

SE opinion
HD **A passion for innovation**
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A MOB of grey roos throw themselves under barbed wire in retreat and dust spews from the undercarriage of the bus as we hurtle along the dirt road toward Wambiana Station.

The **group** of Young Carbon Farmers are about to meet the Lyons family, John and Rhonda, their son Michael and his wife Michelle and their children. Michael was awarded a 2014 Nuffield Scholarship and has chosen to study the management of natural resources and ways to create a highly profitable grazing business. He's nicked off overseas to expand his education on the complex subject, leaving Michelle and his parents to (very capably) handle our tour of the **property**.

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Dusk at Wambiana is all kinds of beautiful: the sky fills with pink, purple and blue and cockatoos fly low overhead, shrieking like a bunch of injured banshees. Their call is a comfort, an obnoxious alarm sounding the end of a huge day and we set up camp and make our way over to the homestead for dinner and a **chinwag**.

The Lyons family are incredibly accommodating and their warmth and kindness spread throughout the **group** - before we know it we're sitting on the lawn under the stars, cackling away at the days events. A few glasses of water later and I have to sneak off to jot down a few notes before they slip my mind like a methane-filled bovine belch.

"As you sow, so shall you reap" " Michelle Lyons, Wambiana Station

Morning comes and the full beauty of Wambiana is revealed in broad daylight " a vast landscape, 23,000 hectares of cattle grazing country.

Located 70km south west of Charters Towers, Michelle says Wambiana is almost considered "suburbia" in comparison to other northern stations " but this fact doesn't make the family exempt from having to deal with, among other things, reduced access during the wet season and a lack of educational facilities for their children.

"Work with nature, not against it" " John Lyons, Wambiana"

The Lyons family have been working very closely with Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) research staff for the past 16 years, breaking part of their **property** into 10 paddocks as part of the Wambiana Grazing Trial. The trial aims to compare the ability of different grazing strategies to cope with rainfall variability and develop new, practical grazing strategies. Innovation comes naturally to this family, with camels integrated onto the farm as part of a weed management strategy. Between this and general **property** maintenance, I wonder how they have any energy left at the end of the day. It's a behemoth task and everyone is expected to pull their weight.

DAFF research scientists Peter O'Reagain and John Bushell head the Wambiana trial with both men of the belief that many producers in the north have been pressured by peers and uneducated outsiders to stock higher rates of cattle on their properties in the quest for financial reward.

"Dead cat bounce" " Peter O'Reagain, DAFF research scientist

Peter said recent rain has seen a general cover on the ground of grass but this is where some can start to make bad decisions and that cosmetic ground cover can present producers with the false hope that

the country has "bounced back". We head to one of the trial paddocks, it's been completely pillaged of all its pasture and is now struggling with the widespread encroachment of current bush which occupies 30 per cent of the trial **site** among other woody weeds. The team have also trialled the use of controlled fire application with varied results. Some parcels of land have used fire to effectively control the structure of woody species.

The northern research scientists have found an incredibly diverse range of flora and fauna on both Wambiana and Trafalgar and, just as Peter starts to discuss this, tour member Josh Fittler whispers for my attention. A tiny skink has crawled onto his arm. He holds it dead steady and I grab my camera. This landscape, even in the driest season, is teeming with wildlife. It's refreshing to see paddocks which have avoided being overgrazed and full of old growth trees. The Lyons and Landsberg families are the benchmark and an incredible source of knowledge for the young producers. This is how to play the game.

"You can't control the prices but we can control the production of a competitive product" " Roger Landsberg, Trafalgar Station

Next door sits Trafalgar Station, 33,000ha of savanna woodland owned and run by Roger and Jenny Landsberg, whose family have been on this patch of land almost as long as the Lyons', 101 years. They know this country like the back of their hand and, like their neighbours, they want to create a sustainable future for themselves and the beef industry.

Roger reckons the days of getting on a horse and chasing a few cows are gone and producers need to be looking for better ways to invest in **property** management.

He takes us on a short tour of his **property** " he diligently spends 15-20 per cent of his **property** every year, regardless of weather or stocking rates.

He said it's incredibly important to spend some time developing a succession and/or retirement plan because "some things don't always go the way you plan". I think that sometimes the hardest conversations to have are the most important and talking to your family about your business and planning for when you're not there or what you hope to achieve in the future (if you decide not to kick the bucket) is so much better than leaving them to it without you.

With the wet season almost over and little hope of any major rain fall, Roger and Jenny have kept their eye on the ball and are stocking their paddocks conservatively.

"In my father's day, the cattle had the decency to die and take the pressure off the landscape" " Roger Landsberg, Trafalgar Station

Roger said the better the technology, the more pressure it puts on the landscape because of the ability to increase and maintain stocking rates. Our food production is growing every day and we need to be extremely aware of how to maintain this level of productivity on a patch of land that won't necessarily be able to support it.

"Rangeland production can have conservation values and unless you equip yourself with that knowledge, you won't survive" " Roger Landsberg, Trafalgar Station

Roger reckons agriculture is being forced into overseas, Asian-based, markets and no government has the balls to make a national vision happen... of course, I'm paraphrasing. We need to build a market at home without flooding it with goods. We need to keep the price of produce competitive and we need to build a hope for the future of "Australian made". Producers are begging for a secure future and that's exactly what they deserve. They work through thick and thin and for no reward " for us.

"We drilled down about 70 metres and found water and there was sharks swimming in it" " Roger Landsberg, Trafalgar Station

The north is experiencing one of the worst droughts on record and Trafalgar's home dam is almost empty. Roger, pushing 60, will soon have to roll out 4 kilometres of poly pipe to pump water for the homestead.

His family isn't alone " 80 per cent of the state is feeling his pain. Unfortunately, safety in numbers isn't always a good thing and with the worsening of the dry, the heavier hearts sink. I wish I could do something. I wish I could close my eyes and just the thought would bring along much needed wet weather. The cattle market is in tatters " with large numbers still flooding the saleyards, forcing prices down. It's a buyers' market but what producer can afford even the cheapest beast? It starts me thinking - where to from here?

Carbon farming is only one step in a long list of changes that need to be made to the industry. The government is implementing incentives " like "credits" as part of the Carbon Farming Initiative (CFI) " but many don't trust that a return will be made on the investment, so they refuse to entertain the idea. Basically, when it comes down to it, producers need to take responsibility for hundreds of years of land clearing which has caused erosion, not to mention overstocking.

For those still wondering what the CFI is all about " producers can earn carbon credits by storing carbon or reducing greenhouse gas emissions on the land. These credits can then be **sold** to people and businesses wishing to offset their emissions. Two sentences. Why do I still feel overwhelmed by information?

"I was quite worried about going out into the elements with my delicate nature" " Ben Graham, Future Farmers Network general manager

The Young Carbon Farmers are wrapping up day three and starting to think about what they'll take away from this experience. What they'll implement and how much knowledge they'll share with their peers.

It's been an incredible experience for me to be invited along on the journey. As not only as a journalist but also the daughter of beef producers, all I want to do is go straight home and start talking to my parents about ways in which we can become involved in carbon farming, and if not the CFI itself, perhaps just changing the operation to help cut emissions... or maybe just fix the gate that's being held together by baling twine. One step at a time.

It's been a jam-packed three days and although I'm washed out and tired, I am filled with a fiery passion " I want to grab this feeling that the tour has ignited in me and spread the word of agricultural innovation.

PS. A big shout out to Mumma Brunner (aka Young Carbon Farmers project manager, Sefton and Associates consultant and leader of the pack " Heidi Brunner) for welcoming me onto the tour with open arms and running the show like a well oiled machine. I don't think I've ever been on time to so many consecutive events in my life. It was an absolute pleasure.

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