substantial amount of capital for both fencing and purchasing cattle was alleviated by entering into a share profit alliance. This share profit alliance began four years ago with a number of pastoralists and it is an ongoing and mutually beneficial arrangement. Avoca does not have to find the capital to purchase cattle and the pastoralists involved in the deal do not pay for agistment.



Picture by: Ian Knight and StanleyYokwe

Perennial pastures are an important part of the total grazing in our farm and integral to extending the green feed by an extra month at either end of the season, in April and November. My aim is to fully utilise perennial pastures through improved nutrition, enabling high stocking rates of alliance cattle over winter and spring.

We first sowed subtropical perennial grass pasture in 2001 using a combine with 14 inch spacings. Some 700ha has been established to subtropical perennial grasses and current sowing rates are 2kg/ha Gatton Panic, 500g/ha Signal Grass and 500g/ha Fine Cut Rhodes grass. Our aim is to see the whole farm established to perennial grasses.

We apply super phosphate in these paddocks to replace what the cattle take out: every kilogram of meat produced takes out 6g of phosphorus. Most of the perennial grass sowings have been successful, with those paddocks maintaining a good level of diversity and high levels of ground cover. The pastures are now predominantly Gatton panic and Rhodes grass.

I believe good rotational grazing system is a more effective way of grazing paddocks than set stocking.”

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