

# [***Why sharing landholder knowledge can be key to improving soil health***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B90-D0F1-JD34-V19C-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Community engagement, learning, and curiosity about ***soil*** management are still crucial for farmers willing to innovate for ecosystem restoration on their land.

That's according to Agrinew rural development specialist Gillian Stewart, Ballan, who spent six years in Samoa working with rural communities overseas before recently moving to her base at Pheonix Park.

"I was working with a certified organic grower group, which consisted of around 600 families, and part of that work was helping support [Samoa's] international organic status," she said.

Ms Stewart worked with local landholders in the Pacific country, who had been practicing traditional, unbroken farming practices for generations.

She said such methods were underpinned by incredible ***soil health***.

It influenced her to join a ***soil*** restoration farming network throughout the COVID pandemic, which she would log into via Zoom while "sitting under a coconut tree or by a lagoon".

"I used to listen to these incredible minds who were back here in Australia, and I never felt like I had a lot to contribute to it at the time, but I listened closely to what everybody was up to, and that has served me really well now."

Ms Stewart said it spurred her to begin her rural consultancy business when she returned home, but to also reinvigorate Pheonix Park after it closed during the pandemic.

Ms Stewart said both roles were "a seven-day-a-week job", but she was motivated to make the park a hub for rural people to learn and discuss innovative ideas in agriculture.

The park hosts a wide array of events, but her passion was "farmer learning and participatory" events.

"I enjoy sharing knowledge and doing these things in a less formal way, but sometimes I hope we can create something in that rural learning context that we can take forward as a community," she said.

"As a young person I cut my teeth in the Mallee and then up in western Queensland, watching people really tap into their minds and talents and then sharing it," she said.

"Only good things can come from that type of experience, and I just continued in that space for a long time before I headed overseas and coming back."

***Soil*** Restoration Farming coach and facilitator Rochelle Armstrong, Baranduda, said farmers were keen to change practices, but many needed help in their current farming systems.

She has focused a lot of her work on ***soil health*** and said there were some outdated norms in how farmers tackled deficiencies in their ***soil*** via fertiliser application.

"What we're learning is there's a biological aspect to the ***soil*** that completely changes the game," she said.

"When you consider that biology, meaning just the microbes and macro life in the ***soil***, is cycling nutrients, we have a whole different focus on how to increase ***soil health***.

"So when we start focusing on increasing the life in the ***soil***... we're farming for life in the ***soil*** rather than focusing on the chemistry."

Ms Armstrong is part of the organising team for the Ray Generate 2024 Conference, which will take place at Pheonix Park during the first week of March.

She said the event, featuring US-based ***soil*** scientist Ray Archuleta, will be a hands-on learning experience in regenerative agriculture focusing on biomimicry or mimicking nature to bring small water cycles back into the land.

"We're basically here to support education, consulting, and coaching in the regenerative space," she said.

"It's really about a change in mindset or a paradigm shift that's required, and sometimes that takes [a lot] of thinking it out with other farmers

"The goal is focusing on biomimicry and farming in a way that is in tune with nature that'll give you landscape restoration for the next generation and for generations to come."

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