

# LESSONS IN ADVERSITY

*With a reputation for doing things differently, Annabel Walsh has nurtured native perennial pastures to reinvigorate Moorna Station.*

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

On a hot February afternoon, Annabel Walsh steps from her HiLux onto the hard grey dirt of Moorna Station. Walking in off the road, the western New South Wales grazier crouches to look at new growth emerging from the parched earth. “They really are amazing,” Annabel says, running her fingers through the soft seed heads of bottle wash grass swaying gently in the breeze.

Although Moorna recorded 50 millimetres a month previously, a heatwave has sucked precious soil moisture into the atmosphere. Even so, a carpet of golden seed heads spreads across the landscape, filling gaps between perennial saltbush and bluebush that pepper the station’s pancake-flat paddocks. “They need more rain, but at least they’ve seeded,” says Annabel, walking back to her ute. “Beautiful little seeds.”

Continuous grazing since the 1850s has taken its toll on the 26,000 hectares of red-gum forests, black box flood plains and salt land vegetation of Moorna. A property that once shore 100,000 Merinos a season, their fleeces shipped by paddle-steamer to Adelaide, had been reduced to a carrying capacity of 10,000 dry-sheep equivalents when Annabel and husband John “Horrie” Walsh took over in 1983. “People come here and they don’t fully realise the impact of past management, right from settlement,” Annabel says. “European farming systems and river management engineering has not suited our Australian landscapes.”

Hugging the northern banks of the Murray River, 30 kilometres west of Wentworth, the flood plain paddocks of Moorna today appear almost barren. A closer look reveals something extraordinary. Native perennial mulka grasses and bottle washes, river couch, bend grass, yam daisies, samphire, pigface and glasswort have rebounded. “The grasses have been my teachers,” says Annabel,

recalling the chain of events that led to her mission to regenerate Moorna’s native perennial pastures.

By 1986, the Walshes were well aware of rising salinity and lamb losses on their property. Along with neighbours, they had approached the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) to investigate issues with the heightening of nearby Lake Victoria. “They kept supercharging the lake and we could see the road to Lake Victoria was as white as snow,” Annabel says. “It was just bringing the salt right up to the surface.”

As authorities investigated salinity issues, the wool industry collapsed and Moorna’s future looked bleak. Indigenous land claims and talk of converting huge tracts of Murray River country to national parks added to the uncertainty. Then, in September 1992, Annabel’s world was turned upside down. “That was when John had his accident,” she says quietly of the car accident that left her husband fighting for his life with serious brain injuries.

Six months later, with John still in a coma 400km away at Royal Adelaide Hospital and Annabel at home on Moorna with three young children – Alister, 10, Johnny, 8, and Hugh, 3 – the MDBA called a meeting of local pastoralists. “They showed us a map which showed that Moorna would be very badly salinised by 2025,” Annabel says. The authorities proposed several options, including deep drainage and tree planting, or buying Moorna and other properties around Lake Victoria – essentially buying the problem.

After the meeting, Annabel resolved to find a solution. “Horrie was still unconscious, but I still felt that he was going to come around,” she says. “I had a lot on my plate, but the main thing was we wanted to bring the kids up here on Moorna and I wanted to find a way to sort this out.” Giving up was not an

*Annabel Walsh watches the sun set on one of Moorna’s regenerated loam ridges.*





*Annabel, with brother Douglas and mother Joyce, on her childhood property in Tasmania, circa 1966. OPPOSITE: Annabel collects salt from one of Moorna's salt-affected lake beds.*

option. "For what I'd just been through, this was an easy one to solve," she says. "I guess that's where my mum kicked in."

A radio announcer for ABC Tasmania throughout World War II, Joyce White later spent five years working as ABC's New Guinea correspondent. "Mum was really 'out there,'" Annabel says. "She was 40 when she had me; she was a career woman, she'd stood for parliament, she was on the first executive of the Liberal Party, she worked with Menzies and Casey. There were never any hurdles for Mum, and I think that's probably one of the things that she instilled in us."

It was a lesson Annabel was forced to put into action from a young age. Growing up with brother Douglas on the family's property Acton, a 320ha mixed-farming operation just east of Hobart, Annabel's childhood was rocked when her father Alan died when she was just 15 years old. It was a major blow for the young girl who struggled at school with dyslexia but loved the freedom and open spaces of the farm. "I was like dad's little shadow," she says. Annabel left school soon after to run a business she had established years earlier, agisting horses for schoolmates.

The business led to a passion for equestrian competition, and Annabel travelled the world, spending two years in Ireland, and later grooming for the Australian team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Although she'd met John in Tasmania, it wasn't until a move to the mainland that romance blossomed. By 1977, the couple were married and farming at Lucindale in South Australia's south-east. They later bought property near Salt Creek, on the Coorong, before selling to move to Moorna in 1983. "Horrie was always

keen to own a pastoral property," Annabel says.

Fast forward 14 years and the Walshes' plans were in tatters. John had been transferred from Adelaide to Wentworth Hospital, but it was now clear he would not return to Moorna. With the MDBA buying properties across the district, Annabel looked for technical fixes, planting trees, digging drains, anything that could reduce salinity. "But I came to the realisation that there were no technical fixes, only working with the natural systems," she says. She read books, attended conferences and contacted experts in plant biology and landscape function.

Over the years the quest for knowledge has led Annabel to the United States, Argentina, South Africa and, more recently, Mongolia. She's held positions with the Lower Murray-Darling Catchment Management Authority, the Lake Victoria Rangelands Management Action Plan and the Australian Rangelands Society, and is current chair of the Stipa Native Grasses Association, a farmer-driven not-for-profit with a mission to promote functioning landscapes using native perennial grasses as pastures and part of cropping systems.

In the early days, however, it was just Annabel and the land as she grappled with Moorna's problems. Rest and rotation of paddocks was a critical initial step. "I had eight paddocks and I worked out I could rotate so that every paddock got 10 months off," she says. Later, she learned which paddocks needed more and which needed less. Annabel collected grass seeds from regenerated areas and spread them across the station. Following one particularly good summer germination, she used a petrol leaf blower to fill 30 black garbage bags with seed, later spreading



it en masse. Stock rates were tweaked to better reflect variations in Moorna's average rainfall of 225mm. If annual rainfall was half the average, half the stock were offloaded. "You're much better off to sell, and we've done that for a number of years now," she says. In 2006, she transitioned the flock from Merinos to Dorpers and the station now supports 2000 lambing ewes.

And tying it all together, says Annabel, is carbon. "I realised that plants can sequester enormous amounts of carbon," she says. "Most plants have more under the ground than they do above the ground, but if you continue grazing plants off at a lower height, they never get much of a root system, damaging their ability to sequester carbon and reducing the complexity of the soil flora and fauna to such a state that all plants can really grow is prickly stuff." By allowing native grasses to grow, then grazing them sustainably with long recovery periods, Annabel believes grazing can significantly improve the land. "It's been proven that land has to be pruned; it has to be cycled. You have to create disturbance, either by grazing or trampling." As carbon is returned, soils become more complex, healthier and more productive, benefiting business and the environment. "The biggest challenge is really to give people a vision of the capacity of the landscape because they don't know what those soils are capable of," Annabel says.

Annabel's middle son, Johnny, a helicopter pilot based in Mildura, says his mother's willingness to do things differently has not always been met with enthusiasm. "A lot would say she's been ahead of her time with some things, especially how she wants to manage the land, and that at times flies in the face of tradition," he says. Throughout the challenges, however, Johnny

says his mother's determination has remained steadfast. "She likes a challenge and once she focuses on something it's pretty rare for her to lose sight of what she's set her mind on."

Despite her successes, Annabel admits ongoing challenges, including changes to red tape governing the cropping of the station's lake beds that mean the wheels are now in motion for the partial sale of Moorna. Twenty-four years after his accident, John Walsh remains at Wentworth District Hospital. Rather than dwell on the pending sale, Annabel is optimistic about the future. "I actually feel like I'm not giving up; I'm just moving to a different stage," she says. "Everything I've learnt here, I've now got this network where I can work with people who I love working with and we can do stuff all over the place, locally and internationally."

Chief executive officer of the Stipa Native Grasses Association, Graeme Hand, has no doubt the organisation's chair is the woman to sell the story of native perennial pastures. "She actually relates to the landscape and she has an intuitive understanding of how to fix things," Graeme says. "She's just got that ability to process and absorb and generate ideas, and she's got the ability to make things happen." Annabel's humble nature belies the extent of her achievements. "Her humility with what she's done, is quite extraordinary, really," Graeme says.

As dusk cloaks Moorna's paddocks in shadow, Annabel leans on her HiLux, water rushing through a nearby regulator where pelicans circle in search of fish. "The plants have been my teachers," she says. "They taught me how important adaption is to the boom and bust environment that we have in Australia, and that has been one hell of a lesson."



Annabel inspects freshly germinated bottlewash grass on one of Moorna's river paddocks. OPPOSITE: Annabel and her sons (l-r) Alister, Johnny and Hugh.