

Rod and Katrina Butler – Gimlet Ridge

For Rod and Katrina Butler things had to change. They were working hard, their profit was very small and losses were at times large. That was 10 years ago. Today there is more work that still needs to be done but seeing bustards and echidnas in their grazing paddocks is a wonderful sight.



So how have they got to where they are today? What led them to where they are today?

- Well for starters they had stock but there was poor cover on their paddocks
- Their crops were not putting a cover on the ground
- And they had areas they were badly capped. Capping is when there is a hard crust on the soil surface that severely limits permeability.

So really this is not a good start to any farming business

Four years into their 10 year rethink they went to holistic management. At this stage they were getting bigger and bigger and putting in more area of crop. Holistic Management gave them more understanding and certainty of what they wanted their farm to look like.

They made the decision to go into rotational grazing. The aim of this was to improve the cover and diversity of plants at a lower cost and manage the cover. Improved cover and plant diversity leads to more living organisms in the soil.

It took them a long time to truly find the direction that wanted to go. We live in a world where we are expected to conform. Those of us that don't are sometimes made to feel wrong. This is not blaming anyone it is just how society works. To change this is a huge fundamental shift. Something that for humans is a huge things – whether individually or as a society.

In order to understand their internal conflicts Rod and Katrina also looked into the past. Back to white settlement.

Since white settlement as we are all aware we have changed the landscape considerably. Our cities were built on once pristine land and rivers. But cities are not the only areas to change. Rural areas have affected the landscape as well.

Not far from their house is an ex-spring where Bowgada Station homestead was built. It was a special meeting place and key part of the law grounds for indigenous tribes. However, the cutting stones were not concentrated in the spring they were in the waterway. This is quite strange. However, before white settlement this waterway was actually a river. Not a constant flowing river but more like the Murchison waterway. We have silted this river up so much that it is no longer a

river. In doing so we have also changed the plant life, soil cover and the whole ecosystem. This really does show how much we are affecting the landscape.

So we should be asking ourselves – Are we really going forwards or are we still in our own little world? How can we make it better? This is what we should be asking ourselves and it doesn't matter if you are a farmer or someone living in the city. We all need to and should ask it.

Rod and Katrina have benefitted from training in Allan Savory's Holistic Management. He is an ecologist who at times has been at war with both people and animals. Allan Savory has learnt how to get the most out of a system and developed it into a grazing tool. He has discovered how critical rest and recovery is but also that in order to promote species and biology you need to have the grazing. Without the grazing things go stale. He has put it altogether so that you can have the three things we strive for in life

- Social
- Environmental and
- Financial goals

That work together to complement each other.

Rod and Katrina asked themselves - what can nature offer us?

Taking all these things into account, Rod and Katrina decided on their direction – planned rotational grazing. If we take time and other pressures off nature things will happen. We are always go, go, go but we often don't take the time to sit back and see what nature is doing for us.

2017 started off with some great rains over summer but then nothing much happened until August.

For Rod and Katrina going away for 6 weeks in a season like this was ideal. Not a great season, nothing much to do but there were some rains in August. Wow what a difference 6 weeks can make. They came back to see what nature could actually give them and it was great – both on their demonstration sites and their farm in general.

Before going away, Rod had set up a demonstration trial. He was looking at no kill cropping and high density short duration (HDSD) grazing. There were 5 sites

1. No kill cropping
2. HDSD Grazing only on capped soils no cropping
3. HDSD Grazing on capped soils followed by no kill cropping
4. Traditional free grazing followed by no kill cropping
5. Traditional grazing

A bit about the demonstration:

No-kill cropping: A K-Hart triple disc assembly with a tyne at 2 spacings with an inverted T-point will be used to open the ground, expose the soil and hold moisture. No chemicals are used to kill pasture/annual volunteers before the process, it all just went in.

High density short duration grazing: aims to mimic nature and the way large animal herds move over large areas as packs flattening the grass, break the soil capping, covering the soil surface with mulch and dung, thus allowing biological decay before the next growing season and the affected area to rest during long durations (Chaplot, Dlamini & Chivende, 2016).

Traditional free grazing: when the animals are allowed to graze the paddock at their own free will. Not shepherding. For this particular demonstration they were only free grazed for a couple of days.

Site 1:

Using no-kill cropping the site was sown to a mixture of oats, wheat, barley, ryegrass and seconds grain mix. It germinated but not fantastically. One of the biggest problems with this site was that it got overgrazed in previous years, thus it is badly capped. Very difficult sites were chosen. The lack of biology here may be improved by spraying with biological stimulators such as fish emulsion or similar. The aim is for 7-8 plant/m², but here Rod only got about 2-3.

**Site 2:**

We mislaid the GPS point for the trial for this site however high density grazing definitely promoted higher density of cover and more species than similar areas not grazed with this technique.

Site 3:

This is the site near their home. It has poor coverage, capped soils and due to its proximity to the house it was a paddock that needed fixing. Rod grazed this paddock using very heavy shepherding. Basically the sheep were moved around to such a degree it was like them being in a holding pen. This meant that their hooves were digging/imprinting the soil in all different directions. The area was then no-kill cropped with the same mix as the other sites. The paddock doesn't look too bad now and has between 7-8 plants/m².

**Site 4:**

This has a similar soil type to that of site 3. However, this one was traditionally free grazed. Once the stock were removed it was no-kill cropped using the same pasture mix as the other sites. There is basically no coverage on this paddock.

Site 5:

This is where there was only traditional free grazing. It was done on another farm a short distance from the Butler's.

So were to from here?

Refine a few things. Where nothing seems to be working think of other ways to help nature.

Rod's ultimate paddock would be mulla mulla/saltbush/shrubs and perennial and annual grasses. It is the grasses that breathe life into a paddock. They live and die, live and die. They use the water when it comes, set seed, die and do it all again. Mulla mulla and those kinds of plants are more longer term.



Unlike the sandplain country it is essential to get in before it rains. It takes too much rain to wet the soil up if it has not been disturbed. By the time it's wet you have lost half of your growing season. By getting in dry any seeds – whether the ones you have cultivated or the naturally occurring ones have the whole season to use the rain and grow.

Other things that Rod has observed are

- Not all seeds are going to come up at once
- Use a variety of seeds. Doesn't have to be cereals. Seconds which include ryegrass and radish are great
- Growing plants create pathways for other plants to grow.

The no-kill machine Rod used was not ideal. It didn't crack the capping enough to allow seeds to germinate. 'I should have rebuilt it before I began but hindsight is a wonderful thing. I used a different machine on a neighbouring property but still not perfect although it was a lot better.' Rod explained

In natural livestock there are sometimes plants that grow that are not always desirable for stock. Stock may have had issues with particular plants in the past and so they now avoid it. If some stock avoid plants then this will teach other stock to avoid them as well. To stop this they use a technique called parking. The stock are held on these areas and learn to get a taste for these less desirable species. If stock are seen to be eating it then other stock will give it a go. Plants such as

saffron thistle has been known to be grazed like this with no dire consequences to the stock just a saffron free paddock.

In the future Rod and Katrina may look into the possibility of growing crops for harvest. This will still be done in the no-kill cropping style and they could be organically marketed. However, this is not the end goal it is something that will be opportunistic and definitely not at the expense of the land or biology.

Rod and Katrina's goal is to operate a low input and profitable business, with healthy life giving land and be happy and enjoy it. To have 100% cover, 100% of the time with green and growing plants. Therefore utilising rain that falls outside the May to September rainfall no matter what the season is or the seasonal conditions are.