



Holistic approach shapes farming and family life

James and Donna Winter-Irving, along with James' brother Andrew and his wife Sandra run Boosey Creek Partnership, which comprises two properties 12km apart. Both properties have an average rainfall of 500mm. Barong is 25ha of irrigated lucerne, pasture and companion crops on fertile, alluvial silt and sand soil with remnant and regenerating river redgums by Nagambie Lake. It is used to finish lambs for market. The Burnt Creek property comprises of 800ha and another 400ha of leased land. The landscape is creek-line and plains grassy woodland with alluvial clay, loam, silt and sand. Vegetation is river red gum, grey box, grasses and sedges. The land is used for breeding a self-replacing Corriedale flock of 2000 ewes and 2500 lambs for prime lamb and wool production.

In 2016/17 the Winter-Irvings found themselves "back in the classroom" at Tatura at a Holistic Management Course delivered by Brian Wehlburg from Inside Outside Management and supported by Goulburn Murray Landcare and Goulburn Broken Catchment Management.

Holistic management is a process of decision-making and planning that gives people the insights and management tools needed to understand nature, resulting in better, more informed decisions that balance key social, environmental and financial considerations.

James and Donna were already very aware of their responsibility to care for the environment as well as the interconnectedness of systems but had a number of questions about farming practices they weren't sure how to address them.

Some of those questions were:

- What benefit is the continuous use and cost of fertilizer and chemical?
- How can animal health improve naturally without products e.g. drench?
- Is it necessary to burn / what else can be done?
- Why are we cropping when its not profitable and depleting the soil?
- How can we grow more grass and reduce compaction?

"The course was overwhelming to start with but by the end we were convinced this was a model for working 'smarter not harder', " James said.

"Although there is still so much to learn we now have a support network to share the journey. Those in our support network apply the same principles of decision making and management regardless of varying holistic contexts, climates, landscapes and enterprises. We just adapt. The course was life changing and we have decided we will shape a life for ourselves and our four sons according to our holistic context."

The Winter-Irvings now collect and record data for monitoring biological landscape function because "if you don't know what you've got you can't know what you are aiming for."

They are also:

- aiming for 100% groundcover preferably with plants and/or litter 100% of the time with mixed species cover crops to prime the soil for natural grasslands;
- grazing sheep in one mob for seven months and only split for lambing - previously five mobs were run;
- grazing plans are prepared in April and November charting stock movement, activities and changes;
- synthetic fertiliser has been reduced by 70% with the goal of eliminating its use completely;
- weeds are treated as green plants to be managed with grazing as the first option.
- retaining nutrients on the farm (eg. keeping stubble) to cycle and build soil microbial activity;
- triticale mono-cropping has been reduced to 30ha;
- increasing plant species and age biodiversity across the landscape; and
- lucerne haymaking has been reduced by 50%.

While only in the second year of holistically managing their farm Donna and James are convinced it's the way forward.

"It's early days yet but we are excited because we already have more money in the bank and lots more litter cover across the whole farm," James said. "As food and fibre producers we can validate our role in reducing climate change and regenerating land - not contributing to its destruction. We would like to encourage more young people to seek training in holistic management."

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