

Murrumbidgee Landcare's Cross Property Planning project

Land holder case study: Skye Bellamy, "Coombiana"

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| Name: | Skye Bellamy and Tom Wilks |
| Location: | "Coombiana", Downside |
| Property size: | 404 ha |

With her husband Tom Wilks, a water broker, Skye Bellamy operates 'Coombiana', a 183 ha mixed farm at Downside, about 15 km north of Wagga Wagga. Recently, the farm area was increased to 404 ha with the purchase of an adjoining block of land on Houlaghans Creek, an occasional stream that meanders to the Murrumbidgee from its origin about 65 km NNE, between Junee and Temora.

This landscape is prime Riverina real estate, renowned for wheat, canola and prime lambs or fattening cattle. 'Coombiana' is very much a working farm, producing fodder and some grain for the beef cattle that are grazed on the property. It is also home to a dedicated Landcarer (Skye), who is intent on achieving a balance between sustainable agriculture and the natural environment. Only a couple of months after purchasing the new section of the farm, a five-row tree and shrub belt was prepared for planting along the eastern and northern boundaries of the block.



Skye is a strong supporter of grassroots Landcare, encouraging members of the Junee Area Landcare Network to participate in the Cross Property Planning project, which since 2012 has been coordinated by Jacinta Christie and Nicole Maher for Murrumbidgee Landcare Inc (MLi), involving landholders in the nearby Junee, Kyeamba and Tarcutta districts. The funds allocated to her property have been utilised to protect a swamp area inhabited by frogs, toads and toadlets; and to develop and protect additional areas of native vegetation on the farm.

In addition to the recent work, benefits from prior Landcare activities are now evident on 'Coombiana'. Tom and Skye developed a 3 ha area surrounding the main house, planting lucerne, fruit and nut trees, a vegetable garden, and yards for chicken and ducks. Adjoining this 'home' area are six-row native tree and shrub plantings on the eastern, northern, and western aspects. These areas will be connected with additional native plantings during winter 2016. Currently, about 12% of 'Coombiana' is planted to native vegetation. Several areas and some key paddock trees are also protected from grazing.



Skye said, “I am especially proud of the life we have encouraged and protected at ‘Coombiana’.

We have dung beetles, worms, spiders, moths, butterflies, frogs, toads, permanent and migratory birds (including Cranes, Spoonbill Ibis, Egrets, Kingfishers, Flame Robins, White Faced Chats and Superb Parrots) along with lizards, an echidna, sheep, pigs, cattle, and horses. Annually we are visited by a Superb Kingfisher, and we now have a small flock of Cockerteils”.

A past highlight at ‘Coombiana’ was a Schools Day organised by MLI in 2014, when students from six primary schools participated in activities at several paddock locations, to learn about native vegetation, pond life, soils, tree-belts and biodiversity.

Skye acknowledges the role of regional bodies in targeting parts of the landscape for priority treatment. However, she maintains that the activities funded by these bodies must be complementary to the work done by farmers with incentive funding provided by State and Federal governments for Landcare. Landholders, when they work together with grassroots groups and networks such MLI, enjoy programs that are community- and family-friendly.

“Farmers enjoy the comradery of working together and sharing information, and the funds available for revegetation and rehabilitation can be applied more flexibly, more efficiently and more cohesively” she said.

Skye added that community groups and the community approach must be nurtured by regional bodies, Progressive changes in farm businesses mean that the guidelines that apply to incentive funding require updating from time to time. Farm families are now time-poor, forcing a re-evaluation of how groups operate and participate. Updating and flexibility are needed in terms of the costings that are applied to ‘in-kind’ farmer contributions, the strings that are attached to funding, and the guidelines that seem to be part of the package. For example, the range of ‘approved’ trees and shrubs is often limited, whereas more than 60 species have been planted out on ‘Coombiana’.

