

A scenic rural landscape featuring a stream flowing through a lush green field. In the background, there is a dense line of trees under a cloudy sky. A large blue semi-transparent box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title text.

Case study 2: John and Isabelle Atkinson

Remnants for a sustainable future: farming in a biodiversity hotspot

John and Isabelle Atkinson’s farm contains extensive native remnants. Active management of the property for conservation ensures they will remain into the future – for everyone’s benefit.

A devil’s playground

“Maitland” – John and Isabelle Atkinson’s farm – is rugged country. The property is situated within the Tasmanian Midlands – a nationally recognised ‘biodiversity hotspot’ and one of Australia’s most biologically rich, yet threatened, natural areas. The Tasmanian Midlands are characterised by undulating hills with a variety of soil types combined with relatively low rainfall. These features create a unique mosaic of forests, woodlands and grasslands, which support diverse flora and fauna.

Some two-thirds of John and Isabelle’s farm is comprised of native vegetation. These remnants provide important refuge for a range of threatened species. In spring, the bush transforms as heaths and wattles flower, and native orchids and wildflowers emerge. Endangered Tasmanian Wedge-tailed Eagles keep a watchful eye overhead, while Spot-tailed Quolls forage below.

Over the years, John and Isabelle have observed the endangered Tasmanian Devil decline due to the facial tumour disease. However, this iconic species appears to be recovering, with devils now reproducing on the property, providing hope that they will thrive into the future.



Tasmanian Devil. Photo: Dave Watts.

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John suspects that the key to the health of their local devil population, and that of many other threatened species, is the expansive native forests which comprise the majority of the farm. “A lot of the species have remained because there are large tracts of suitable habitat, which has been managed for its continuation - so it remains a healthy tract of native habitat”.

Managed for everyone’s benefit

John and Isabelle are passionate about farming with a focus on animal welfare and environmental sustainability. John grew up on the family farm – his parents, David and Brenda, initiated and drove early conservation efforts on the property. Isabelle’s background is in environmental chemistry and international education. They have carefully researched and considered their farming strategy to align with their values.



John and Isabelle Atkinson. Photo: Alex Maisey.

David and Brenda were conservation minded: they carefully managed grazing pressure and set out to protect the remnant vegetation, a strategy that John and Isabelle have continued. “We’ve pushed over the years to value the native vegetation - it’s managed for more than its grazing value”, says John. John is quick to point out that they are not alone in this endeavour. “In a lot of farming, the bush and the remnants are managed for everyone’s benefit”.

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Today, John and Isabelle spend considerable time and resources proactively managing their farm for conservation. A significant portion of their budget is spent controlling Gorse, a major environmental weed. Small areas of the property, such as creek lines, are fenced off and revegetated, and the vast majority is carefully grazed for both production and environmental outcomes.

John and Isabelle believe that grazed land needs a recovery period to remain viable. Stocking rates are kept low. Most of the native vegetation is spelled for three months over the spring and summer period, to give the grass time to flower, seed and reproduce. Vegetation and salinity are monitored to ensure that grazing is not having detrimental effects. If there are signs of overgrazing, the land is destocked accordingly.

To John and Isabelle, Maitland is a productive and viable commercial business because of, not despite, their focus on sustainability. They believe that active environmental management goes hand-in-hand with wool production. “Because we have such large tracts of native forest, we can’t just operate on the rest of our land. The forest still has to be productive, and for that, it has to be maintained in a healthy state”, said John.

Can’t lock it up and throw away the key

John and Isabelle have recently acquired some additional land. They observed that the exclusion of stock for long periods had caused native plant species to succumb to pressure from weed invasion or feral herbivores. To them, the lessons are clear: “For a lot of this country, vegetation needs to be actively managed. It’s not a matter of simply locking it up and throwing away the key.”

Consequently, they feel that programs that fund the ongoing management of native vegetation on private land are particularly important. These strategies not only ensure that the land remains viable for grazing, but also that conservation becomes a priority for farmers - and remains so into the long term. “It has been a tricky one” said John, pointing out that historically, it has not always been clear to farmers whether removing or maintaining native remnants was a better commercial option.

One strategy to address this is through stewardship agreements.

John and Isabelle have agreements in place with the Midlands Conservation Fund, a private fund run by Tasmanian Land Conservancy and Bush Heritage Australia. Under this agreement, the land is managed for both production (i.e., grazing) and conservation. If they meet Key Performance Indicators relating to conservation outcomes, they receive a fixed annual payment from the Midlands Conservation Fund which enables John and Isabelle to continue their conservation work.

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Wedge-tailed Eagle. Photo: Chris Tzaros.

An extra hour's sleep at night

For John and Isabelle, managing their land to support conservation is a no-brainer. Farming with a conservation focus, which also maintains healthy, viable grazing land, provides them with peace of mind and assurance of the long-term sustainability for their business. They feel there are also clear animal welfare and well-recognised financial benefits. “It’s almost guaranteed to aid production”, said Isabelle.

However, they highlighted that several questions about the benefits of conservation-focused farming remain unanswered. Explicitly quantifying the financial benefits of their farming strategy remains an important priority for John and Isabelle. That’s why they jumped at the chance to be part of *Farming for the Future*, a multi-year study – the biggest of its kind in the world – that aims to quantify the contribution of different types of natural resources (‘natural capital’) to profitability across hundreds of Australian farms. With this new insight, John and Isabelle – and other farmers – will be able to make more informed decisions about how to best manage their land for both its health and farm profit.

In the meantime, they enjoy the wellbeing and lifestyle benefits that come from living and working on healthy land. “It’s rewarding to work in an environment that is healthy, balanced, and self-sustaining. To achieve those levels of balance and co-existence is one of our goals”, said Isabelle. “How you quantify that, I don’t know – you get an extra hour sleep at night!”

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Farming for the Future (post-script)

While producers have long known that a farm's natural capital will influence productivity and profitability, that relationship has yet to be properly quantified at scale. Farming for the Future is looking to change that, through research and the development of tools that will enable producers to bring their natural capital onto their farm balance sheets. AWI has signed up as a partner of Farming for the Future, ensuring that the interests of wool growers are well-represented in the research.

Name of Farmers: John and Isabelle Atkinson

Name of Property: Maitland

Location and size: Maitland – 2000 ha near Campbell Town; The Forest – 1840 ha near Conara.

Type of farm: Mixed enterprises – sheep and cropping: superfine merino wool (16.3 micron), pharmaceutical poppies, seeds (hemp, carrot, clover, grass), cereals (wheat, barley). 100 ha of irrigated ground.

Size of flock and break down of breeds/types: 5,700 head merino including 1,900 breeding ewes.

Type of wool grown: Superfine merino wool (16.3 micron ave)

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