

LANDCARE: A FARMER'S EXPERIENCE

Max Chamberlain, "Naura" Downside

Max Chamberlain has been planting trees and working to improve the ecology on his Downside property for over thirty years. And the benefits are not just in greater farm productivity but also long term sustainability.

Max was a founding member of the Downside Landcare Group and he recalls the catalysts for the groups formation as a trip he and some other local farmers took to north east Victoria to view first hand horrific land degradation in 1988. "We saw the horrific salinity discharge sites and could see the potential for this in our own district. We started with around 20 members in 1989 with the aim of countering the threat to productivity posed by salinisation, and the potential for off-site damage."

"Our farm had very little remanent vegetation - my grandfather and father had followed the common farming practices of the time and cleared large parts of the property. So while I had been planting trees for ten years before, it wasn't until we formed the Downside Landcare group that I had begun to better understand dryland salinity causes and effects and identified some saline discharge areas".

Max and many other Downside farmers have carried out large amount of environmental works. Recharge areas have been fenced off and trees established. Salinity scald areas have been mounded and planted out with trees, pasture and saltbush. Waterways with containment earthworks, fenced off, pasture and trees sown.



Left: Max Chamberlain showing grandson Will Chamberlain the finer points of tree planting

They also established a local greenhouse where group members propagated thousands of trees such as kurrajongs, yellow box, red gums and drooping she-oaks from locally collected seed.

“Propagating from local seed grow some species which are suited to the local conditions. I’ve also learnt over the years how critical it is to plant the right tree species in the right place. Now we take a more integrated whole farm approach to our tree planting. All our windbreaks consist of three rows and we will you species such as kurrajong or taggaste in one of the rows to give us a living haystack. These wind breaks are not only useful in protecting livestock from weather extremes but has also allowed the incorporation of laneways to aid stock movement and provide better paddock access across the farm”.

Other changes on “Naura” have included the establishment of lucerne and the inclusion of canola in the crop rotation. “We didn’t realise the important connection between the effect of acid soils on crop and pasture growth and the subsequent inefficient use of stored soil water. Liming our midslope country is now an integral part of our management and it has allowed us to not only grow lucerne and canola but grow better cereal crops as a result of the disease break.

Max believes Landcare is still very relevant but in his area it may need a new focus. “We have done a lot of work in fixing discharge areas but addressing recharge and off site causes are more difficult and expensive to combat. “I’m concerned about the explosion of noxious weeds along council roads and the lack of council funds to control problem weeds such as khaki weed, blue flowering heliotrope and St Johns wort. As landholders we need to regularly monitor our boundaries and work with council to try and limit their spread.

It would be great to see more young people become involved and give farming a greater voice in the broader community”.