

Dairying the Green Way

MICHAEL AND ANNE GREEN TOORA, SOUTH GIPPSLAND VICTORIA

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168 hectares

435 dairy cows

On this farm since 1981

River flats and steep hillside within
the Corner Inlet catchment



When you are working around the place with trees everywhere, it just makes you feel better that you have done all this work, it is so much of an improvement on the way it used to be.

Dairy farmers wanting to revegetate sections of their properties often need a helping hand, and that's just what Michael and Anne Green got from the local community.

Prisoners on work programs, volunteers from environment groups and local school children have all contributed to the remarkable transformation of their Toora farm.

When Michael and Anne bought Franklin Downs in 1981, they wanted to change the way the farm was operating, but barely knew where to start.

The sheer size of the blackberry and hawthorn bushes meant it was going to be a major operation to tackle the environmental problems, but that's easier said than done when you are trying to run a dairy farm and raise a young family. "It was pretty bare, I think in the original 120 acres there were five paddocks with no water reticulation at all," Michael said.

"We had river water for the cows on the riverside and we had two dams on the other side, so the river was used as a watering point - where ever the cows could get to it they did. It was pretty uncontrollable."

With the hawthorn bushes proving to be particularly obnoxious, the Greens found help from an unexpected quarter. The now defunct Wron Wron Prison was looking for community projects for its inmates. Helping clear hawthorn bushes from the farm's waterways certainly met the criteria.

Once the weeds were out, fences were erected and native plants were ready to be put in the ground.

"We had children from Toora and Foster Primary Schools come out and plant. I sometimes wonder if they ever remember that."

A founding member of the Franklin River Landcare Group, Michael knows the benefits of community action when it comes to tackling major projects. "When we formed our Landcare group, our objective was to replant the river and the ridge here down to Port Franklin," he said. "I remember our inaugural president of Landcare saying that he wanted to leave the place better for our kids and grandkids and felt that planting trees was the most important environmental thing he could see that needed doing."

The revegetation projects do far more than provide vital habitat for birds and other native wildlife. Keeping cows out of waterways and preventing nutrient run-off has a major affect on water quality in the immediate area and further downstream.

With the environmentally sensitive Corner Inlet just a short paddle downstream, the Greens were well aware of the impact their farm was having on the bigger picture.

"Effluent re-use is an ongoing development," Michael said, "When we built the dairy we put in a solids trap and the effluent now goes back on the paddocks."

The riparian plantings have played a major role in containing nutrients to the farm. "It has helped to keep all the rubbish out of the waterways, we now have a buffer zone between the paddock and the waterway," Michael said.

With barely a native tree on the property when they bought Franklin Downs, it was hardly surprising that native animals were scarce. Replacing willows with eucalypts and wattles has seen birds come back in abundance, while planting understorey has provided habitat for a variety of native creatures, including koalas and wombats.

While the birds and marsupials are happy, so are the cows, who have shelter and improved pasture from the well-established plantings. "Even just to walk out the back-door beforehand, you would be blown away, but now you can walk outside and you wouldn't notice the wind because we have the shelter-belt all the way round the river and behind the cow shed," Michael said. "It protects pasture as well, if it's being blown all the time it doesn't grow so freely."

But it's Michael and Anne who derive the most pleasure from watching the changes to the landscape that have resulted from all their hard work. "When you are working around the place with trees everywhere, it just make you feel better that you have done all this work, it is so much of an improvement on the way it used to be," Michael said.



The Franklin River has been fenced, revegetated & protected.

Written by Danny Buttler for GippsDairy 2012.
With Thanks to Michael and Anne Green.



Michael & Anne Green have been involved in Landcare for many years and are reaping the benefits of their hard work. Trees provide shelter for dairy cows & pastures. Wildlife has returned to the property in abundance.

It wasn't always easy being a Green

When the family started revegetating their property in the late 1980s, they not only had to deal with formidable environmental problems, they also had to cope with neighbours who were sceptical or downright unhelpful.

"I remember when we first started taking the willows out, someone came along and said 'what are you doing? You're raping the land!' - now look at it," Michael said.

"The willows grew in the river and they were a curse, because they changed the stream flow and caused erosion."

The Green's original farm was only about a quarter of its current size. There were various neighbours to deal with and a variety of attitudes towards creating better waterways and native habitat on dairy farms.

"When we started, we couldn't get the neighbours to do it, but eventually we either bought the land or the others did their bit," Michael said. "So as a result, this section right down to Port Franklin is done." By done, he means a biodiversity corridor running from the foothills of the Strzelecki Ranges down to Corner Inlet.

In hindsight, it's easy to see the benefits that have flowed from the Green's foresight and commitment, but when the idea of giving up farmland – even a small percentage – for trees was first floated, not everyone thought it made sense.

"We had to fence off our river frontage which we paid a lease on, so people were frightened of losing that bit of land for grazing, they couldn't see the benefits would far outweigh what would be lost," Michael said. "But in the end, people saw the results and had a change of heart."



Anne & Michael Green on their Toora property, Corner Inlet & Wilson's Promontory can be seen in the background.