

Report on Bus Trip to National Environment Centre at Albury

Host: Rob Fenton

Date: Saturday 28th February, 2009

Fourteen dedicated landholders from this region participated in a tour to Albury to visit The National Environment Centre.

Background on the National Environment Centre

The farm on the centre was created some 10 years ago and funded as a model to counter climate change. The farm started as an unimproved, infertile block and by utilising methods like keyline ploughing, drainage lines, fencing along contour lines Rob has created an organically certified 190 hectare farm that is sustainable and increasing in soil health. He has increased organic carbon levels over the years and has a number of different enterprises including fat-tailed Damara cross sheep, olives, red gum woodlots that produce firewood and bardi grubs and is about to include a pasture based egg production unit, honey and perennial herbs. He uses solar or wind power to move water around the property to stock water troughs. Smart marketing allows the farm to maintain income as it has to be self funded. Grazing is limited to 4 days in each of the 73 paddocks. Habitat for wildlife is created by keeping dead wood and identified bird species have risen from 26 to 87.



McIvor Landcare group being addressed by Rob Fenton

Tour

After a short coffee break and over shooting the turn off (Oops) we arrived at the environment centre in the heat of the day. Rob welcomed us and we quickly proceeded into the cool of the classroom to beat the heat. We firstly listened to how Rob created the farm and what he is trying to achieve. Rob is the Farm Manager and Head Teacher for the Centre. The Environment Centre is a learning hub for many students discovering the huge benefits from using permaculture based methods and also bio-organic, organic farming ideas to improve the health of their soil produce healthy food and as a consequence our own health and well-being is improved. Rob had the whole room thinking and questioning what they do at home straight away.

We then went for a short walk and looked at his Damara fat tailed sheep. These sheep were lambing all year round to produce a meat sheep that was marketed every fortnight at a local farmers market. These sheep thrived on a cell grazing approach that led to an elimination of drenching as the sheep never stay in the one paddock for more than 4 days. This breaks the cycle of any worms. The sheep are effectively never eating pasture that is infected with their dung that could have worm eggs / larvae, which also suits their organic certification. The sheep are hassle free as there is no crutching, shearing, mulesing or risk of fly-strike. They are yarded once a month to mark the lambs and select sale stock. Alpacas run with the sheep as well as a donkey to keep foxes and wild dogs away. A donkey is a lot stronger and will kick a wild dog if it enters the paddock.



Damara sheep

Another discussion was had back in the environmentally and specifically designed classroom before our delicious Damara lamb BBQ lunch. Thanks to Rob and his family for efforts in supplying and cooking the lunch. We dined on barbequed damara chops, rissoles and sausages which were all very tasty.

After lunch we jumped on the very hot bus and took a tour through the farm. A central laneway allowed access to all sections of the farm and also delivered water in a 1' poly pipe reticulation system to water troughs around the farm. Rob pointed out his swamp area with contour banks that allowed water to slow and get filtered before ending up stored in a large dam, and also the vertical tree nest system to increase bird life.



Wetlands created to slow water flow



Water troughs fed by solar / wind pumps

Keyline ploughing along contours of the paddocks allowed water infiltration into the soil profile and helped aerate and improve the soil structure. The whole farm was fenced with the contour of the land in mind. Eroded areas had been fenced off and let re vegetate and trees grow. Contour banks installed in these areas diverted water away from high risk areas and slowed the water flow across the landscape.



Keyline Ploughing in foreground

Also woodlots were scattered over the farm allowing bardi grubs to be harvested for fishing bait. Putting a dolphin torch under a tree apparently attracts the grubs so next day you harvest in that area.

Our visit, obviously in drought conditions, saw the systems in place that will allow a continual improvement in the whole property through better water use, grazing utilisation and protection of high risk areas when it does eventually rain. I certainly would love to visit the property in a “normal” season and I think I would be blown away with what I would see.

In the meantime the farm is being run as a business and the marketing strategies that have been put in place will allow the farm to continue to be self sufficient even if it is running at a fraction of its potential carrying capacity.

Take home messages I received on the day were:

- It is all about the soil, if we have healthy soil we grow healthy food and then we can eat healthy food.
- Be a price maker not a price taker. Determine what the product has to return to you as a grower to be profitable and go for it.
- Slow the water flow on your property; you will be amazed at the changes that will occur.
- Protect native habitat, eg large box trees fenced off say 20 meters. Stock can still access shade from that tree (see photo below).



Tree fenced off for protection and concentrated dung scraped away from under tree to allow native pasture to regenerate.

- Before fencing this tree off scrape the soil/manure from around this tree that has most likely been used as a stock camp and spread over paddock. It is high in nutrients.
- Native vegetation will grow in no time at all and there will be vegetation up to the trunk of the tree.
- Move your water on the property with gravity it is cheap. Work with the contour of the land.
- There are 4 types of people.
 1. Leaders – people that always buy wholesome healthy food from accredited sustainable producers.
 2. Learners – people discovering about healthy soil, organics, etc
 3. Leaners – people starting to buy better food grown in healthy soil and environment when they can.
 4. Laggards – people who will never change

Market your product towards the Learners and Leaners, the others may or may not follow.

Before we knew it, 4 o'clock had turned over and it was time to get on the bus and head home. With cool drinks, nibbles and many discussions of the day the time passed very quickly and in no time at all we were back in Tooborac. There were many discussions about what we had seen and the one thing we all agreed on was there needs to be more outings like this one to challenge our thoughts, practices and most of all broaden our horizons!

Look forward to seeing you on our next trip.

Cheers

Jason Hagan
President
McIvor Landcare Group