

Self-sufficiency is not easy

But trying can be fun laments
Paul Dann enthusiastically

IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN APPARENT from the start, 40 years or so ago, that there was something wrong with this place near Mongarlowe.

I'd salvaged some very old, classic French grape vines from a vineyard removal job near Canberra and with great love and care, planted one at the foot of each verandah post of the shed. I drove off with juicy visions of a shed draped, in a few years time, with torrents of luscious black bunches. But it was not to be.

Returning several weeks later, I was disappointed, to say the least, to see that no vine remained in its lovingly selected place. Instead, each had been savagely — or so it seemed — ripped out and left lying metres away in the bush. Subsequent replantings met with the same fate. It just seemed that something — wombats? — didn't want me to be there.

This introduction set the pattern for the next 40 years.

Environment, and its components — particularly wildlife and particularly wombats — can be a hard taskmaster. For ten years or so I was growing admirable crops of sweet corn, three metres or so tall, enjoyed by good markets in Canberra and Braidwood. Then the wombats heard about it.

They'd hole the fences and straddle the rows of corn, pushing each plant over until they reached the cobs which were gobbled without so much as a thank-you. Fix a hole and another one

would soon appear. Cunning electric fences? My wombats were shock-proof.

Steel mesh buried sixty centimetres or so? Too expensive for some half a kilometre. Swinging gateways? Thanks, they might say. Some other control options are better left unmentioned. So I gave up on growing corn. I never liked eating it, anyhow.

How about the birds then? For the first decade or so the birds left enough for me, neighbours, and some sales. But now it seems that the population has expanded to meet the food supply, and they leave nothing for me. Everything has to be protected with netting or there's nothing left. For hundreds of trees that's aesthetically and financially unacceptable.

A pet hate is bower birds — they get so greedy when feeding it's possible to sneak up and grab them. One consolation is that several bower birds can make, so it is said, an acceptable stew. (But wombats? ... doubtful.)

That's enough about biological problems for a while. The climate here is a major challenge, particularly when it comes to temperature. One can accept the savage frosts in mid-winter, when it's possible to slide a dog out onto an iced-up dam, but the sneaky November and December minuses are the ones that hurt.

Deciduous fruit and nut trees can forgive several mild spring frosts, but get discouraged by persistent later

ones. I have photos of 20-ft high chestnut trees blackened to the top; no nuts that year, nor deciduous fruits. In fact, crops of stone fruits rarely happen. Trying to be clever by planting tender species under the shelter of big eucalypts doesn't work here. The quickest way to kill an Araluen avocado is to transplant it at Mongarlowe — even in a big pot under the shelter of a verandah. Although the only successful grape vine here is growing thus, however, this is where my hatred of bower birds originated — can't win, eh?..

Before I go out to shoot myself (no doubt all these failures are a measure of my ineptitude and my attempts to do things as a minimalist) let's consider a few more biological problems in this environment.

One of the big disappointments here has been the discovery of the sneaky little soil-borne disease phytophthora.

Raspberries once grew 3 metres high; now they just don't grow. But the sad thing is the 30-year old chestnut trees that suddenly just die from the root-rotting disease. Dozens have expired thus, before I realized the problem.

There's some alleviation by injecting an appropriate fungicide into the trunk; but this involves a number of spring-loaded syringes, expensive, and suspicious-looking when encircling the trunks in a chestnut grove, a Mongarlowe shooting gallery.

Then a bit higher up the evolutionary scale is the longicorn beetle, which after some 30 years decided it liked hazelnut trees. It bores down the trunks and cleverly chews the wood from the inside, leaving a stump which looks as though it resulted from a fine-toothed chain saw; and dozens of trees which just fall apart.

So a trendy little market for 'organic' hazelnuts and chestnuts has to do without the Mongarlowe contribution. Getting back to birds. For several decades I had successfully reared fish, mainly bass, in various farm dams.

But in the last couple of years they seem to have all gone; cormorants, I'd say, coming in when I'm not around. Could be marauding neighbours, perhaps — whatever, it's a biological pest problem.

The upside is that on a balmy summer evening the surface of a dam near the house used to erupt with voraciously feeding fish, splashing not-so-clean water onto the windows. Now at least I can look out more clearly onto the many failures in my landscape.

Exotic feral animals take their toll too. A pair of geese multiplied over

some years into a free-ranging flock of fifty or so, grazing in the paddock with minimum attention. No need to lock 'em up at night it seemed until a fox heard about this silly over-confidence and they started to disappear, one or two a night. At least it was a frosty winter, and deep-frozen partially demolished carcasses could be picked up in the morning, thawed, plucked, and enjoyed as massaged poultry. This could be a useful strategy when the oil runs out and there's no more roadkill. At one stage I thought I had invented a fox-proof poultry system by teaching chooks to roost beyond the reach of nocturnal foxes — which don't like climbing ladders — on top of a glass-walled vegetable garden. Free-range, of course, they ranged through several acres of bush during the day and deposited the thus harvested nutrients onto the vegetables at night. Trendy, eh? And it worked for about ten years until until some fox, smarter than I, woke up to it.

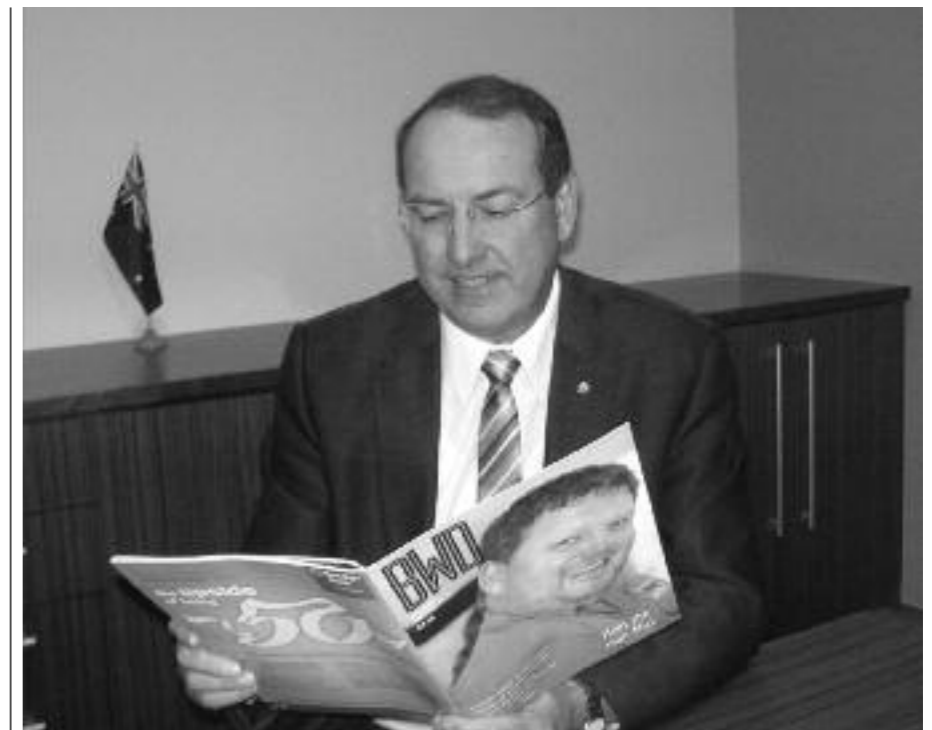
Though lacking traditional skills, I even tried bush tucker, nibbling on lomandra and native raspberries and so on and planting stuff like yam daisy and bunyas — only one of the latter surviving and that only because I wrapped it in my doona for the first few years. And it doesn't look enthusiastic about providing nuts in my lifetime. The creek in the early days used to give good fishing for eels and perch and so on, but not any more. Even mussels, which I can't abide, and yabbies are no longer reliable. I don't know ...

So I have tried lots of approaches. But the floating gardens sank; birds flew empty into the sunpits and out the other end dripping with bunches of grapes in their beaks; wallabies danced on the sunpit canopies to let the frosts in; the moats in the moat garden dried up; and so on, until I realized: Hell. It's easier and cheaper to go buy your stuff from IGA in Braidwood.

If you want to save the world by being self-sufficient or sustainable, don't try it around here is my suggestion. Probably better, instead of being sustainable, try to be a bit less unsustainable. And as we're only here to fill in time between life and death, why not enjoy it as much as possible.

So as I sit here on my balcony, flagon of muscat at one hand and favourite old dog at the other, and gaze out across my landscape — some of which I created — to the mountains, I find it easy to ask: "who wants to be self-sufficient anyhow?"

"But gee, hasn't it been fun trying!"



Peter Hendy

Kylie Dominick tracked down our local member for Eden-Monaro and this is some of what he said ...

As of a few weeks ago, Australia has no carbon policy at all which worries many people. What are the government's plans to implement Direct Action? Which elements of Direct Action would apply to our area?

I don't agree there's no climate change policy in action now — there is. The Direct Action plan has already started; elements are already in operation.

The government has abolished the Carbon Tax but we do have our Direct Action programme which over the course of the next four years is around 3.2 billion dollars, rolling out over four years. The centrepiece of that policy is an emissions reduction fund and that is not unlike the Clean Energy fund that the previous government put in place, which actually is still in place because we were going to abolish that fund and replace it with our Emissions Reduction fund but we're working on a compromise agreement so we can still roll out what we plan to do.

That policy of the Emissions Reduction fund is a research and development fund that will subsidise those activities where we see there is real bang for the buck in producing technologies that will reduce CO2 emissions and other climate change gas emissions.

Which elements of Direct Action are in place now?

We've got a policy to roll out the planting of new trees across the whole of Australia — twenty million trees. One focus we've got is promoting the use of technologies that would improve the use of soil carbon. We think there's mileage in putting research and development funds into that area because that would help a lot.

There's a perception developing that the present government is taking a stance against renewables. How would you respond to that?

I don't subscribe to that. As part of our Direct Action programme, renewables are very important. That's the government's view and that's my personal view. In confronting the climate change issue, encouraging the development of new and better technologies and renewables is very important.

Recently I was down at Nimmitabel to inspect the Boco Rock wind farm project. They are building about 67 wind turbines as stage one. And stage two will bring that to about 127. That's proceeding and is a very big project. I regard wind farms as one of the sensible options in regards to renewables. They're one option, solar is another.

