

Case Study – Environmental Strategy #1

Case Study: Graham and Cathy Finlayson

Bokhara Plains

35km North of Brewarrina, NSW

Prepared by Sally Ware (NSW Department of Industry & Investment) with Graham and Cathy Finlayson

Area of property
7000ha

Enterprise description
Rotational grazing of cattle and farm tourism.

Describe your vision for the business
"To provide our family with the means to live the lifestyle that we want to live".



Graham in a reclaimed paddock on Bokhara with cattle at a water point in distance

Describe the impact climate variability has had on your production system and business
The average rainfall for Bokhara is 380 to 400mm but currently the property has a 725mm rolling average. We have experienced the two extremes as we have totally destocked four times since 2002. And we have experienced good seasons as in 07/08 we received 11 inches in one day and in December 2009 we received 15 inches in that week.

Graham often states that "we know that our rainfall is reliably unreliable".

The climate has had quite a significant impact as it made us re-think our direction. Ultimately it meant that we changed to an intensive planned grazing system in 2001 and diversified into tourism by setting up the shearer's quarters as Bokhara Hutz station stay.

Describe what the business looked like 10 years ago
Ten years ago, Graham was working off farm crutching and shearing sheep and Cathy was working in Brewarrina. There were large claypans across the property and the main enterprise involved running crossbred sheep on what the locals described as a "tough, smallish block" and they were the fifth owners in 50 years. The seasons were however quite good in 1999/2000 but both Graham and Cathy were not happy with the direction they were taking with Bokhara.

Describe how you have managed to transform the business from what it was 10 years ago

In 2001, a friend gave Graham a copy of Allan Savory's book to read. Graham remembers being very frustrated and in need of a change before he read the book. In 2002, he completed the Grazing for Profit course and spent four years as a member of the Executive Link. Using this information plus the feedback from the Executive Link, he and Cathy commenced setting up Bokhara for a new grazing management system with a view to "regenerate" the landscape.

The first steps taken were to fence seven cells and close off the ground tanks. Over the next ten years, 100 paddocks of 60ha in size have been created using approx. 200km of divisional fencing.

The farm stay Bokhara Hutz was also established which meant purchasing/renovating and building a number of structures at the shearer's quarters.

Describe the impetus for change, and how you recognised the need for a new approach

There were a number of factors that drove the change including the drought conditions on the property which led to a lifestyle of having to work off farm as well as having to endure the daily grind of tasks like dragging sheep out tanks etc.

Reading Allan Savory's book also prompted the need to change and it was read during the drought and when Graham was extremely frustrated with his current lifestyle. Frustration turned to excitement and enthusiasm once reading the book.

What have been the key achievements/stepping stones along the way?

- There was a steep learning process as the new system was implemented.
- The fences and waters have all had to be installed.
- A grazing chart is used to plan a 12 month grazing management system for the property. It is based on 56DSEdays/ha/100mm. It is used to measure grazing pressure on each paddock and to plan stocking rates for 12 months.
- The farm stay has been established since 2001 and is fully operational and very successful and complements the farm. Graham and Cathy also founded Outback Bedz with the original eight members. This is a group of tourism operators who work together to promote their accommodation (including farm stays).
- 2005 – Graham was awarded the Farmer of the Year.
- 2008 – Graham was awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship and travelled for four months of the year.

What have been the major challenges in this space of change?

The major factors have been starting with a degraded block, drought and finance costs and finding a common direction for both of us whilst each dealing with a large workload.

What were/are the key success factors, skills and knowledge the business required to make this change?

- Complementary diversification – setting up Bokhara Hutz on the station as well as moving forward with the grazing changes.
- Grazing for Profit course – implementation of the skills learnt at the course.
- Support network – this was crucial in providing external guidance by the Executive link from the Grazing for Profit course.
- Setting up the property for the new grazing system.
- Obtaining funding from the Enterprise Based Conservation program. This assisted financially and also provided a network and link to other like-minded landholders i.e. we were involved with a group of positive landholders.
- Obtaining funding to become a Nuffield scholar and travelling overseas and learning about grazing management in other Rangelands areas.
- Studying a low stress stock handling school and completing a KLR Marketing course.

What financial impact has the change had on the business?

As Graham and Cathy expanded their business management skills through the use of planning tools such as their grazing management charts, they were able to develop a good relationship with their business associates such as the bank and their accountant.

The returns from the property have increased significantly as they have raised their carrying capacity from 56DSE/ha/100mm to 80DSE/ha/100mm.

Return from assets has also increased significantly, in particular with the use of the shearer's hutz now being constantly used as farm stay accommodation.

How has this change allowed the business to adapt to and become more resilient to climate change?

Bokhara is now completely set up for a planned grazing system that is able to run a significantly higher DSE/ha compared to other properties in the area. The return of perennial grasses and the reduction or elimination of hard pan (clay pan) areas means the property is able to be grazed for a significantly longer period of time during a dry period. As agistment cattle are currently used on the property, the property can be destocked very quickly to match stocking rate to carrying capacity as required.

The farm stay operation is able to continually provide supplementary income during the dry periods.

What do you see as the future challenges for the business?

- To increase profits to enable employment of some casual staff so that the current workload can be decreased.
- Fitting everything into our lives that we want to do!

What plans do you have for the business in the future?

- To breed our own line of cattle and produce own bulls.
- To potentially buy another property.
- To expand Bokhara Hutz.

How do you keep motivated in an ever changing environment?

Graham and Cathy set goals and employ a business coach. They have a phone link up once a month and a meeting every three months with their business coach. Often their accountant joins these meetings.

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