

Land Studio

LAURA FISHER



LEFT: The “brush” weir at Umbiella, 2020. RIGHT: Peter Swain during his Welcome to Country at Snowgoose Farm. Photo: Bodhi Todd.



This article tells the story of our first experimental *Land Studio* camp held in the Capertee Valley in September 2020. The concept grew out of the *Artist Farmer Scientist* project. During our collaborations we’d been exposed to a lot of degraded farmland, and learnt that putting regenerative principles into practice was quite a juggle for farmers in the first few years. We often mused about how the wider community might support those farmers. As with the barn-raising and harvest traditions of the past, maybe there was a way to make labour-intensive tasks fun, social and culturally meaningful, and possibly even an educational opportunity for those who wanted to connect with the land.

Even before the *Artist Farmer Scientist* project began, I’d been dwelling on the problem of farms in transition. In 2017 I attended a farmer-focused conference about soil carbon called *Diamond in the Rough* at The Living Classroom. The opening speech was given by the indomitable Major Michael Jeffery, former Governor General, and tireless advocate for soil health. Jeffery began by noting that around 130,000 farmers managed 60% of Australia’s land mass.

Sitting there in a room full of farmers, I was struck by how outrageous this fact was. What does it mean for our hopes of healing the land if such a tiny fraction of our population of 23 million people (roughly 0.06%) manage around 348 million hectares of the country? I already knew Australia was one of the most urbanised societies in the world, up there with Japan and Brazil. 90% of us live in cities or large towns, and the rural population dwindles further every year. We all know that the rural/urban divide creates unequal access to infrastructure, services, education and employment. But Jeffrey’s point led me to think more deeply about the cultural effects of this lopsided population spread, and how little dialogue seems to go on between

the city and the country. Each time KSCA makes new, remarkable friends in rural Australia—innovators and champions for change—I’m frustrated by how much their influence is limited due to city-dwellers’ negative impressions about the country.

As with the barn-raising and harvest traditions of the past, we sought a way to make labour-intensive tasks fun, social and culturally meaningful

All of this suggests that a lot of magic might happen if imaginative, courageous people from both sides of the city/country divide get to mingle more and work together to solve environmental problems. The potential to test these ideas arose after Kerrie Cooke, President of Capertee Valley Landcare and a good friend of KSCA, came along to *Groundswell*. She recognised that artists might be able to support her community’s efforts to restore the waterways of their catchment. In 2019, working with Leanne Thompson, Georgie Pollard and Alex Wisser from KSCA, she instigated the *Capertee Valley Hydrology Project* (which you can read about at www.kzca.land/capertee-valley-hydrology-project). She also connected with The Mulloon Institute, an organisation in Bungendore that has put Natural Sequence Farming into action in synergy with other regenerative methods. For ten years the Institute has stewarded a highly successful landscape rehydration project involving around 20 landowners who share waterways in the Mulloon Catchment. This project is now internationally recognised as a template other communities might follow. Alongside her interest in the Mulloon approach, Kerrie had long wished to host university students in the Valley to take part in land restoration. She and I began to talk about how we could make this happen.

In late 2019 a new community grant from the NSW government supporting climate change resilience popped up. We submitted a proposal to pilot *Land Studio* with farmers in the Valley and students studying KSCA member Lucas Ihlein’s

Creative Arts course “Art, Nature and the Environment” at the University of Wollongong. We were awarded the grant in early 2020... by which time COVID-19 was upon us. A question mark hung over the project for many months. We cheerily navigated the low ‘risk appetite’ of the university knowing our chances of staging the camp were very slim. But we must have charmed a few of the administrators because with the number of community-transmitted cases in NSW reassuringly low in the Spring, we were finally given the green light.

The Valley looked spectacular following the recent rains, the sun shone, and Lucas and I welcomed 23 students to Snowgoose Farm to set up camp. Snowgoose is the property of Emily and Stuart Dawson. They run sheep for wool, raise and sell grass-fed lamb and have embraced regenerative methods like multi-species cropping. Dabee artist Peter Swain welcomed us to Wiradjuri Country at sunset with a smoking ceremony at Snowgoose, anchoring us to the values of stewardship, connectedness and healing.

The following day we made our first visit to Umbiella, a grand historic property owned by Terrie Wallace and Stuart Knox in the centre of the Valley. Terrie and Stuart have been regenerating Umbiella from a degraded state in recent years. They run

grass-fed sheep and cattle holistically to rest the land, sow multi-species crops and avoid chemicals. They are trialing some Natural Sequence Farming strategies as well.

With guidance from Peter Hazel and Bill McAlister from The Mulloon Institute, the students tackled the problem of “slowing the flow”. Pointing out features of the Valley landscape around us, Pete and Bill explained how challenging it can be to harness rainfall, the most erosive force on the planet, to drive regeneration. The students heard how this environment would once have contained wetlands connected to spongy floodplains, with plants cycling nutrients, moderating temperatures and maintaining local rainfall patterns. Now, as in so many parts of Australia, there are deforested paddocks bounded by incised creeks and eroded gullies which funnel water downhill fast. What we now know is that strategic interventions can quell that water’s gravity-powered energy, and encourage the rehydration and ecological recovery of the whole landscape.

To illustrate one such strategy, the *Land Studio* students built a 30 metre wide “pin” or “brush” weir at a deeply eroded creek on Umbiella. We used stakes and plant materials (the “brush”) that we scythed from neighbouring vegetation. Locals Dom, Tony, Chris and Gianluca taught us how to use old-fashioned scythes, and it turned out to be an addictive activity for some of us! We also made small rock weirs further up the creek, moving stones to encourage the formation of pools and to direct water away from the edges of the creek where the banks are eroding.

Elsewhere at Umbiella the students explored the movement of water in a more artistic way by contributing to Leanne Thompson’s *Capertee Water Weaving* project. Leanne had been developing this work for months with community members, to highlight how plants hold water in the land, and illustrate the contour as a tool

for reading the landscape and slowing the flow. The students assisted Leanne to bind a thick, twined rope out of harvested phragmites (reeds) 130 metres long. Hung from bamboo stakes, it formed a striking contour line visible from the road. A couple of weeks after the camp, Leanne and community members, and a few returning students, incorporated woven circles of all sizes created from plants, and large natural sculptural elements into this contour line. It could be interpreted visually in many ways, but I love Terri Wallace’s description of it as an effervescent image of water “bubbling up from the hillside”.

The students also planted 100 trees at Snowgoose Farm, demonstrating another method for slowing the flow. We chose an area where water flows periodically, and which has two dysfunctional dams that the Dawsons would like to re-naturalise. Everyone worked happily into the early evening, admiring the full moon as it rose

over the escarpment. Kerrie selected 100 native species that like to have ‘wet feet’ from the plants she and her partner Dom cultivate from Capertee Valley seeds at their own nursery. These plants will create root systems that draw up nutrients and hold water in the soil.

On the final morning of camp we learnt how to propagate native seed, and gave the Snowgoose Farm orchard some microbial love with a soil bacteria tea Kerrie had cooked up using goat’s whey (left over from the cheese she makes every morning, from the milk from her neighbour Tony’s goats!). After a lunchtime visit to the WayOut art gallery in Kandos, we said goodbye to some very happy, tired but energised students.

There is a very compelling principle that underpins Aboriginal Ranger programs in Australia: “Country needs People”. The respectful interlinking of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stewardship in Australia

is still a work in progress, but however that plays out, I think this principle should speak to all of us. How can such an urbanised society take care of its less populated landscapes—not just national parks, but private land? What might change in the public imagination if more of us city-dwellers lingered in the environments that nourish us and took part in regeneration? And what ideas might spring from the minds of students who experience that work as part of their university degree? This first camp was an opportunity to pose all of these questions. We look forward to developing the *Land Studio* model further, exploring how land stewardship, food production and climate change adaptation can all be part of the same project, with compassionate relationships between people at its heart.

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Dr Laura Fisher is an artist and social scientist. Her projects build fruitful connections between the city and the country to support land regeneration, better food systems and community wellbeing. Laura is a founding member of Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation (KSCA) and a social researcher with The Mulloon Institute.



TOP: Leanne Thompson (spotted shirt) and students with the 130 metre rope of harvested phragmites that became part of the *Capertee Water Weaving* land art sculpture, 2020.
 BOTTOM LEFT: University of Wollongong students Angelic McNab and Sarah Arnesen rise and shine at *Land Studio* camp. Photo: Lucas Ihlein.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: Pete Hazel from The Mulloon Institute stands before an eroded creek wall at Umbrella Farm, explaining to students what can be learnt from the soil profile.