

“Experience from setting up an NSF Demonstration Site”

and

“Welcome to Mulloon Creek Natural Farms”

By
Antony Coote *

Presentation
to
Natural Sequence Farming Workshop

Wednesday November 1 2006

Welcome, in advance, to Mulloon Creek Natural Farms (MCNF)!

MCNF is a grazing, cropping, research and teaching enterprise covering two farms on the Mulloon Creek about 12 kms east of Bungendore toward the coast. We cover 2,500 Ha or 5,700 acres and straddle the Great Dividing Range. Our enterprises are cattle, sheep (for wool and meat) and laying hens on pasture.

We practice biodynamic farming (for approximately 18 years) and are certified with the Biological Farmers Association (BFA). Our Vision is “to be a model of restorative natural agriculture, growing biodiversity and building environmental capital to be shared for the benefit of future generations.” (Copy of expanded version is available).

There is set in place, a mechanism to ensure MCNF continues on beyond me.

You will visit today the “Home Farm” where there is about six kms of creek, three of which have been treated as a joint venture between me and the CMA in cooperation with the Landcare Council. It is the first national demonstration under such an arrangement.

When you are on site can I suggest you observe Peter’s work from two viewpoints that I find easily explain what is happening.

1. Look at this body (the land) as a beautiful living patient that is in a rapid process of dying. First we have to stem the flow of blood, the gigalitres of water that drain through and out towards the sea, bringing in so little for the land itself and taking away so much nutrient. Then we have to re-hydrate the body. With the next step, we have to cover the scorched bare skin with the “wool” or “hair” nature intended so it can modulate the heat and cold – this is done with plants – green surface area.

Then give the body the ability to recycle its moisture efficiently. Then work out to the extremities, in this case up to the tops of the hills. By transporting the nutrients to the tops of the hills from where they came gravity does the work just like it’s always done.

Then finally, keep the hills moistened from the mists floating from what is created in the re-hydrated lower country.

The result is that when this once dying body is fully healthy recycling nutrients and hydration, most of the rain falling can run off and be used elsewhere because so little of it will be needed to top up the system.

2. Another way I look at the flood plain itself, draws an analogy with something we deal with every day – the banking system. Why do we call the edge of a river or creek a “bank”? A financial bank takes in deposits. A river bank takes in deposits of water by capillary action through the sand veins in the clay. The financial bank uses the deposits to nourish its own resources: the river bank uses its deposits to nourish the whole flood plain underneath the surface and in so doing increases its own “environmental” capital just as the financial bank uses the money to build its financial capital. When there is a need for us to use money, we withdraw it from the bank. When there is a need for the river to maintain its flow during dry times, it also withdraws the nourished water from the bank as the river level reduces. This is a very simple analogy but one that I find easily relates to those who are first introduced to the NSF concept.

Coming now to the main points I have learned from the practical observations and involvement in this project. Some key issues I see are appearing that emanate from the genius Peter Andrews is, along with his emphasizing to us the urgency and importance of the task ahead, and the realization from my, and others, practical experience on the ground that results can happen very, very quickly.

First let us recognise clearly the genius of Peter Andrews. I quote from “The New Scientist”, December 2005. “Einstein’s physics transformed how we understand the world.... Einstein insisted that great theories are those that explain the most facts from the least number of principles. This was his aesthetic of simplicity, and it was rooted in his belief that the simpler the theory, the less it will look anything like the world will see. The ultimate goal of science, he believed, is to find one all-encompassing, self evident principle or set of principles from which the whole of reality can be deduced. ”The supreme task of the physicist,” he wrote, “is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on the sympathetic understanding of experience, can reach them.”

This leads to my second issue. If, as I have experienced, Peter has the attributes of Einstein in this field, then a way must be found to enable him to be trusted to carry out his work and fine tune it as he goes. This may be accomplished simply by a mechanism by which he could be retained, as any professional, to deliver an outcome.

My third issue, from some experience now, is that it is now time to slow down the road shows and focus on delivering the work. It is time to slow down the talk and speed up the walk. We must be very careful about over-promising and under-delivering. Disappointment is related to expectation. There is now so much expectation with Peter having met at least five thousand people and the publicity about him has reached many, many more, that the disappointment is going to be just as great as the enormous expectation, if substantial action is not put in place very soon.

The design and implementation of projects is now highly dependant on Peter himself. He can probably only fully complete between five and ten projects per year. So this work has to be leveraged through a very well organised training program to train operators and to train trainers. We have an International Reference Panel for the science – should we be thinking about a national reference panel for the implementation? This body could be given, or set for itself, terms of reference, with the objective of making recommendations by a set time.

The critical resource for the implementation will be people of ability who can implement, first of all, the structural and planting work in the riparian zone. I suggest these be drawn from CMA operatives who currently have practical experience, and also farmers. As to the latter I feel the country has been handed a wonderful opportunity that emerges from adversity. In the current economic crisis for farmers, so many graziers have now sold their stock and now actually have time on their hands, but, of course, no financial resources and, in fact, very large debts. Is it time, right now, for government, on behalf of the whole community of this nation, to fund these farmers in a salaried form for a period of time to be trained and then to implement NSF on their own farms and farms in their district, co-operatively working with each other in teams. This sort of massive work program has probably not been experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930's, but maybe it is time for this most important leadership by government to act now.

My fourth issue deals with the matter of “definitions”, e.g. How do we define:

- Pioneer species
- Landscape restorative plants
- Weeds
- Irrigation and hydration
- Infrastructure and contracture
- Swampy meadows, chain of ponds
- Etc.

My next issue from the MCNF experience is what has been raised by others, especially Pam Green, i.e. to review and determine enabling as opposed to restricting (or constricting) legislation so the CMA people can have the freedom to enable this amazing process to proceed fully.

As an important aside, I have noticed the willingness and excitement of CMA staffers and also neighbouring farmers in getting involved in something they know in their hearts is so important. These people love getting out into the field and doing this sort of work.

A major issue that is right with us now, is funding. We do have good funding sources, but most farmers can't afford a 50% contribution in cash for something that is not going to give them a financial return quickly. Farmers will get a financial return from NSF, but not for possibly a few years. What they need is funding from government (representing the whole community, especially the city dwellers) for the transition period of say three

years. As a farmer, and taxpayer, I feel this is so timely right now. Most farmers will have little or no income for the next couple of years at least. Furthermore they have little to do on their farms once the stock are gone. Why not fund them to do this restorative work? John Williams has alluded to the mood being timely for this.

My next point based on my experience with NSF is that it is essential to develop a mechanism by which Tarwon Park is secured as the foundation research institution for the continuing of Peter's work.

My second last issue has to do with creating recognition with the decision makers of each stakeholder, that NSF is not only of critical importance to this country, but is also critically urgent. The key stakeholders to do with agriculture and the landscape are:

- Landholders
- Suppliers
- Customers
- Government – politicians and bureaucrats
- Lenders of \$

Each is led by a person who lives in a city, here or overseas – the largest landholders, the key suppliers of machinery, fuel, fertilizers, etc, the major customers, the supermarkets, government decision makers and financial institutions. These people, as decent as they may be, cannot know, in their bones, the critical importance of these issues in the landscape. Confucius was attributed with saying “the best fertiliser for the farm is the owner's feet”, and let us be reminded of the line in a Slim Dusty song “There's no drought or starving stock on a sewered suburban block”. I think it is important to point out the realistic situation to these decision makers that it is almost impossible for them to understand, but can they at least back up with their own resources, the people who do.

My final point backs up Pam Green's deeply held belief in the need for people to work together. In nature there is a clear understanding of the role of BOTH competition and co-operation. Only in humans is this confused. I have been in an industry for many years where competition is the lifeblood – retailing. When on the Australian team for a sport, our psych testing put me in the 98th percentile for competitiveness. But think how much we all compete with our entrenched positions to defend our egos. And yet, no matter how much we compete, there is room also, just as importantly, for co-operation. These issues are too important for taking stances because of party politics, funding or anything else. Our children and grandchildren don't really care what political party does what, but, quite rightly, they will accuse us of allowing our bickering to destroy their future for them. What are we going to say to them when they ask us “What did you do when you got the warnings?” We have the warnings right now. United or co-operatively we stand – divided or competitively, we certainly fall.

When you come as our guests today have fun (in the sun) and feel the way we live out there where we, as the children's author John Marsden said, "Live as is we'll die tomorrow but farm as if we'll live forever."

* Anthony Coote, AM, BSc, MBA, is the owner of Mulloon Creek Natural Farms and Chair of the Natural Sequence Association.