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The Australian Rangeland Society

Growing sustainably: The Physical and Social capital of Pastoralism in South Australia

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Abstract

“Growing sustainably” is a broad and multi-faceted concept that I will explore further in this paper. As pastoralists, we would immediately think of growing sustainably as focusing on the environmental sustainability of our land. That is indeed part of my premise, but I consider a pastoral business as an organic being, a living, growing thing that requires careful management.

Stephen Covey, in his book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” (Covey, 1989), identifies physical, financial and human resources as the main aspects of effective business management. He also has developed a model of the whole person paradigm, encompassing the body, mind, heart and spirit. In both models, he emphasises the need to maintain a balance across each of these aspects. He uses Aesop’s fable of the Goose that laid the Golden Eggs as a guide, and this is a guide for us all.

I will focus on the evolution of Williams Cattle Company as one model of growing sustainably.

The Williams Cattle Company - A short history

The Williams family made their initial foray into pastoralism in 1967, 50 years ago, when Reg Williams and two of his brothers, farmers and graziers from Carrieton near the Flinders Ranges in SA, purchased Nilpinna Station, north of William Creek. They employed a manager, Jimmy Nunn to manage the property; a position he held for 17 years.

They were different times. Few improvements had been made to the property. They relied on 32-volt power and a kero fridge, certainly no cool rooms! Food was adequate but basic, relying on stores brought up by train. Communication was by way of a 2-way radio, or telegrams in an emergency. There was a lengthy turn around in the exchange of written correspondence. There was very little machinery. Mustering was carried out with a plant of horses, often camping out for weeks on end. Tough and inauspicious beginnings maybe, but a starting point for growing a sustainable business.

My husband, Tony Williams, began his pastoral career in 1973 as a 16 year-old, at Nilpinna Station. He had a passion for the bush and the industry that saw him, and his family, learn as much as they could. With the guidance of Jimmy Nunn and his father, improvements were gradually made to Nilpinna. These improvements were made in a sustainable way, both in terms of the environment and financially; made to maintain the country, improve stocking rates and animal welfare, and only as was financially appropriate.

In 1981, the family was in a position to purchase their second pastoral property, Mt Barry. Tony was appointed as manager, a position that he still holds. As with Nilpinna, there had been few improvements made to Mt Barry at that point, with only one free flowing bore, and two others that weren’t functioning. Now Mt Barry has 30 bores, and nine additional dams have been sunk. Nine drafting yards, nine holding paddocks and numerous holding yards, hundreds of kilometres of roads and over a hundred kilometres of internal fences have been constructed.

In 1989, Arckaringa Station was added to the portfolio. Since the year 2000, Williams Cattle Company, comprising Tony, two of his brothers and their wives, Wayne and Janet, Trevor and Helen, and two cousins and their wives, Larry and Betty and Vincent and Julie, and their families, has held five pastoral properties in the Marla-Oodnadatta region, comprising some 22,000 square kilometres, with a holding capacity of 20,000 head. They also own grazing and cropping land, and a feedlot around Carrieton.

In November of 2016 Williams Cattle Company became the new leaseholders of the historic and famous Anna Creek and The Peake Stations. Never in their wildest dreams had the family ever imagined that they would ever have such an opportunity, and they pay tribute and respect to Reg

Williams and his brothers, as they exceed the vision laid out for them. Their pastoral holdings now cover 45,000 square kilometres.

Growing sustainably: Physical and financial resources

As I reflect on this history, and the sustained success of this pastoral enterprise, I think of the Goose that laid the Golden Egg. In all the planning and implementation over the last 50 years, there has been a driving force of sustaining and improving the capacity of the land and the business. If you disrespect the land, overstock, or use resources such as water or cash flow unwisely, then you are going to “kill the goose” so to speak. The leaseholders are custodians of their bit of the country, custodians for their family, custodians for all future generations and custodians for the environment.

In order to honour this premise, all decisions are made to sustain the landscape, whilst continuously improving animal welfare and, of course in turn, return on the investment. For example, water is a priority. On each of the stations, there is a need to establish watering points in strategic locations, at calculated distances apart, that will maintain the welfare of the stock and also the welfare of the land. With low stocking rates, approximately one beast per 1.25 square kilometres across the leaseholds, more available watering points in addition to the naturally occurring but rarely permanent waterholes, will spread the demand on the feedbase more thinly and sustainably. Maximising the use of groundwater, dams and banks following rain has enabled bores to be closed off for extended periods of time, and to practise a form of cell grazing by moving cattle about to different waters and feed options. An advantage of having several properties is the capacity to move cattle between properties, as rainfall is not always widespread across the district.

This model of development is echoed across all other aspects of the business. Our developing organic accreditation is a further testament to such practices, demonstrated environmental sustainability being a key indicator.

Growing sustainably: Human Resources

Covey (1989) talks about the need for balance, and managing our human resources is critical and inextricably linked to the other resources in the business.

Historically, work on cattle stations has been physically demanding and often in trying conditions. With improvements in machinery and technology this may have changed a little but it is still a reality. Keeping the workers healthy, engaged, happy and committed is critical, in fact balancing the whole person paradigm. We ensure physical well-being by providing a safe work environment, sumptuous and healthy meals and good accommodation; these days with reverse cycle air conditioning, Wi-Fi, and all mod cons. We also provide many opportunities for social well-being.

Education is a key component for all employees. Our senior partners have a wealth of experiential knowledge that they share with our employees and each other in an ongoing and timely manner. Over the years and especially with the advent of technology there has been an exponential growth in knowledge. Building on understandings of genetics and herd management, animal welfare, stock nutrition, soil erosion through sustainable grading practices, use of GPS technology, weather forecasting and so on, benefits both the country and the business. By including all employees in ongoing education, they are being empowered, valued and multi skilled.

Human resources: The role of women and community in pastoralism

In the past, I think it would be fair to say that men carried out a majority of the work in the field. This is probably still accurate to some extent, but certainly across our portfolio there is an increasing number of jillaroos working in “hands on” roles on the run.

Historically, it is probably also fair to say, that the women were the unsung heroes of the pastoral industry. Living conditions were trying, with no air conditioning, few mod cons and a tribe of hungry men to feed using basic equipment and ingredients. Raising a young family and providing an education was problematic, and communication and health care limited. At times I am sure it could have been debilitatingly lonely.

In my own current circumstances I see my role as diverse, and as in the past, critical to the success of the enterprise. My role includes cook, cleaner, secretary, accountant, technology expert, nurse,

counsellor and sub-mum. Tony just recently acknowledged these roles. "I couldn't do this without you," he told me. The weight of paperwork (BAS, Workcover, organic accreditation, etc), increasingly so it seems, is constant, and often those unexpected phone calls, visitors or "events" can put paid to the best-laid plans. This is common across pastoral properties and, unlike some others; I don't have small children nor their education to consider!

It is not only the work for Mt Barry and the Williams Cattle Company that, like other women, occupies my time. I am Chair of the Marla Oodnadatta NRM group. Currently four of our seven members are women, bringing to the group vast knowledge, experience and enthusiasm. A proactive group with education and well being for the district as a priority, we were thrilled with the success of our planned field days in March of 2017 that saw incredible uptake across the district.

I am also secretary of various committees, including the Oodnadatta Bronco Branding. Committees such as these exist throughout rural communities and it is common for the women to take on the role of secretary. Secretaries are usually the ones that ensure that any events are run smoothly, including gathering sponsorship, creating programmes, organising catering etc. It is a rewarding but time consuming role.

Community events, such as Races and Gymkhanas, Motorkhanas, Bronco Brandings, cricket matches and field days are absolutely critical for the social well being of communities. We **are** isolated, we work hard, and these events bring people together, to mix with others in person, to share stories or problems, and just have a good time. The attendance of RFDS at several recent such events has added a further positive dimension to the well being benefits.

Women's retreats in the district in 2015 and 2017 are an excellent example of acknowledging the important work of our women while continuing to build social well being.

Future challenges and trends

Like any enterprise, it is imperative to keep an eye on current and future trends. A constant challenge is the weather and the unpredictable seasonal conditions. This is not new. Pastoralists are able to refer to past data and trends and combine this wisdom and evidence with current patterns and future predictions. Climate change and its impacts will necessitate strategic planning and careful attention to the available technology. The unpredictable nature of markets, both locally and internationally, and variable commodity prices, require a similar proactive approach.

Tourism is another area for consideration. The outback has always held some allure, but with access to better vehicles and GPS technologies, an increasing number of people are choosing this as a destination. With their new technologies some are venturing into previously inaccessible territory and this has the potential to impact negatively on roads and infrastructure, the environment, welfare of stock and their own safety. Whilst there are some obvious benefits, both industry and government need to be prepared, to ensure positive and sustainable outcomes for all. Biosecurity is another such consideration.

In Conclusion

To grow sustainably is an imperative, to look after all aspects of business and personal well being a given. By working together and creating a balance, we can and will sustain our industry and our environment for generations to come.

References

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