

Revival of the small acre farm: A new opportunity for maximising environmental returns from incentives

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Incentives can be a powerful tool for supporting change in the way people interact with their land but how can they be used for maximum effect with small acre landholders, a group not traditionally targeted for this type of motivational mechanism?

The simple answer to that very important question is that we need to view and work with incentives, not as isolated tools targeting particular threats to achieve the environmental outcomes that we, as Government, extension officer and NRM consultants want from landholders, but rather as an integral part of a much larger, all-encompassing vision of sustainability that we can all, landholders and NRM facilitators alike, connect with and embrace. When operated within this context it is quite easy to see how incentives can bring about significant positive change for the environment, farm viability and the social dynamics that contribute to the pleasure of small acre farming.

It is perhaps important to pause at this point to consider what we mean by small acre farming and how it is distinguished from what has often been disparagingly referred to in times gone past as hobby farming. The archetype of the hobby farmer, that scourge on the rural landscape; despoiler of 'good farming land' was very much of the rape and pillage mode. An outsider, with no connection to the land; no understanding or appreciation of its needs by way of weed and pest control, water management, animal husbandry or sound soil fertility and productivity practices. In short, someone who used the land as a toy, a hobby, exploiting it for their own pleasure without consideration for its nurturance or care.

How widespread that stereotype has ever been is debatable, nevertheless it is a view held by a wide number of 'traditional' farmers and rural townsfolk and a fair proportion of government agency staff and NRM facilitators. This is not surprising given the high profile and often very visible cases of gross negligence towards recreational livestock and care of waterways on the part of weekend Collins Street farmers.

So what's changed? The sea-change has dawned, and with it a new generation of rural small landholders: people who have a strong appreciation and long-term commitment to the land and a rural lifestyle. They are often well educated and highly skilled with a strong environmental and social ethic. They are becoming known as "big city escapees", people with professional, business and technical backgrounds looking for a richer, more meaningful way of life that includes reconnecting with the natural environment and sharing a greater sense of community than appears possible with modern city living.

For this group of people, sustainability goes far beyond ‘enlightened’ rhetoric. It is obvious and desirable but more than that, for most it is a fundamental cornerstone of their chosen rural lifestyle. Unlike the ‘hobby farmer’ counterparts, they must be able to generate income from the land in order to physically survive and they are strongly motivated to achieve their economic goals in ways that are environmentally and socially enriching. In short, they are the epitome of sustainability.

As NRM facilitators then, the work is to support this new breed of small landholders to navigate a successful path to achieve their social, environmental and economic aspirations. Some of the major issues that need to be addressed include:

Economic

- determining the most effective trade-off between the initial necessity to earn income and the time needed to establish on-farm income producing enterprises
- how to generate sufficient funds for enterprise establishment including labour support
- knowledge and skills about economically viable sustainable small enterprises

Social

- integrating into the local community including learning from and contributing skills and knowledge to improve sustainable community development and decision-making
- developing positive relationships with neighbouring traditional farmers with respect to ‘alternative’ enterprises
- embracing and enriching traditional rural-style social and recreational activities

Environmental

- restoring and enhancing small degraded bushland remnants
- dealing with nutrient export
- developing understanding to manage the land e.g. pests and weeds, ground and surface water

Even such a short list clearly shows the potential investment opportunities offered by incentives to maximise environmental benefits by supporting small acre farmers to achieve their sustainability objectives. However, because genuine sustainability stems from the simultaneous pursuit of environmental, social and economic goals it is important to understand that the best outcomes will only be achieved with interventions that integrate all three aspects of the sustainability vision. One program that works to do just that is Heavenly Hectares.

Heavenly Hectares

Heavenly Hectares has been successful in Western Australia because it has focused on the immediate needs of largely novice small landholders:

- pastures
- stock keeping
- weed, pest and disease management

- fire safety
- diversification options e.g. agro-forestry, orchards, grazing and cropping
- funding and technical support and assistance opportunities
- waterwise landscape management

It provides access to a wide range of field days and workshops and extensive information on sustainable land management.

Follow-up one day property management courses provide opportunities for social interaction and identification of common interests, economic options are canvassed and key issues such as fire and weed management are addressed.

Contrast the outcomes being generated by the Heavenly Hectares program to those from the range of 'single issue' incentives and services offered by a variety of other service providers such as Land for Wildlife, covenant schemes and Department of Agriculture services and it is very clear the direction in which we need to head. But who will lead the change in direction?

Local governments have often set the planning framework, landscape living zones etc, with sizes of subdivisions and rules for water, waste disposal, land uses and fire protection. Do local governments have the potential to be goal setters to stimulate sustainable outcomes?

Catchment Management Authorities have been encouraged to set 50 –year Resource Condition Targets and 20-year Management Action Targets. If these were linked to sound sustainability visions in their strategies then regional groups could make a powerful contribution to a sustainability agenda for rural communities. Moreover, if local governments were to set similar targets for their jurisdictions and/or for specific special land use subsets, the potential for positive change would be that much stronger.

Finally, there is the largely untapped resource offered by private enterprise to take a leadership role in moving towards a more sustainable rural future. Landcare Solutions, the developers of the Heavenly Hectares concept, is just one example of how professionally skilled private providers, with their high level of flexibility and responsiveness, can play a significant role in supporting the changes we need in policy and practice to bring about significant improvement in the way we perceive and use public money in the interests of the environment.

Summary

This paper has been inspired by the vision of small landholders achieving vibrant sustainable communities. We have canvassed the Heavenly Hectares model developed in Western Australia and we find that it has made significant strides in combining a range of services and is attracting a great deal of support. This model has the potential to be developed further to include more social and economic elements.

Once we move to a process of integrating social, environmental and economic goals there will develop a variety of formal and informal networks and organisations

focused on achievement of those goals. Local government has the potential to champion this approach. Can we empower local government to take this step?

We have deliberately moved from a threat and issue based approach to one of setting goals and visions. Inspiring people and communities to reach for sustainability will be the way of the future.