

Prosperity through Simplicity— *The Coughlans of Tarabah*

Michael and Anna Coughlan, along with their tribe of youngsters (Lily, Harry, Molly, Isabelle, and Emma), are among the world's greatest harvesters of sunlight. We first met them on a ranch tour that Daniela and I led through the Rocky Mountains in the summer of 2000, and in April of 2001 added their incredible property, Tarabah (on the plains of southwestern New South Wales), to the itinerary of another tour of Australia and New Zealand.

It was a good decision. Tarabah blew us away with its biological abundance, streamlined simplicity, herds of kangaroos, and 100 percent forage-based economic prosperity. And, at that time, they were just getting started in Holistic Management, having taken their first course with Australian Certified Educator Bruce Ward in 1997. The previous chapter (*first published in September of 2001*) highlights the lessons learned on that first visit. Much of the following chapter builds on what's happened since.

Building on Success

We made another trip to Tarabah in 2004 to witness their progress, and we've just had the opportunity to spend two weeks with Michael and Anna on a recent tour through Argentina. So, we're updated on their progress. In 2001, Tarabah carried 1,000 mother cows, close to 1,000 yearlings, and 10,000 Merino sheep on 45,000 acres (18,000 ha) with one full-time hired man (in addition to themselves). Today, five years later, the purchase of 5,000 adjacent acres (2,000 ha) has brought the total area to 50,000 (20,000 ha). Through the swapping of sheep and cattle stock units, total animal numbers now include 2,000 mother cows and, for much of the year, close to 2,000 yearlings, and Michael and Anna hint that there is still room for expansion. Total number of pastures has increased from 71 to 97, and they've decided that their one hired man was excessive, so they now do all the day-to-day work themselves.

In addition to Tarabah, the Coughlans also own another property a couple hours to the east, in a wetter, much more productive environment, called Moombril. Its 6,000 acres (2,400 ha) feeds another 1,000 cows and 1,000 yearlings, and everything stays humming with one half-time employee, in addition to a visit by Michael once every couple weeks. So, between Michael and Anna and the Moombril part-timer, 2 ½ full-time labor units manage to get all the day-to-day work accomplished on an outfit that at times of the year carries close to 6,000 cattle. That's what I mean by efficient.

No Frills Management

Now, back to Tarabah. With only a 17-inch (425-mm), winter-dominant rainfall pattern, the grazing on Tarabah is planned through a six-month, winter-spring growing season from early May through October (remember, we're in the southern hemisphere), and the dormant season includes the rest of the year from November through April. During the growing season, 90-day recovery periods are planned (resulting in most pastures receiving two grazings), and two herds are managed—mature cows and mixed sex yearlings. This results in average grazing periods of only two days. During the six-month dormant season, all the animals are put into one herd and moved through all 97 pastures, taking only one selection over the dry season.

If you've got 6,000 cattle and no help, it's tough to get too carried away with keeping herd records, monitoring calving, or running animals through a chute. The Coughlans have cut this sort of work back to the absolute minimum, and as you'll see,

the results speak for themselves. Calving now happens in June and July (instead of the area's traditional fall calving season in March and April), the middle of winter. But in their mild Mediterranean environment, winter isn't really winter. It's the beginning of the green season, with calves hitting the ground as grass growth gets under way. By the time the bulls go out on August 20, the cows have had at least two months of abundant green grass, and, despite the demands of lactation, are in prime shape to conceive.

Calving happens unassisted over the course of 45 days, and first calf heifers all calve in the same herd as the mature cows and at the same time. Calves are worked at three to four months of age, in late September and early October (when the bulls come out), before it gets too hot. They aren't touched again until weaning in late April, at nearly 11 months of age. Mature cows aren't preg checked. If they don't have a live calf at side by mid-August, just before the bulls go out, they are culled and sold.

So the main herd is worked once to sort off dry cows, then again six weeks later to work the calves, and that's it. The Tarabah cattle receive no vaccinations, no treatment for internal or external parasites, no mineral supplements—not even any salt. Tarabah is now certified organic, so they can't do a lot of that stuff anyway.

After weaning (which takes place right at the end of the dormant season), all the steers and heifers stay together right through the coming winter and spring growing season. The Coughlans emphasize that because this big herd of youngsters is born and raised together (and therefore have their social issues worked out), the common problem of steers riding heifers is nearly non-existent. The bulls actually go straight into this big herd of steers and heifers on August 20, with no problems at all, and just like the cows, they come out 45 days later.

During September and October, the steers are all marketed as grass-finished organic beef at a liveweight averaging 880 pounds (400 kg) at 16 months. This marketing happens right through the peak of their spring growing season, after these young cattle have made the best of the year's highest quality green grass, and before quality starts to decline into the summer. By early December (beginning of summer), all the steers are gone, and the heifers are preg checked. Those that are bred (average breed up on heifers is 78 percent over 45 days) go straight into the cow herd, and never come out again. The opens go down the road. The Coughlans don't need this many for replacements, but they remain in an expansion mode, so anything that catches stays at this point.

For every 100 mature cows put to the bull, 85-90 calves reach their first birthday. Given their hands-off approach, that's awfully good. It also indicates that their intensive management of the cow herd through calving is excellent, given that they are moving 2,000 head every 2-3 days with baby calves all over the place. In other words, they aren't orphaning many calves.

The key, Michael emphasizes, is to open gates and let them move themselves. The cattle are never actually moved—they voluntarily migrate through the property. The Coughlans just open and close gates to control the speed and direction of the migration. During calving especially, gates are left open behind the cows so those that are calving or those that have left a calf behind can catch up or go back if needed. All moves are always to adjacent pastures during this time. If a significant size group gets too far behind, they will often skip this group across a fence to a pasture the main mob is approaching, and get everything recombined when the big bunch arrives.

So, by early in the dormant season (which is also a very, very hot season, with average daytime highs typically over 104 F or 40 C), yearling steers and open heifers are all sold, all the females are bred up, every mature cow on the place has a calf at its side, and everything is in one herd. Now nothing needs to happen for another five

months when calves are weaned. Michael emphasizes one of the biggest advantages to shifting their calving to June-July is that no cattle working takes place in the searing months of summer.

Watering the Herd

Speaking of heat and summer, you may be wondering how in the world they manage to water one huge herd of lactating bovines without stress. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that their proposed land plan included 37 miles (59 km) of three-inch (75-mm) water line. At that time they were making do with creeks, windmills and small dams (many of which were filled by windmills), but that wasn't ideal. Now all of this pipe is in, plus another 6 miles (9.6 km) on the new 5,000-acre place. Water can be pumped from the main creek at the rate of 78,000 gallons (330,000 liters) per day. This volume can be sent to whatever water point the cattle are currently using. At most of these points, the water first enters a 30-foot (10-meter) long rectangular trough with a three-inch (75-mm) overflow hole at the other end. The water continuously runs through this trough, then overflows out the hole, into a pipe, and into an adjacent pond.

The Coughlans have found this to be the perfect combination for watering large herds. With only trough space available, lots of trough space is required to water several thousand animals. With only a dirt dam, water gets quickly fouled and water quality suffers. But with the availability of fresh running water in the trough, the cattle are happy to go and drink dirtier pond water as well (the level of fouling in this water is partly alleviated by the pumped water constantly overflowing into it).

And with the availability of the pond water, the necessity for lots of trough space is hugely reduced, and crowding problems are eliminated. If the pumping-pipe system breaks down, the ponds ensure that the cattle will still have access to water, which is good for the Coughlans' quality of sleep. Most of these water points also have an old windmill close by, and when the cattle are gone, the windmill is left on to keep the ponds full. The system is actually designed to handle up to 5,000 cattle in a single herd.

When we first visited the Coughlans in 2001, they were receiving approximately US\$.50/lb (\$1.10/kg) for their yearlings, and that was an all-time record high. With an unbelievably low cost of production of US\$.10/lb (\$.22/kg), they were understandably pretty comfortable and content with their profit margins. Now, five years later, cost of production is still the same, but price has risen to US\$.80/lb (\$1.76/kg) for a finished yearling (as a result of a continued market upswing combined with their organic premium). I'll let you do the math from there. Incidentally, every critter the Coughlans own is a straight Hereford. That's what I mean by prospering through simplicity.

Return of the Perennials

But, of course, no story is holistically complete without an account of the state of the land. Indeed, that's what the Coughlans are most eager to share. Because of the winter and spring concentration of precipitation, dryland wheat farming, and over a century of continuous grazing, vast tracts of land in southwestern New South Wales have lost their perennials and reverted to grasslands dominated by cool season annuals.

All this is starting to change on Tarabah. The Coughlans take photopoints every six months, and read transects every two to three years, and with this data (combined with everyday observation) are seeing some amazing things happen. For example, Kangaroo grass, a native warm season perennial of the genus *Themeda*, is making a comeback on parts Tarabah. It's nearly non-existent for miles in any other direction. The Coughlans have created the niche, and long-dormant *Themeda* seed has responded.

When they began managing holistically in 1997, they set the ambitious goal of achieving 100 percent ground cover; and, in Michael's words, "We are there." The duck-billed platypus in the creeks are increasing in abundance every year, and echidnas (little porcupine-looking critters) are making a comeback. During his entire childhood on Tarabah, Michael never saw an echidna, and last year he saw ten.

When I think of Tarabah, I think of the marginal reaction test. The Coughlans don't do anything that doesn't make a fantastic holistically sound return to their triple bottom line. And, as their example shows, if done consistently, the result is abundance, in every sense of the word. Another result is synergy. For example, despite spending no money on veterinary expenses, the Coughlans have no health issues with their animals. This is because nutrition is optimized with incredibly good grazing planning and implementation (which results in a constant fresh plate of forage), their calving season fits the environment, and the cattle are never stressed. If you can get what matters right, everything else falls into place.