

Holistic approach transforms Kimberley

Landline - 9 July, 2000

Reporter: Peter Lewis

An emigrant couple in Western Australia's Kimberley has turned a 750 square-kilometre 'backpaddock' into a sustainable cattle and environmental tourism operation.

Chris and Jacquie Henggeler have transformed their lot, Kachana, using holistic farming techniques which Mr Henggeler's father pioneered.

When the couple, Swiss emigrants, bought Kachana, it was suffering from severe erosion and did not seem fit to run a cattle herd.

But the Henggelers had a dream to restore the degraded landscape, build up a commercial cattle herd and combine it with environmental tourism to ensure sustainable production.

They took an approach pioneered four decades ago by Mr Henggeler's father. Back then, it was an alternative approach to agriculture which challenged orthodox land-use strategies; nowadays it is called 'holistic management'.

'Holistic management' focuses decision-making on a single holistic goal. The approach assumes that anyone can turn around the fortunes of their farm in a way that is both economically and environmentally sustainable.

Their vision is starting to come to fruition: they have noticed a remarkable improvement in their pastures as well as the condition of their cattle.

Mr Henggeler says the approach can help combat widespread land degradation.

"I think everybody that I've met, be it in Europe, or the [United] States and in Australia are finding that the cost of production is going up and yield is going down," he said.

"Really the underlying cause is that we are losing the vitality of our soils. Unless we start addressing the root cause, which appears to be diminishing biodiversity, things won't get any easier."

The Henggelers settled on the backpaddock of the El Questro cattle station for one major reason: it had water all year round.

"Everywhere I'd been working across northern Australia, water seemed to be the limiting factor and here we had flowing water all year round," Mr Henggeler said.

The Henggeler set themselves three major goals:

- To preserve the pristine areas by fencing out stock and eliminating vermin and feral animals.
- To better manage the rangelands, which involved virtually destocking the property and then using the small remaining mob, some 60 head of cattle, as a management tool.
- Repairing the damage uncontrolled grazing had caused: erosion and loss of biodiversity.

Their efforts have seen a remarkable transformation in the landscape.

But Mr Henggeler says the land development would not have been possible without tourism.

"Without the tourist potential, I don't think I would have started this," he said.

"The idea was to use tourism to subsidise the pastoral side of things, to establish what this country is capable of producing without being in a position of having to extract more than this country is capable of extracting.

"We are a long way off finding what this country is capable of," he said.

The Henggeler call their brand of tourism 'enviro-tourism' and differentiate it from 'eco-tourism'. They believe 'enviro-tourism' places a higher value on the environment.

"Our mission is to help promote environmental literacy to the broader community," Mr Henggeler said.

They have three main objectives for their enviro-tourism venture:

- To convey the principles of environmental literacy to the broader community.
- To fund the revitalisation of Kachana's rangeland and rebuild its biodiversity.
- To contribute to the development of the land's production potential.

"In a practical manner we demonstrate how we as individuals with our daily actions and inactions have an influence on the quality of life that awaits future generations," Mr Henggeler said.

The couple charge their visitors an environmental levy of \$25 a night.

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