



Social Inquiry

Supplementary Information:
The 8 families group case study.

2022

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We acknowledge that the contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views of these contributors.

About Soils for Life case studies

For more than a decade, Soils for Life has been producing case studies of farmers' inspiring stories of transition to regenerating their soils and landscapes. It is the largest body of regenerative farming case studies in Australia.

Each Soils for Life case study is an interwoven story supported by evidence about innovative, ecologically-informed land management. The case studies are holistic, documenting ecological, social and economic factors and change, with a strong focus on peer-to-peer support.

The case studies have been used by farmers, researchers and policy makers around the country to inspire and inform new ideas and approaches in agriculture.

About Soils for Life

Soils for Life is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that works across Australia to support Australian farmers in regenerating soil and landscapes, to build natural and social capital, and transform food and fibre systems.

For further information

info@soilsforlife.org.au
www.soilsforlife.org.au

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Preface

This document provides an analysis of the social processes and outcomes that are a part of wider on-farm holistic system transformations of the 8 families group – a group that now consists of nine families that are connected through their geographic location and landscapes, as well as their approach and goals of farming regeneratively. Our purpose is to better understand the role of the group in fostering agricultural transformation. This report recognises and draws from both farmers’ and experts’ knowledge, and the research which informs it was collaborative and holistic, based on the understanding that farming systems are integrative.

We also include an in-depth account of four individual farming families to expand our understanding of the social aspects of change, which are a part of production changes and wider ecological and economic outcomes. The document therefore, sits alongside the [*Production and Ecological Inquiry, Supplementary Information: the 8 families case study*](#) and [*Economic Inquiry, Supplementary Information: the 8 families case study*](#), and feeds into the Overview Report - [*Working Together to Regenerate Landscapes: A Case Study of the 8 Families Group*](#).

Key insights

Wellbeing through a Community of Practice and of place

- The 8 families group case study supports other studies that have shown that regenerative agriculture contributes to farmer wellbeing by developing farmers self-efficacy, adaptive capacity and social connectedness (see Brown et al. 2021, p.4).
- By focusing on a group of farmers who work together, the case study offers an opportunity to understand better social connectedness through the formation of a Community of Practice and its role in 1/ supporting the regenerative agriculture journey of farmers; and 2/ in the wellbeing of farmers.
- Insights from the four focus farmers have helped us to expand on our understanding of the formation of a Community of Practice, and its role in strengthening social connectedness. Specifically, they have offered insights into the mixed results in relation to farmers' sense of community connectedness that we found in our wellbeing survey. Mixed results are also evident in other studies (see Brown et al. 2017, p. 21 compared to Brown et al. 2021, p. 10). One of the main differences in results might be whether the farmers have found a like-minded group of people to share and learn with.
- The group and focus farmer Key Narratives of Transformation analysis, has given us insights into the value of the group, for example in supporting farmers through their ongoing evaluation and adaptation in the journey to achieve ecological, social and economic outcomes.
- The 8 families case study have formed a Community of Practice facilitated by the Holistic Management framework. The Community of Practice shares many of the elements of a common culture identified by Cross and Ampt (2017, p. 593) in a Community of Practice of grazing eco-innovators, including: being aligned through Holistic Management; farmers' belief that they are making positive landscape changes; decision making involving experimentation and monitoring rather than set formula; an attitude of letting go of control over nature; the association of profit and production with increased financial stability and increased quality of life and satisfaction.

A Shift to holistic thinking and practice

- The regenerative journeys of the 8 families is characterized by experimentation and adaptation on the farm, resulting in overall improvements across social, economic and ecological areas.
- Our research framework has allowed us to explore the triggers that have led to such experimentation and adaptation, including the Millenium Drought, farm debt, poor animal welfare and biodiversity loss, climate change, and inspirational ideas and approaches, and to see how these triggers have set members on a pathway of change which involved shifts in thinking, a reassessment of values, and in-turn changes to the ways in which members manage their farms.
- It is clear from the interviews that members of the 8 families group already had a strong land stewardship ethic before the group started. The Holistic Management Training has given members a framework through which to undertake both mental

and practical shifts through an assessment of what they value and how their farming aligns with their values, as well as common ground for their shared learning.

- Overall, the shift involved the adoption of a holistic approach to farming, in which the farm is seen as a system that involves family, community, as well as animals and ecosystems. In this holistic view, profit is important but so are other social and ecological outcomes.

Background

The 8 families group

Located around the Eastern Riverina in NSW, the 8 families group first formed in 2008 after attending the same Holistic Management course in Holbrook. The group now comprises nine families who produce a range of products using regenerative management approach that aims to restore soil and landscape function. Over the last decade, the families have become a strong Community of Practice for regenerative farming, and continue to help each other make major changes in managing their landscapes and their businesses.

The group are not only a Community of Practice but they are also a community of *place*. The groups' properties are all located within a 100-kilometre radius, around the Mundarlo Valley, Holbrook, Book Book, Sandigo and Wymah Valley.

The group consists of Gill Sanbrook (Bibbaringa), Pete and Bundle Lawson (Trewalla), Bill and Joy Wearn (Yammacoona), Kate and Jochem Heijse (Spring Creek), Michael and Anna Coughlan (Tarabah and Mt Narra Narra Station), Michael and Héloïse Gooden (Willowlee), Sam and Prue Pincott (Bellevue), Nick and Deanne Austin (Mundarlo), Rebecca Gorman (Yabtree West).

Focus farmers

Michael and Héloïse Gooden (Willowlee), Sam and Prue Pincott (Bellevue), Nick and Deanne Austin (Mundarlo), Rebecca Gorman (Yabtree West) have become 'focus farmers' for this case study process, which means we engaged them in one-on-one conversations beyond the group discussions. The focus farmers were selected based on available ecological data; relevance of their property and approach to the agreed group themes (land stewardship, holistic approach and community of practice); and availability of other relevant data. These four focus farmers provided an opportunity for in-depth inquiry into their transformative process of regenerative agriculture.

See [*Working Together to Regenerate Landscapes: A Case Study of the 8 Families Group*](#) for more background to the 8 families group.

Research approach

Conceptual framework

Soils for Life's approach to inquiring into and advocating for agricultural landscape transformation is to recognise these landscapes as complex social, agro-ecological systems. Within such an understanding people are a part of the landscape transformation process in two main ways: 1/Landscape transformation first involves a shift in peoples' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and values, and this shift shapes the ways in which people approach the food and fibre systems within which they operate (Massy 2017); and 2/ human wellbeing can be understood as an indicator of a sustainable farming system (Brown et. al. 2021, p. 2). Our focus in this supplementary document is on these social shifts and the strategies used to translate attitudinal changes into practices changes. We mainly do this through the use of Key Narratives of Transformation framework in combination with insights offered in the Wellbeing surveys, workshops interviews. We emphasise the role and value of the group through the concept of Communities of Practice, which includes social learning.

First framework: 5 landscape functions (socio-human function)

Given the complexity of the social agro-ecological systems within which the 8 families are operating, we have used an analytical framework to help structure and facilitate the discussion of the data available. This framework incorporates five-landscape dynamics which underpin landscape function; the solar energy cycle, water cycle, nutrient cycle, community dynamics (biodiversity) and the human/social dimension. The first four were derived from Holistic Management (Savory et al., 2019) which are addressed in The [Production and Ecological](#) supplementary document, and the fifth, identified by Charles Massy (2017), is addressed within this document.

Farming behaviour is a result of 'the learnt concepts, understandings, inherited and trained beliefs, mental models and paradigms we carry in our heads' (Massy 2017, p. 280). Some call this a worldview. Others have called this a narrative or discourse. This recognises that the 'complex network of meanings, phrases, practices and institutional structures that form a restrictive or expressive code of conduct' (Gordon et al 2021, np) is collectively produced and shared. Many agree that a shift in mindset (or discourse) is an essential precursor to on-farm practice changes and landscape outcomes (Massy 2013, Gordon et al 2021). This is why, rather than focusing on specific farming practices, we focus on farmers' journeys of change. That is, we combine this socio-human understanding with the key narratives of transformation approach (outlined below) in order to better understand the transformation processes of the 8 families, and how they relate to the other landscape cycle changes.

In the socio-human function framework people are a part of dynamic landscapes – humans co-evolve with other landscape components, such as animals (Massy, 2017) and human wellbeing is an indicator of a sustainable farming system (Brown et. al. 2021, p. 2). Human wellbeing is not just impacted by production value but also by social and ecological factors (ibid). It has also been found that the extent to which farmers adopt regenerative agriculture principles, rather than practices, is associated with higher subjective wellbeing (Brown et al. 2021).

The Soils for Life research approach has been to seek indicators of change including changes to individual worldview and values, wellbeing, farmers' relationship to farming, to see patterns of change, and to better understand how those changes relate to broader ecological and economic outcomes. In the case of the 8 families, we are interested in the individual and collective process of change, and the role and value of the group in that change.

Second framework: Key Narratives of Transformation

Our approach to exploring the regenerative agriculture stories of individuals and the group is based on four chronological phases:

- Phase 1: the original enterprise
- Phase 2: the first stage of practice changes
- Phase 3: the second stage of practice changes
- Phase 4: now and into the future.

Soils for Life decided on these phases based on experience with previous case studies.

We then adopt a model called *Key Narratives of Transformation* to help us to make sense of these rich and complex chronologies. This analytical model provides an easy-to-follow framework for conceptualising the 'pathways to change' or 'narratives of agricultural transformation'. The narrative also helps us to give structure to the learning and sharing process of the group. The model draws on the work of a number of researchers from different disciplines (Clarke, 2016; Klein, 2013), and is described in more detail in the main report [*Working Together to Regenerate Landscapes: A Case Study of the 8 Families Group*](#).

The model has four elements:

1. **Key Theme:** These themes were uncovered during the early workshops and validated by individuals during interviews.
2. **Trigger:** In each theme incidents, ideas and events were identified that provoked a start to change.
3. **Activity:** This element describes the actions taken by the land managers to support their goals for change.
4. **Outcome:** Each narrative is concluded by noting the results of the actions taken. These outcomes were not always positive but were consistently used to plan future change.

Third framework: Communities of Practice

Social learning in a Community of Practice can be defined as '(1) a change in understanding that takes place in the individuals involved; (2) it goes beyond individuals and becomes situated within the community of practice; and (3) it occurs through social interactions and processes between actors within a social network' (Reed et al. 2010, np). 'Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wegner-Trayner 2015, p.1). It involves three aspects: the domain (shared interest and concern), the community (members engaged in discussion and help each other out and share information and sometimes resources), and the practice (members are practitioners who develop a shared repertoire of resources). The

learning value of a Community of Practice is a shared commitment to advancing a domain. In the case of the 8 families group, their domain could be understood as Holistic Management as a form of regenerative agriculture. Hence, the 8 families group is a good example of this social learning process and a Community of Practice.

Soils for Life and the 8 families recognise the importance of peer support and learning in transforming our food and fibre systems. By building this case study of the 8 families, we are interested in illuminating the following elements of the group (based on Wegner et al. 2011):

- Collective knowledge of the group as a current and future resource ('knowledge capital');
- The learning environment;
- The ways in which the group offers support to individuals;
- The group as a space for problem solving;
- The sharing of resources;
- Innovation resulting from group interactions.

The framework of the Community of Practice helps us to understand better these group elements listed above. Investigating the group in relation to individual and landscape transformations can help us to understand better the value and role of a group in those transformations.

A Community of Practice is related to but differs from a network, in that a network does not tend to have a shared identity or commitment to a specific domain, rather the learning value of networks is the optimisation of connectivity and the potential for emergent collective exploration of a topic (Wegner et al. 2011). The network is a useful framework to explore the relationships formed through Soils for Life's collaboration with the group.

Methodology and methods

The research methods used for this social analysis supplementary document are based on Soils for Life's Collaborative Action Research methodology, which recognises the knowledge and research processes of both farmers and experts and seeks farmer input and opportunities for collaboration in the research process and actions along the way. Soils for Life uses case studies to highlight the transformative individual-socio-natural-economic impacts of regenerative land management. The case study program provides integrated, evidence-based accounts of practice change from the landholder's perspective. The 8 families case study is Soils for Life's first group case study, which aims to explore not only individual stories of transformation but the ways in which Communities of Practice form and the role of peer learning and problem solving in regenerating landscapes.

The methodology and methods are detailed and discussed in the [Methodology supplementary document](#). Below are details of the main methods used for this social analysis.

Methods

- Three Workshops: the first to co-design the case study; the second to establish the group story and timeline; and the third focused on environmental stewardship, an interest arising from the previous workshops;
- Interview (1.5 hours): with four focus farmers, which integrated the following: an oral history approach; four chronological phases; themes arising from workshops (land stewardship, holistic approach, peer support); and the trigger, action, outcome process;
- Virtual Field Walk: farmers chose key locations to talk about significant management decisions and illustrate themes that had arisen from workshops;
- Wellbeing Survey: including indicators for personal wellbeing and relationship to farming;
- Farm records: including financial, soil monitoring, time-scale photos of fields, and grazing records (voluntarily contributed by farmers).

Wellbeing survey

To contextualise and frame the wellbeing surveys, we determined the details of the chronological phases in collaboration with members. We then provided a written summary of the years and key moments of these four phases to members for feedback, and members then responded to the survey questions with these chronological phases in mind. The wellbeing survey involved two short sets of ‘closed’ questions and indicators.

The first set of questions was the widely used Personal Wellbeing Index 11 (Australian Centre on Quality of Life, 2020). The personal wellbeing indicators are also used in the long-term broadscale Regional Wellbeing Survey conducted by the University of Canberra (2020), and used by researchers (Schirmer, Yabsley, Mylek, & Peel, 2016). These wellbeing indicators are considered important for inclusion in measuring the sustainability of farming systems (Brown et al., 2021).

For each question, members were asked to remember how they were feeling at each of the four phases on a scale of one (extremely unsatisfied) to ten (extremely satisfied) in terms of:

- Achievements in life;
- Feeling part of a community;
- Global life satisfaction;
- Standard of living, health;
- Personal relationships;
- How safe they felt;
- Future security.

As previous research has found significant difference in regenerative farmers relationship to farming as compared to conventional farmers (Brown et al 2017), the second set of questions explores farmers’ relationship to farming. This second set aims to uncover a farmers’ sense of resilience, optimism and self-efficacy (a person’s belief that they can perform the actions needed to achieve desired outcomes).

For each question members were asked to remember how they were feeling at each phase on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) in terms of their:

- Ability to cope with most difficult conditions on the farm;
- Ability to achieve the things I/we want on our farm;
- Ability to make the right decisions about farm management; and
- Optimism about my/our farming future.

Social processes & outcomes (the group)

Key Narratives of Transformation

Through a series of workshops and interviews, the Soils for Life team worked closely with the 8 families group to reflect on and chronicle their collective pathways to change. After the workshop, the Soils for Life team identified land stewardship, holistic approach and peer support processes as their central narratives of transformation. These three transformative processes are further described below in Figure 1 through the trigger, activity, outcome framework.

Key Theme	Trigger	Activity	Outcome
Land Stewardship	Desire to leave a legacy and opportunity to make a positive impact for their families and for the broader community.	Develop a mindset that takes responsibility for the landscape whilst “letting nature take control”. “trust in process, there is liberation with responsibility”	The whole group has shifted to identifying themselves as “stewards” and has been caring for the landscape as such for more than a decade.
	Sense of responsibility for the landscape and wellbeing of their livestock.	Consider themselves as “managers” rather than “owners”.	All members have observed increases in ground cover since making practice changes. The spatial mapping results support these observations with all properties maintaining higher ground cover than the surrounding 5 km buffer. See Outcomes and Production Supplementary Report.
	Land degradation and poor animal welfare resulting from poor management (e.g. impact of containment lots during drought).	Develop a genuine relationship with the land and their livestock and continually observe and respond. Adopt a “holistic” approach that aspires to support all functions of the enterprise and landscape rather than target elements in isolation including specific Holistic Management techniques for grazing management.	Pursuing opportunities to access formal recognition and support for existing holistic stewardship activities.

Holistic Approach

Inspired and influenced by thought leaders and innovative social contacts.

Need to recover from financial difficulties and landscape degradation.

Need for a 'useable' alternative framework to 'Industrial Agriculture'.

Adopt a 'holistic' approach that aspires to support all functions of the enterprise and landscape rather than target elements in isolation including specific Holistic Management techniques for grazing management.

Adaptive management approach that trials complementary ideas that focus on various functions such as Natural Sequence Farming or Group Marketing.

Analysis across four focus producers shows a greater resilience to drought (evident in the heat maps of ground cover compared to surrounding area during drought). See Production and Outcomes Supplementary Report.

Successful integration of Holistic Management with complementary techniques e.g. Natural Sequence Farming, free range eggs, Resource Consulting Services training and non-agriculture enterprises.

Analysis of three focus producers shows that they manage towards a set of multiple priorities, involving environmental, social and profitability objectives. Two producers are exceeding internal profit targets and profits are repeatable. One producer is on track towards similar outcomes. See *Economic Inquiry supplementary information*.

Peer Support

Mutual attendance of Holistic Management course and shared Mentor Bruce Ward—emphasised importance of peer support to achieve 'holistic context'.

Need for a 'safe space' of like-minded individuals to work through challenges and ideas with and for accountability.

Some group members had been in useful peer support groups that were winding up.

Develop social cohesion with fun group activities such as cake baking contests, Christmas party.

Foster social learning through guest speakers, site visits, sharing of experiences.

Socially support individual innovation through rotating hosts, structured agendas and shared decision-making frameworks.

Close relationships resulting in social sensitivity and confident communication. This enabled group to respond quickly to individual needs and retain group function when members became less satisfied.

Creation and maintenance of peer support group for more than a decade with genuine friendships and thriving community.

Increased social capital results in shared resources such as consultants, agistment grazing, expertise, machinery, contractors. Actively considering collective farming including combined herds and grazing cells and collaborative production.

Fostering innovation and creative problem solving (one member said, 'I never go to a meeting without an Ah Ha! Moment'.

Figure 1: Key Narratives of Transformation for the 8 Families Group

The Key Narratives of Transformation gives us insights into the processes and patterns of change at the level of the group. For the 8 families, we can see a clear pattern around what triggered the families to shift their worldviews and seek other approaches – drought, debt, poor animal welfare, and a broad sense of responsibility for the landscape, family and community. We can also see how the worldviews of members in the group emerged in relation to learning together - firstly through the Holistic Management course, and then through the group itself. Clearly, many in the group have had a land stewardship ethic to begin with. What emerged was a holistic worldview and approach to farming, which has provided a framework through which the 8 families assess not only on-farm practice changes but also wider life priorities. The group's holistic approach is what defines the group as a Community of Practice and has given the group a shared framework.

The analytical process has highlighted the ways in which farmers can reach insights about their life and their property and adapt accordingly. It helps us to see the opportunities in potentially challenging triggers. That is, triggers can lead to shifts (in worldviews, on-farm practice changes) and profound agricultural transformations (including an increase in resilience). Our analysis suggests that learning opportunities and a supportive learning environment and community are central to this process.

Understanding better the group's transformation process might be useful for other farmers who are at the beginning of this process and experiencing similar triggers. It also reinforces the importance of social learning and the formation of a Community of Practice for extension programs and policy makers considering ways in which to support farmers in the regeneration of landscapes across Australia.

The following section describes the four phases of the groups' transformative process, from before they met (Phase 1), to the first set of practice changes (Phase 2), the second set of practice changes (Phase 3), and into the future (Phase 4), drawing out the key themes summarised above.

Phase 1: Farming individually and seeking a different way (pre 2006-2007)

Before coming together, many members of the 8 families felt a deep sense of 'belonging to the land' and a 'sense of responsibility' for the future of the landscape, livestock and families. Influenced by leaders such as Allan Savory, Peter Andrews, Stan Parsons, and Terry McCosker, many group members were committed to leaving a positive legacy and felt inspired by the idea that agriculture had the potential to make a positive impact on the world.

Before joining the group, one farmer, coming from an engineering background, described his worldview as mechanistic. He focused on controlling processes on his land, until he realised that he was 'on a treadmill' of constant work in order to do this. Another group member described his paddocks as 'blowing away', and having no time for thinking through decisions or enjoying time with his family. For others, the failure of their high input/ output family farm during the drought and subsequent land degradation and increasing debt drove them to look for other ways of farming. All families wanted to avoid the worst impacts of drought: including soil loss, water shortage and the financial burden of buying feed to keep animals alive.

For all of these reasons, each of the families were seeking an alternative framework to conventional farming, leading them to enrol in Holistic Management courses. They were also seeking other likeminded people to discuss ideas with and help in the decision-making process.

Phase 2: Forming a group for shared commitment and accountability (2008-2014)

In 2008, many of the future members of the 8 families group enrolled in the same Holistic Management course or shared a mentor in the convenor and educator Bruce Ward.

Part of the Holistic Management training involves creating a ‘holistic context’ – a guide for families and businesses which defines their social, environmental and economic purpose, vision and aspirations, looking many years ahead. The Holistic Management training also emphasised the importance of peer support in realising the visions: ‘If you want to succeed in doing this, you need support’. As one of the members of 8 families now reflects, ‘Holistic Management is predicated on being part of a group – the broader ecological improvements will only work if the social connections are there as well’.

Peer support is a vital ingredient for the 8 families. In rural communities there can be a sense of isolation, and support groups create a ‘safe space’ of like-minded individuals to work through challenges and ideas. Some members had been part of peer support groups in the past, and found that a key ingredient for success is shared commitment with people in the same geographic area.

As the group developed, they began to want a greater level of accountability from each other. So, after a number of property visits and a Holistic Management conference and workshop, six of the families met at a local café in Holbrook and committed to starting a more formal peer support group. Three families, eager to connect with other Holistic Management operators, joined the group in the following year. We could say that Holistic Management became the group’s ‘domain’ in their Community of Practice.

After a few years, a project was developed to research a shared marketing plan for beef. To begin, a Holistic Context was developed with a shared vision, to complement their individual Holistic Contexts. Trials were undertaken, from processing animals through to packaged beef. The pitfalls of paddock to plate and the scale cost involved resulted in the project not processing past this stage, but the process proved invaluable and laid the foundations for the group going forward.

While there was huge value in their business-focussed meetings, the group never forgot to socialise. For example, the annual Christmas party came to be a major event of importance to the group, where partners and extended families join.

Phase 3: Working together in a Community of Practice and place (2015-2020)

One thing that sets the 8 families apart is that it is both a Community of Practice *and* a community of place. Having like-minded people close by makes more interactions possible. The longevity of the group has created trust in all interactions. This includes providing moral support, consulting one another on decision making, intentionally creating learning experiences, and now sharing of resources (including grass).

The group are also aware of the Country upon which they farm. They will always begin with an Acknowledgement of Country, and the host will also read a poem, a first nations story, or talk about the 'spirit of the land'.

At the outset, meetings were mainly for mutual support. The families are deeply appreciative of the safe environment of group meetings and constructive conversations. Regular six weekly catch-ups mean a shared understanding of where each family and business is at. There are shared experiences and values, respect for others' opinions and journey, and a feeling of freedom to talk about anything – personal, business, family, national, global.

Encouragement from the group was important for all members in making key decisions. The group helps members to have the courage and self-belief to follow their convictions in the face of scepticism and local traditions and even opposition from family or neighbours. Several made really big decisions informed by group discussions, such as selling breeding stock and buying or selling properties. Group support was also instrumental when trying new practices that may initially have failed. Being ostracised locally for unusual practices is a common experience, and connections with like-minded people are very helpful in persisting with a desire to be innovative ecologically.

By working in a group, the families have access to a 'brains trust' of like-minded people with a shared decision-making framework with different perspectives and experiences. All 8 families members value and trust the information from the group conversations and field visits. They collectively assess and comment on a member's management at the on-farm visits. On the farm visits the group view and support grazing planning, projects and grass monitoring. Together, they learn new approaches and troubleshoot designs and decisions around starting new enterprises.

The tight knit nature of the 8 families helps them to quickly notice potential concerns. One group member was concerned when the time spent socialising began to creep up and sessions were having limited actual value. They addressed this by setting a clear agenda and introduced the idea of a two-minute quick sharing at the beginning of a meeting, affectionately known in the group as having a WIFLE (What I Feel Like Expressing) not a waffle. Another concern was the limited relevance of discussions of cattle grazing for those farmers focused on eggs. The group agreed that meetings have to be meaningful, relevant, structured and revised regularly, and that anyone should feel free to speak up when a meeting isn't relevant.

The families collaboratively developed a six-weekly roster of meeting hosts. Each host sets the agenda for that meeting in consultation with the group. The agenda ensures the meetings are relevant to their visions. A series of shared decision-making frameworks are also used to ensure relevance and practicality in meetings.

The 8 families invite guest experts, such as Holistic Management educator, Brian Wehlberg, to help them refresh as a group, and sharpen their focus. Apart from guest speakers, the 8 families organise annual field trips across Australia and to the US to continue exploring new ideas and approaches. Every year, they try to do a trip together to visit a new place. These

trips are not all about work and learning, but the group enjoys the new experience, interactions and companionships of these trips.

Many of the trips led to 'lightbulb moments' for the group. The field trips and guest speakers introduced the group to a wide range of different techniques such as Natural Sequence Farming, Provenir on farm meat processing, Time Controlled Rotational Grazing, compost and biodynamics. The group took an adaptive management approach to trialling the new ideas and found that many fit well in the Holistic Context. To the 8 families, Holistic Management is the philosophy, not the method of farming, but a way of thinking and deciding that is not prescriptive.

The group's interactions have developed into increased collective marketing of produce and sharing of resources. The group is now sharing resources such as contractors, bulls, agistment, and machinery. Neighbouring members of the group are actively considering combining herds to collectively farm and others are considering creating products together.

Over the past decade, the 8 families have seen a lot of changes within members' businesses. Their shared journey has seen an improvement in profitability, animal health, and the environment. Members of the 8 families noted improvements in their social wellbeing, including improved sense of achievement, feeling part of a community and life satisfaction, over the last decade.

The 8 families farmers have also seen evidence of regeneration of their landscapes (see Production and Outcomes Supplementary Information). Across the farms, there have been observed improvements through the rebuilding of soils, improved soil sponginess, decrease in damaging runoff and increase in clear water runoff, reduced gully erosion, more worms, and progressive increase in ground cover. Analysis of groundcover also suggests that group properties were generally performing better than 5km areas around them. Their next goal as a group is to find ways to develop rigorous soil testing to compare with their own observations.

There has been a change of mindset towards agriculture amongst group members. Acting as long-term stewards, rather than extractive owners, they take responsibility for the landscape, livestock and family legacies while at the same time 'let nature take control'. As one member said, 'once you understand the complexity you are embedded in, you lose the arrogance and stop trying to push and pull'. Actions and decisions are considered in terms of likely impacts over lengthy periods of 20, 50 or up to 100 years, beyond the current management cycle. The group believes that it is these changes in perspectives and their strong friendship has led to the ecological, economic and social improvements.

Phase 4: Looking forward (2020 - to the future)

The group now comprises nine families with a range of products and enterprises – including beef, lamb, stud cattle, eggs, agistment, training and agri-tourism – all taking a 'regenerative' management approach that aims to restore soil and landscape function. Now numbering 9 families, the '8+ families' are excited to see the effects of their actions over the coming years.

To quantify and gain value from the changes they've made and continue to make, the group is looking at how they can collaborate to provide evidence of their collective environmental stewardship, 'beyond the boundary fence'. This sort of cross-property planning is relatively rare but has the potential to create landscape-scale improvement in connectivity of the type needed to address species loss in production landscapes. They are investigating ways to be rewarded for the improvements they've seen and expect to see in the future, including for soil carbon, organic matter and biodiversity, and want to what they learn to help other producers make the most of land stewardship programs and opportunities.

As a collective, they recognise their voice is bigger, and they would like to use their collective voice to change things for the better, for example by advocating for incentive schemes to recognise the benefits of holistic stewardship. A holistic approach which seeks to concurrently improve biodiversity, soil carbon, ecological health, wealth and personal development can be hard to fit within the more siloed context of current government incentives. The 8 families are 'all interested in the future of land stewardship and how this will add another enterprise to our business now and into the future'.

To support progress and change, the group, with the help of Soils for Life, recently ran a collective workshop exploring how to access rebates and rewards for more holistic approaches. Group members agreed that they want to encourage premiums for produce of provenance that has been produced regeneratively.

The group believes that 'the pendulum is swinging' on regenerative agriculture. Previously, the term 'regenerative agriculture' was 'almost a swear word', but now it is a subject that can be discussed at the pub. The 8 families find that people who once would not be interested in visiting properties and field days and talking about regenerative agriculture are seeking them out to find out more. The group will also continue to support other people to get involved in regenerative agriculture, including through Local Land Services, Farm Owners Academy, Earth Canvas, Landcare, RCS and others.

Personal wellbeing and relationship to farming (the group)

We asked all of the nine members to rate satisfaction with eight aspects of their lives relating to personal wellbeing at each practice change phase. Six members responded and the results are presented below for the group as a whole. See the methodology section of this report for details of the survey questions and origins.

Personal wellbeing survey data

Life achievements

As a group, the six respondents all felt an **increase** in their **life achievements** through their regenerative agriculture journey (Figure 2).

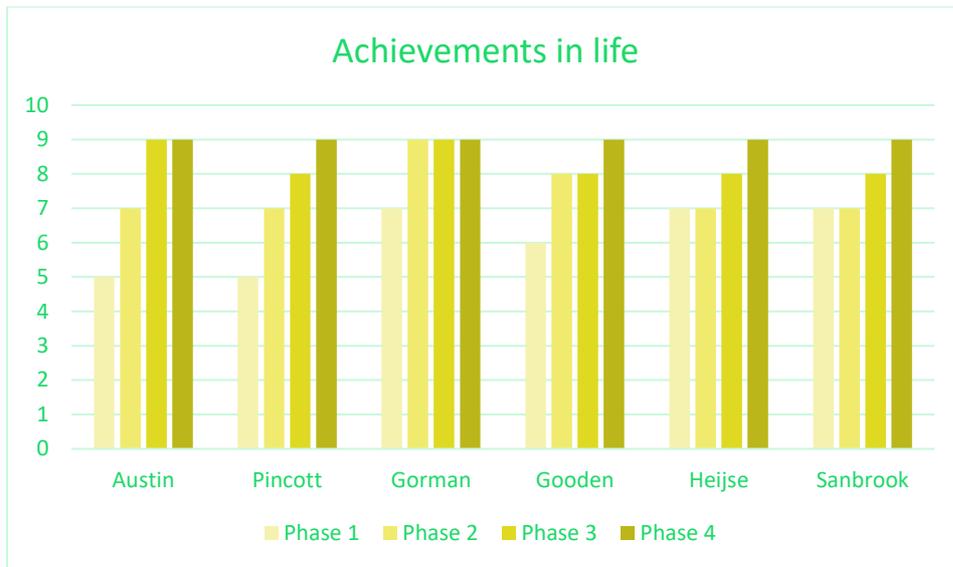


Figure 2: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'achievements in life' (scale of 1-10)

Life satisfaction

All of the respondents felt an overall **increase** in their **life satisfaction** during the phases of transformation (Figure 3).

Only two respondents (Gooden and Gorman) had a decrease from one phase to the next (both in Phase 3), but now, both are **more satisfied** than when they started.

One farmer had a significant change from feeling **very unsatisfied** to **extremely satisfied** (Sanbrook).

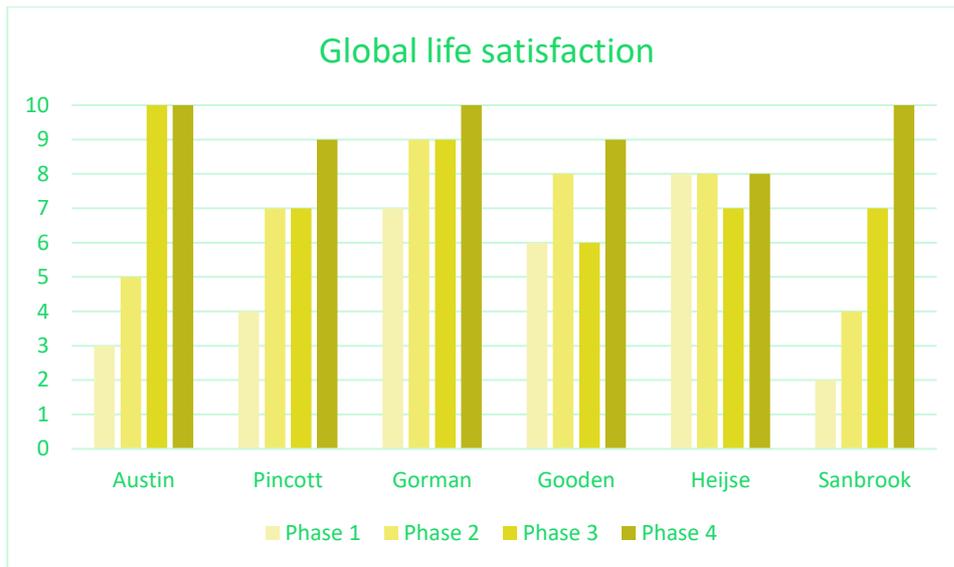


Figure 3: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'global life satisfaction' (scale of 1-10)

Feeling part of a community

Interestingly, three of the respondents experienced a decrease in feeling like they were part of a community when transitioning from traditional practices (Phase 1) to regenerative farming practices (Phase 2). However, as the 8 families group developed and strengthened, all respondents experienced an overall **increase** in feeling **part of a community** (Figure 4).

Now, most of the respondents are **very** or **extremely satisfied**. Again, one farmer had a significant change from feeling **very unsatisfied** to **very satisfied** with their **community connections** (Sanbrook). Another farmer had very little change over time, which could be explained through her joining the group soon after Phase 1 when she commenced farming (Gorman).

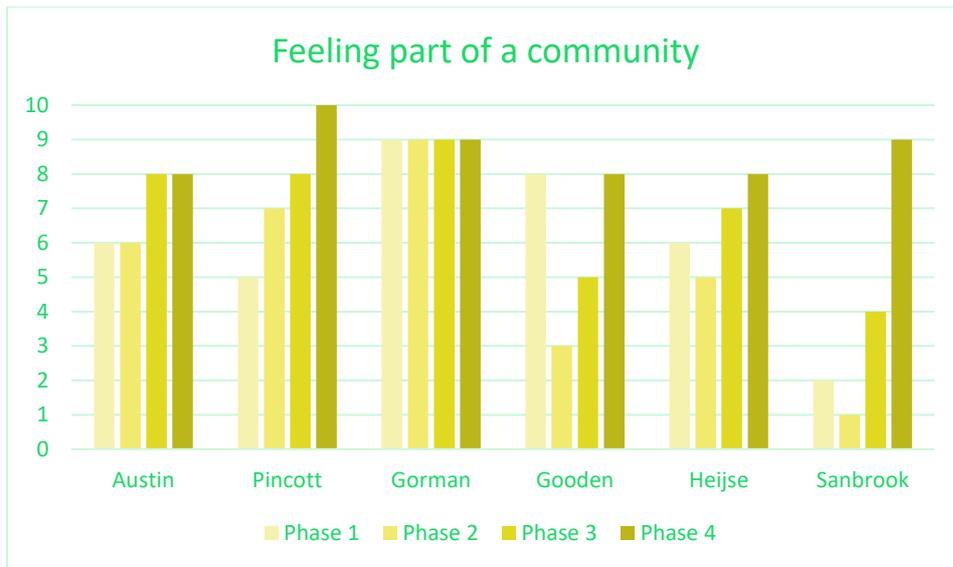


Figure 4: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'feeling part of a community' (scale of 1-10)

Future security

Interestingly, the level of security for some respondents took a few phases to increase from insecure to very secure, with one respondent even feeling greater insecurity in Phase 2 after starting the regenerative practices (Heijse). These trends might indicate the necessity of trust-building for regenerative processes, and the lag-time between practice change and their socio-environmental-economic benefits.

Compared to before beginning their regenerative practices, with three of the respondents feeling quite insecure, the majority of the respondents are now feeling **quite secure** about their future (Figure 5).

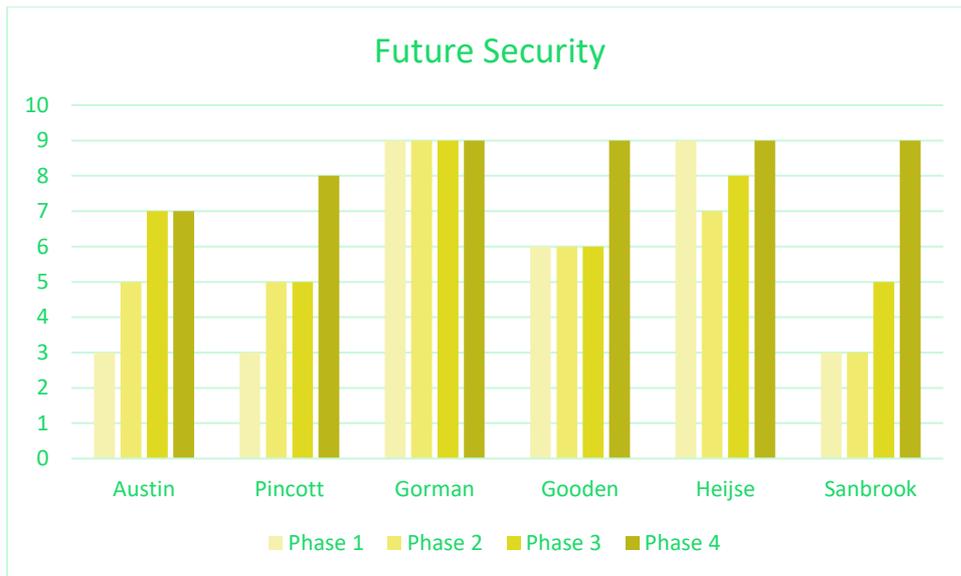


Figure 5: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'future security' (scale of 1-10)

Remaining indicators

For other wellbeing measures, including their standard of living (Figure 6), health (Figure 7), personal relationships (Figure 8), and sense of safety (Figure 9), there was a less obvious pattern of improvement and some families experienced fluctuations in these areas. A few families, before the formation of the group and the transition to regenerative practices, marked these indicators as unsatisfied (3 out of 10), whereas most of the families were already satisfied to varying degrees in these areas.

Significantly, the group is currently feeling, across all of these indicators, very satisfied (marking at least an 8 or above, out of 10), indicating a slight increase for most members.

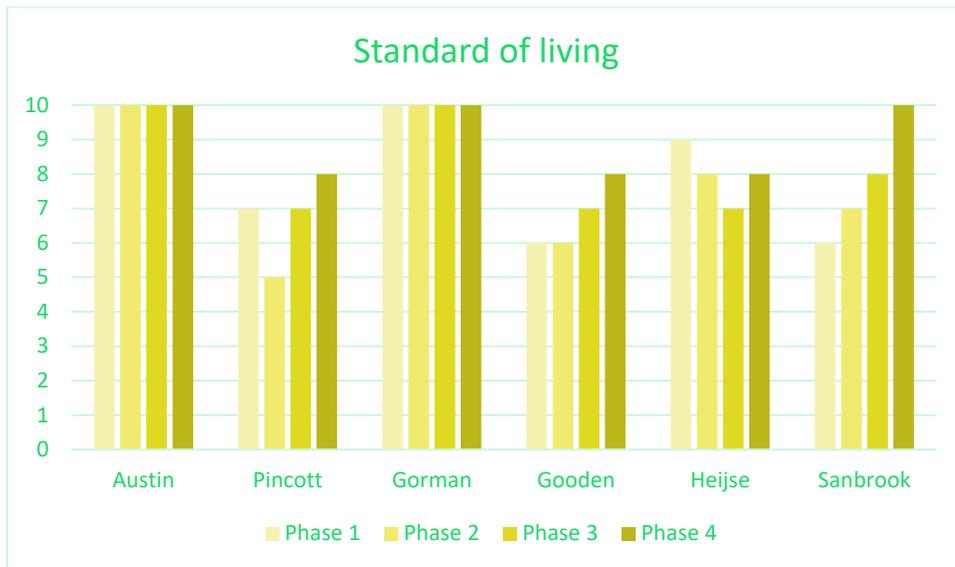


Figure 6: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'standard of living' (scale of 1-10)

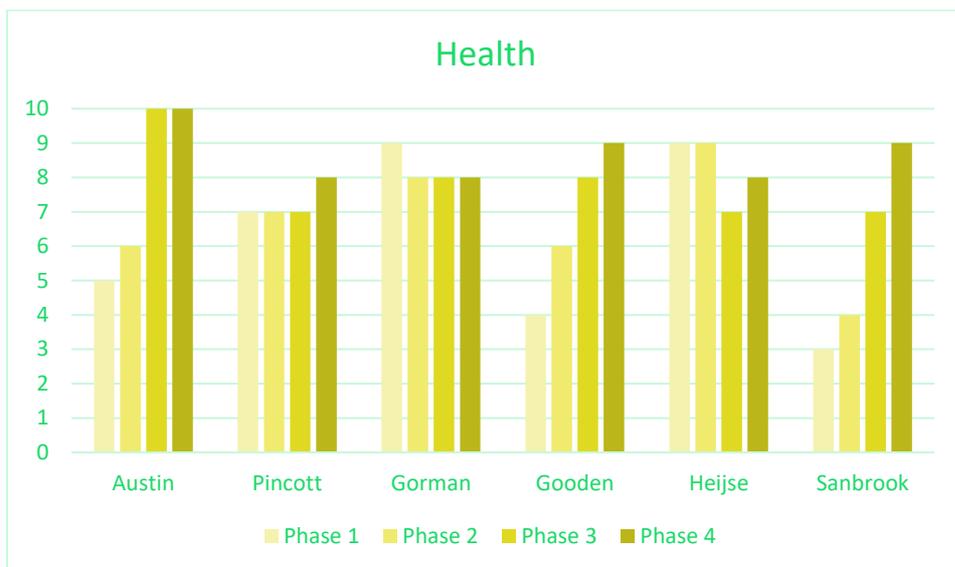


Figure 7: Personal Wellbeing indicator 'health' (scale of 1-10)

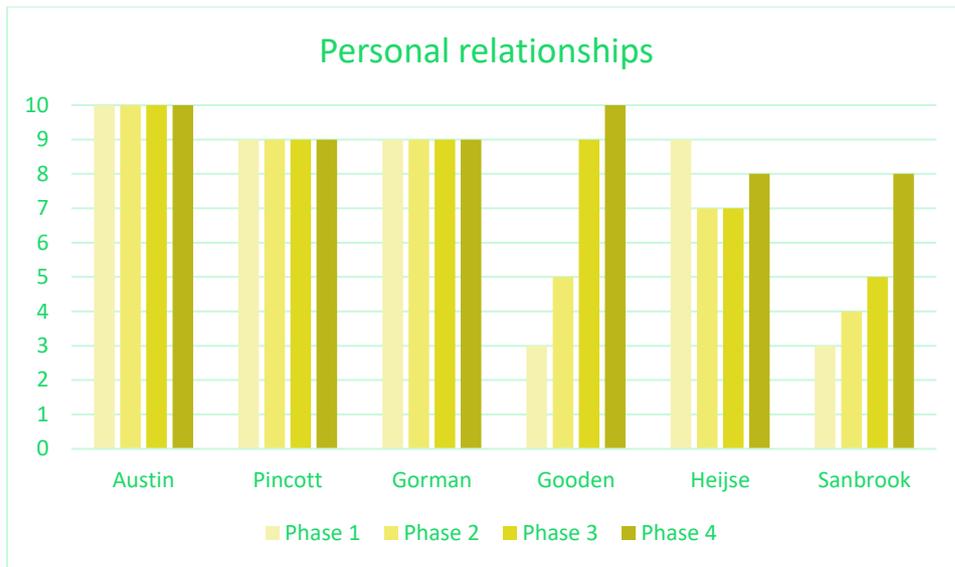


Figure 8: Personal Wellbeing indicator ‘personal relationships’ (scale of 1-10)

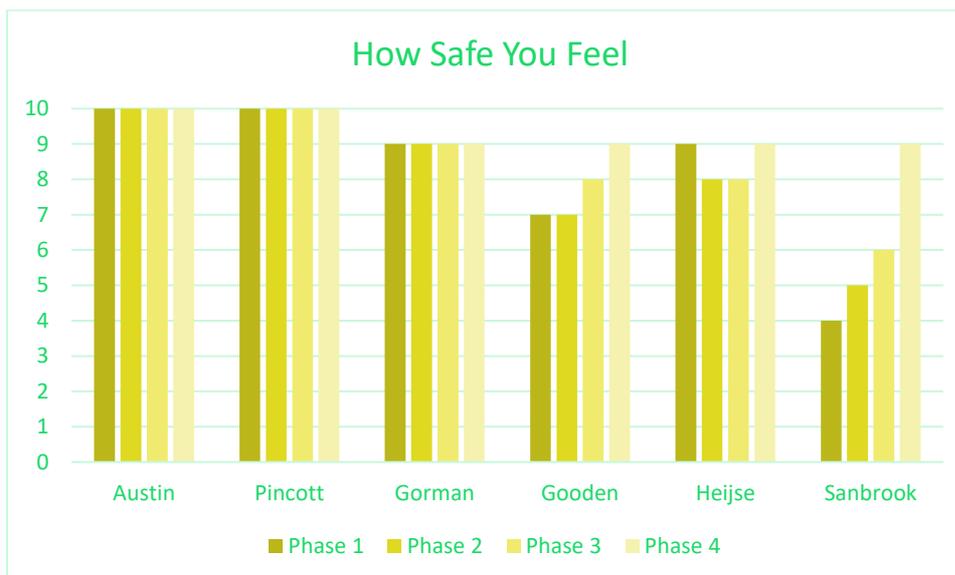


Figure 9: Personal Wellbeing indicator ‘how safe you feel’ (scale of 1-10)

Personal wellbeing survey discussion

The survey results show a pattern of increased satisfaction through the four phases for many of the measures. There are a few exceptions to this pattern. Most interestingly are the results relating to members’ sense of community. Three participants had a decrease in their satisfaction before an overall increase, and one member was very satisfied and experienced no change over time. These results relate to the evolution of the group in the context of each farmers’ transformation process. We discuss this in more detail in relation to Michael and Héloïse Gooden and Rebecca Gorman in the Focus Farmer section below.

To further explain the less consistent pattern seen across other wellbeing measure, beyond the interpretations offered in the Focus Farmers sections below, and the final discussion section, we would need to undertake follow up interviews and consider demographic variables, such as gender, age, education. Variables and context are likely to be important for indicators such as health, where age, pre-existing conditions or the occurrence of an illness could be factors.

Relationship to farming survey data

We asked all nine members to rate satisfaction with four aspects of their lives relating to their relationship to farming, at each phase of their journey with regenerative agriculture. Six members responded and the results are presented below for the group as a whole.

Ability to cope with most difficult conditions on the farm

All of the respondents experienced an increased sense of being able to cope with challenging conditions on the farm by Phase 4 (see Figure 10). Their individual experiences of being able to cope varied prior to practice changes and in the first stage and second stages of practice change (see Phase 1, 2 and 3 in Figure 10).

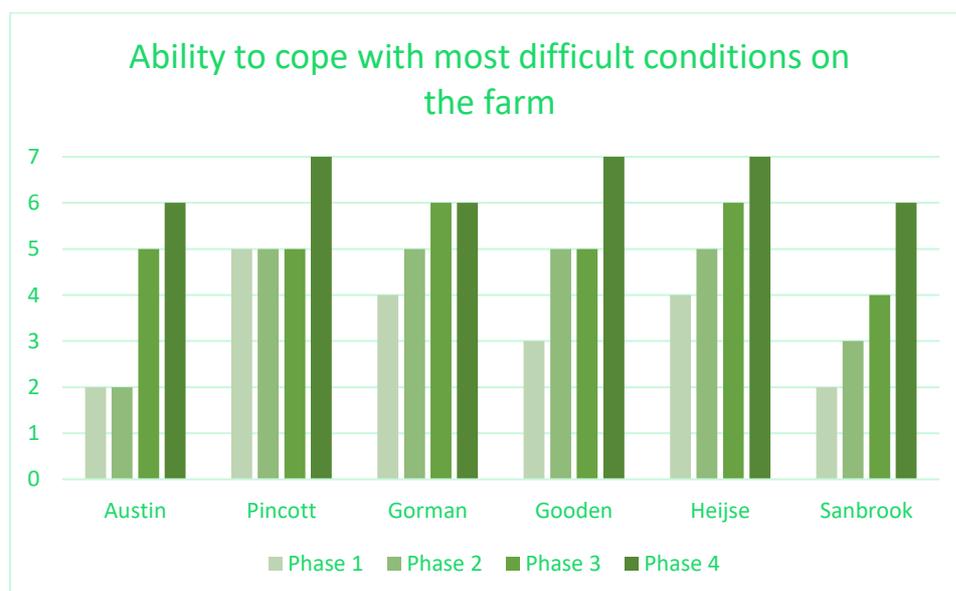


Figure 10: Relationship to Farming indicator 'ability to cope with most difficult conditions on the farm' (scale of 1-7)

Ability to achieve what they want

By Phase 4 all respondents felt like **they could achieve** what they wanted to on their farm, a sign that respondents felt that their vision for their farms were being realised. For some this sense of being able to achieve occurred in the third phase (Austin) and for others it was gradual.

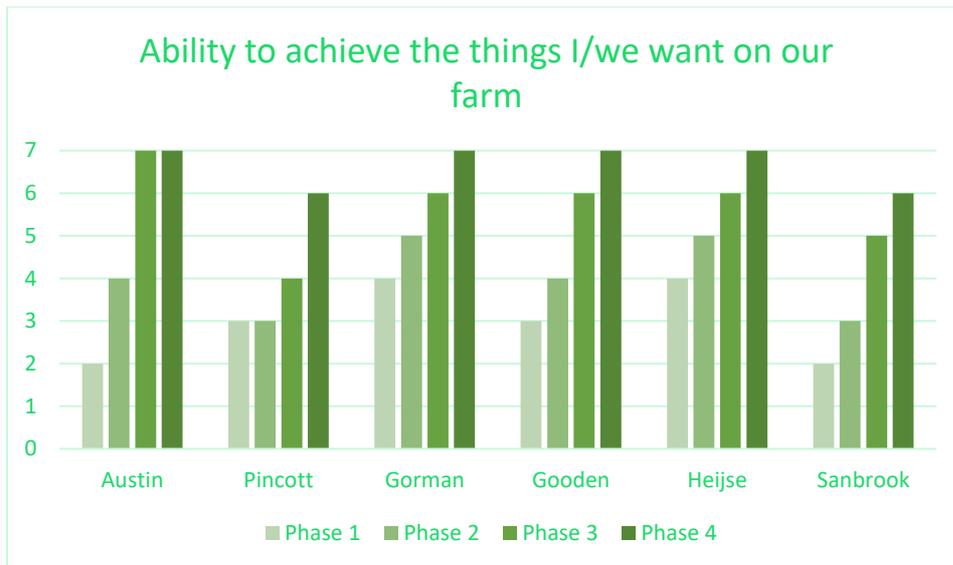


Figure 11: Relationship to Farming indicator 'ability to achieve the things I/we want on our farm' (scale of 1-7)

Ability to make more helpful decisions

Respondents had an overall **increased** sense of making **appropriate farm management decisions** by the final phase of practice changes (see Figure 12). For some this only began to change after Phase 2 (Austin and Heijse). Other respondents began to feel better about making decisions as soon as they started to make practice changes.

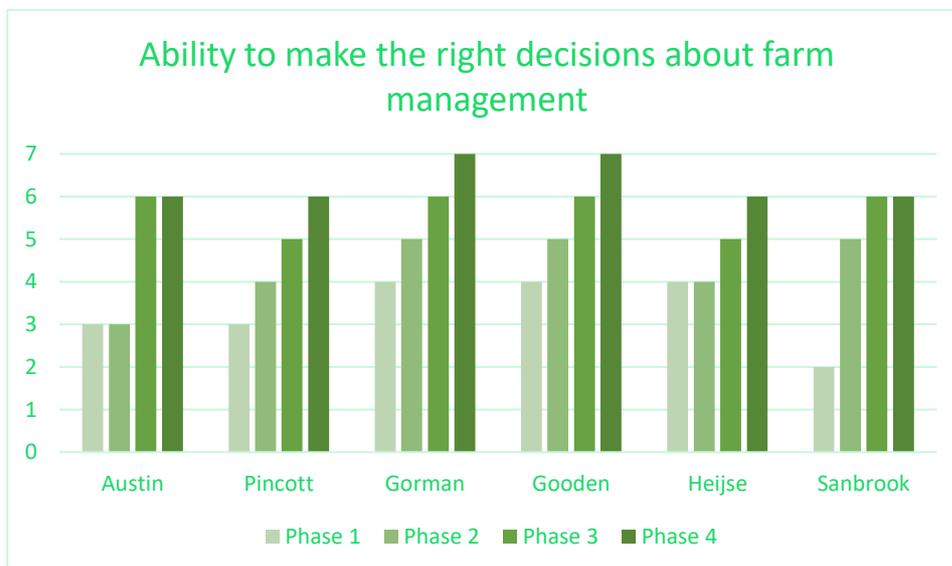


Figure 12: 'Relationship to Farming indicator 'ability to make the right decisions about farm management' (scale of 1-7)

Optimism about the farming future

Compared to before making practice changes, all respondents were **more optimistic** about their farming future (see Figure 13). One farmer had a significant change from feeling a very low level of satisfaction to a very high level across the phases (Pincott).

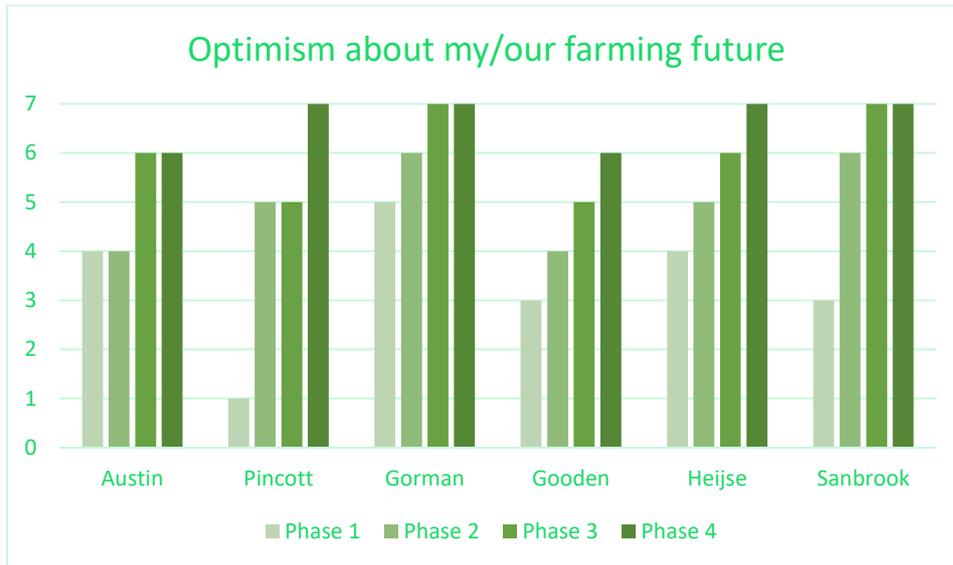


Figure 13: Relationship to Farming indicator 'optimism about my/our farming future' (scale of 1-7)

Relationship to farming survey discussion

The responses to the survey clearly demonstrate a pattern of positive change experienced across individuals in the group in relation to the members' self-efficacy, resilience and optimism. All six members indicated a very high score of either six or seven (on a scale of 1-7 with seven being 'strongly agree') for Phase 4 of their practice changes for each of these statements.

Viewed in combination with the Key Narratives of Transformation analysis we can see a relationship between these improved relationships to farming and the formation of the group into a community of practice.

As outlined in the group narrative above, the 8 families group regularly have opportunities to observe each other overcome obstacles as well as discuss experiences and perspectives in a safe environment. They visit each member's farm, and collectively assess and comment on the farm. By working in a group, the families have access to a 'brains trust' of like-minded people with a shared decision-making framework with different perspectives and experiences. Encouragement from the group has been important for all members in making key decisions. The group helps members to have the courage and self-belief to follow their convictions in the face of skepticism.

Resilient self-efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles and managing failure so that it is informative rather than discouraging (Bandura 2012). Albert Bandura, who developed many early theories around social learning, has noted that this can be achieved through social modeling. That is, observing other people persevere and succeed can raise people's belief in their own capabilities (Bandura 2012).

As noted in the Economic and Production and Outcomes supplementary information documents, the group have witnessed many landscape changes and improvements to their individual and group members' farms. They have individually and collectively experimented with practices, had some failures and successes, and overall improvements. This could be understood to help build self-efficacy, resilience and optimism as individuals are a part of their own as well as the groups process of facing and overcoming challenges and witnessing successes across a landscape.

While the context of the millennium drought is important and moving out of the drought may have been a factor in the positive trend seen in these surveys from Phase 2 (2008-2014), the members also experienced drought in latter phases (Phase 3 with the 2018/19 drought) while still reporting greater agreement with the statements than previous years. This may indicate that members felt better equipped to deal with the challenges of the drought.

The results from both parts of the wellbeing survey point to social patterns that sit alongside economic and production patterns in the wider context of individual farmers transforming the ways in which they approach their farms and farming, and the wider context of the formation of a regenerative agriculture Community of Practice through the 8 families group. Due to the subjective nature of the survey (see Brown et al. 2021 for a discussion on the value of subjective wellbeing SWB surveys) the personal wellbeing and relationship to

farming indicators gives us insights into farmers satisfaction with a range of aspects of their life, including their farming system and the ways they are farming within the system.

Social processes & outcomes (focus farmers)

To support the analysis of the social processes and outcomes of the group, a deeper dive into four focus farmers was undertaken to better understand the relationship between key moments of change (decision-making processes, practice innovations and outcomes) and key indicators of social wellbeing, including each farmer’s relationship to farming.

Focus farmer: Nick and Deanne Austin (Mundarlo)

Key Narratives of Transformation

Through a series of workshops and interviews the Soils for Life team worked closely with Nick and Deanne Austin to reflect on and chronicle their pathway to change.

Figure 14 the Key Narratives of Transformation (through the trigger, activity, outcome) framework, and the 8 families’ themes of land stewardship, holistic approach, peer support, as they relate to Nick and Deanne Austin’s experience.

Key Theme	Trigger	Activity	Outcome
Land Stewardship	Impact of Millennium drought and conventional practices on cattle – bloat, dystocia and feeding.	Reduce herd size and hire professionals to redesign watering system. Stopped cropping, Introduced a ‘flerd’ of mixed sheep and cattle.	Big increases in anecdotal ecology, slow but steady increases in soil health and pasture diversity.
	‘Utopian vision’ for what the property could be like ecologically.	Sold breeding cattle at beginning of 2018 dry period, as soon as it was clear that they would end up feeding through winter.	Huge reductions in dystocia and bloat.
	Fear of fulfilling prophecy of ‘1 st generation gets the enterprise, 2 nd generation expands it and 3 rd generation loses it’.	Encourage family members to take Holistic Management (HM) courses.	Avoided the ‘dust bowls’ and difficulties of other farmers during the 2018/19 drought with a good bank balance.
	Desire to live up to family legacy – ‘My parents were really, really good farmers’.	Clearly define ‘holistic context’ and make decisions for themselves that align with their own context.	Next generation being supported to attend boarding school (at their request) and thinking about succession. Previous generation remains sceptical as regenerative agriculture hasn’t been through enough generations.

Holistic Approach

Discomfort with high risk assessment, with susceptibility of enterprises to weather – e.g. hand feeding during drought, 2 x crop harvests lost to flood.

High debt from succession, drought and floods impeding ability to ‘live comfortably’.

‘treadmill of busyness’ resulting in a lack of time for family, personal interests or ‘time to think and consider decisions’.

HM course in 2001, some practice changes with limited effectiveness.

Reduced reliance on technical interventions and inputs.

Deliberate decision-making that aligns with Holistic Context.

Diversify income streams to include non-weather dependent options: sand quarry and ‘Body Compass’ enterprise.

Consolidate and reduce existing debt and acquire ‘positive debt’ in form of commercial building to support Deanna’s ‘Body Compass’ enterprise.

Manageable debt size and steady increase in profitability with thriving side-business and occupation for Deanna.

‘So, so much happier’ with increased time, people ask ‘what do you do all day?’

‘No regret’ decision-making, that steadily works toward the ‘holistic context’.

Flexible operation - currently 100% trading from mixed herd of sheep and cattle, previous successful forays into cattle breeding.

Peer Support

Fear arising from doubt expressed by previous generation, agronomists etc.

HM course in 2001, some practice changes with limited effectiveness.

Find/ form group of likeminded individuals.

Encourage family members to take HM courses.

Professional support for holistic context and associated changes to enterprise.

Professional design for watering systems.

Validation and understanding for their goals and vision.

Previous generation remains sceptical as regenerative agriculture hasn’t been through enough generations.

‘No regret’ decision-making, that steadily works toward the ‘holistic context’.

Figure 14: Summary of Key Narratives of Transformation – Austin (Mundarlo)

The Key Narratives of Transformation analysis offers insights into Nick and Deanne’s triggers for change and the various aspects of farming life – family time, family legacies, debt, animal health, drought - that they were continually weighing up throughout the change process. It shows us how the holistic approach gave them a new structure (both philosophical and practical) through which they could make decisions and practice changes relating to farm, family and community life. Importantly, we can see how this framework allowed them to revisit decisions and adapt.

Their story of change highlights the importance of pathways to undertake learning, which not only provides farm management advice but helps farmers build a new framework through which to make decisions and adapt to emerging situations.

A more detailed account of Nick and Deanne’s story of change can be found in the [individual summary for Mundarlo](#).

Personal wellbeing & relationship to farming

Through their regenerative journey, the Austin family experienced an improvement in life and their relationship with farming. Nick and Deanne found ‘validation’, guidance and support for their decision-making through their Holistic Context and working with the 8 families group. The changes they made reduced their risk, improved the landscape and increased their flexibility with both time and money. These changes improved their overall perception of ‘life as a whole’ (Figure 15) as well as their relationship with farming (Figure 16) including ‘the ability to achieve the things they want on their farm’.

Key changes in personal wellbeing over the transformation period included:

- Five of the eight wellbeing indicators point to a pattern towards greater wellbeing, with the exception of standard of living, personal relationships and safety, which all had a high rating and did not change through the phases;
- The greatest change was in relation to ‘life as a whole’, which increased from low satisfaction to extreme satisfaction from Phase 1 through to Phase 4 of practice change.

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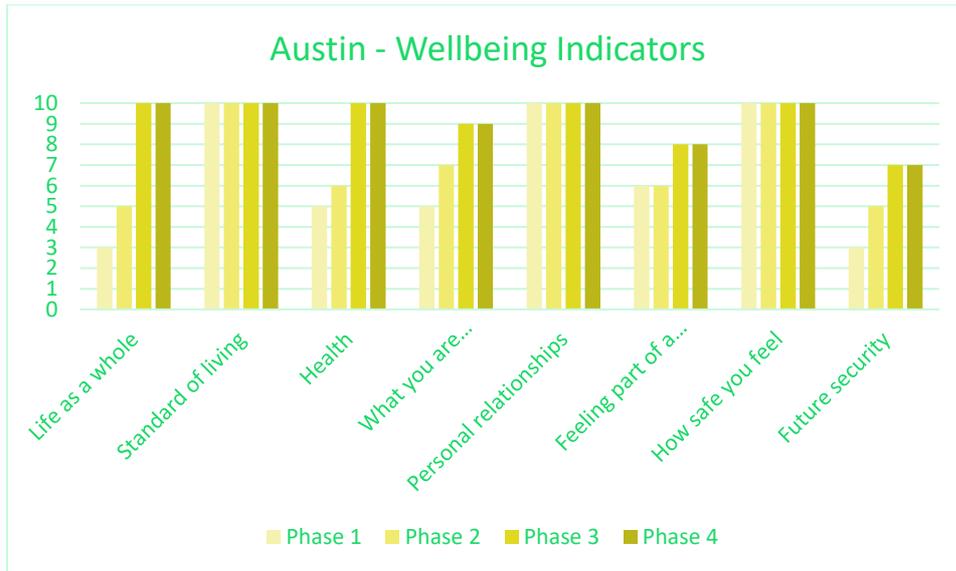


Figure 15: Personal Wellbeing indicators, Austin (scale of 1-10)

Key changes in the Austin’s relationship to farming over the transformation period included:

- An overall increase across the four phases of practice change (Figure 16);
- The greatest change was in relation to the statement *We can achieve the things we want on the farm*, which increased from low agreement to strong agreement from Phase 1 to Phases 3 and 4;
- There was less of a difference between the first and fourth phases for the statement *I/we feel optimistic about my/our farming future*, indicating more stability in relation to Austin’s sense of optimism.

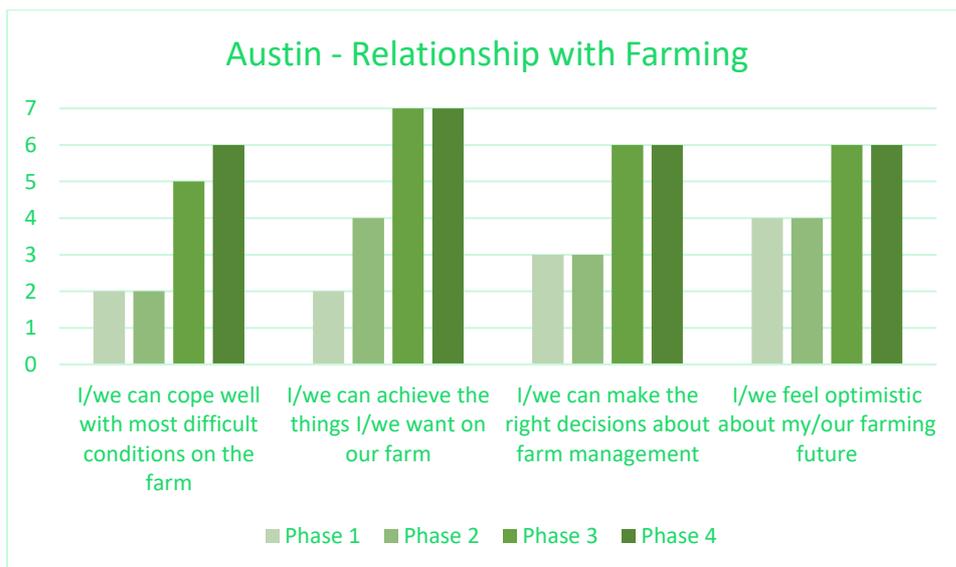


Figure 16: Relationship with Farming indicators, Austin (scale of 1-7)

Focus farmer: Sam and Prue Pincott (Bellevue)

Key Narratives of Transformation

Through a series of workshops and interviews the Soils for Life team worked closely with Sam and Prue Pincott to reflect on and chronicle their pathway to change.

Figure 17 uses the Key Narratives of Transformation (through the trigger, activity, outcome) framework, and the 8 families' themes of land stewardship, holistic approach, peer support, as they relate to Sam and Prue Pincott's experience.

Key Theme	Trigger	Activity	Outcome
Land Stewardship	Failed attempt at high input/high output ag. resulting in land degradation & debt during drought (2006-8) on family farm. Noticed that older farmers 'took their foot of the pedal' and fared much better.	Find land that everybody thinks is 'good for nothing' and bring it back using innovative holistic chicken and cattle grazing.	Land has gone from lots of bare ground to great condition with diverse pasture and good tree cover.
	Poor animal welfare during drought due to hunger & containment lots. 'I had all those hungry mouths on my mind when I went to sleep'.	Set up livestock system that is drought resilient – chickens are core enterprise and stay on through difficult periods, cattle numbers are adjusted.	Core productivity is retained during drought without negatively impacting landscape.
	Desire to 'stop using droughts as an excuse to wreck the land' and 'work with nature' rather than 'finding band aid'.	Chickens follow cattle in a 9-month rotation, spending less than a week on each patch of pasture, guarded by dogs. Extensive tree-planting with Bushlink and Landcare.	Happy and healthy chickens who do not stress -peck each-other due to very low stocking densities and constant access to both sheds and outdoors and new land with fresh and diverse food sources and no faecal contamination - reducing impaction and parasites. Opportunity provided for consumers to confidently spend their 'ethical dollar' on high quality product.

Holistic Approach

Failed attempt at high input/high output ag. resulting in land degradation & debt during drought (2006-8) on family farm. Noticed that older farmers 'took their foot of the pedal' and fared much better.

Family farm sold and having a new family triggered the need to think about what they really wanted.

Discovery that chickens not only improved the soil and groundcover for grazing livestock but also presented a viable business opportunity.

Create a 'holistic context' and make decisions in alignment with that: work with nature, family and community focus, animal welfare, pay off debt.

Shift in core enterprise from cattle grazing with a side of chickens to free-range egg with a side of cattle agistment.

Hire extra labour to help manage the intensity of egg production.

Hire business coach, 'pound the pavement' and share story to find and access market for premium product.

Debt steadily being paid off and new business opportunities are being considered.

Core enterprise provides steady weekly income rather than seasonal, and retains productivity during adverse climactic conditions, albeit with slightly higher costs.

Able to fully participate in family life and active in community with donations, volunteering whilst continuing to run a high intensity enterprise.

Successfully access and retain niche market for premium ethical product with great taste and high Omega 3.

Peer Support

Challenge of trying something innovative without anyone to directly learn from - only 2 people in Aus. doing similar things with chickens and pasture and both unwilling to share.

Need to find likeminded people to discuss ideas and decisions with.

Closest friends are conventional farmers and great to hang out with but not doing things similarly at all so can't discuss.

Join 8 families, visit other farms and reach out to other people doing similar things.

Learn from different people's experiences techniques and ideas.

Group members keep each other accountable to their 'holistic context' and avoid 'majoring in minors'.

Creation and successful implementation of an innovative solution constructed from a range of different elements – Holistic Management meets free- range eggs meets cattle agistment.

Improve decision-making by keeping the focus on what is important and avoid being distracted by details.

Figure 17: Summary of Key Narratives of Transformation– Pincott (Bellevue)

Sam and Prue's Key Narratives of Transformation offers insights into what drove them to make practice changes and seek a community of support, as well as the value of a supportive learning community. Interestingly, it was not only the impact of drought but it was also the recognition that they no longer wanted to use drought as an excuse that led them to rethink how they were farming. Focusing on their story of change in relation to peer support, helps us to understand better the role that community can play in on farm innovations. Like many regenerative farmers at the beginning of their pathway to change, they did not have a community that aligned with the changes they were experiencing on the farm. While they weren't able to connect with others trialling similar practices, the 8 families offered the Pincotts opportunities to expand their perspectives and helped them through the decision-making process.

The Pincott's story of change highlights the importance of peer support from the early days of practice changes and the role of a decision-making framework.

A more detailed account of Sam and Prue's story of change can be found in the [individual summary for Bellevue](#).

Personal wellbeing & relationship to farming

Through their regenerative journey, the Pincotts experienced an improvement in life and their relationship with farming. Sam and Prue's relationship with farming has improved in all aspects compared to before they made practice changes. Their optimism about their farming future was very low before making changes (Phase 1). However, Sam and Prue reported that it increased dramatically as soon as they began to make practice changes before reaching maximum available levels during the current period (Phase 4).

Key changes over the transformation period (personal wellbeing):

- Five out of eight indicators show a pattern of personal wellbeing improvement;
- The Pincotts' satisfaction with feeling part of a community doubled over the transformation period (see Figure 18);
- Their satisfaction with life as a whole had an initial increase when they first started making practice changes (Phase 2), then plateaued during the second stage of changes (Phase 3) before increasing to its current levels of 9 out of a potential 10 points (See Figure 18);
- The standard of living for Pincott fluctuated but showed an overall improvement, while the personal relationship and sense of safety scored high consistently over the phases.

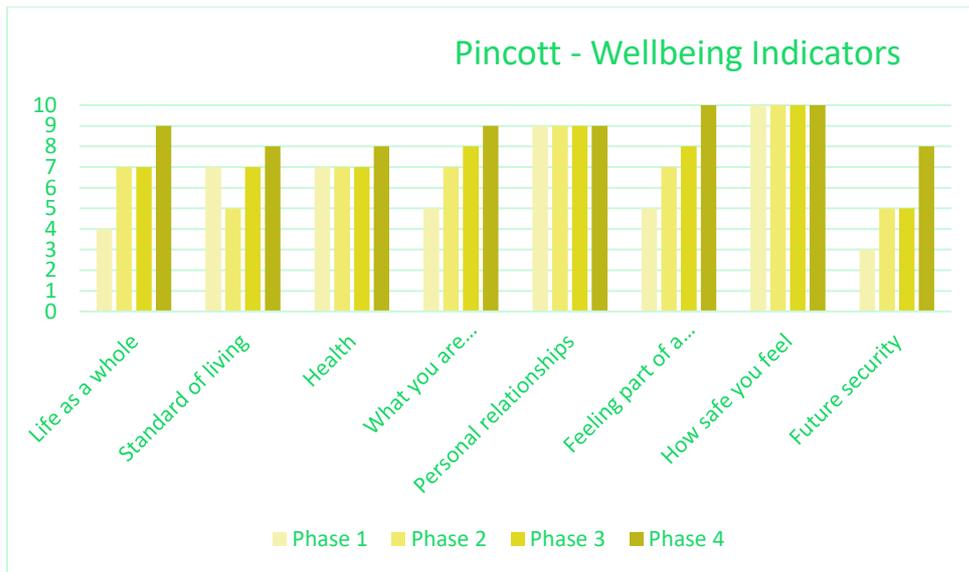


Figure 18: Personal Wellbeing indicators, Pincott (scale of 1-10)

Key changes over the transformation period (relationship to farming)

- Optimism about farming future is the most dramatic change. In the beginning, Sam was not optimistic about the future at all, whereas now, he strongly agrees that he feels optimistic about the future (a rise from one in Phase 1 to seven for the final phase of practice changes);
- Sam and Prue's perception of their ability to achieve the things they want on their farm and make the right decisions about farm management was moderately low before making practice changes (Phase 1) and increased steadily over the transformation period;
- Their perceived ability to cope well with difficult conditions on the farm had a much higher baseline before making practice changes (Phase 1) and did not show improvement until it reached maximum available levels during the current period (Phase 4).

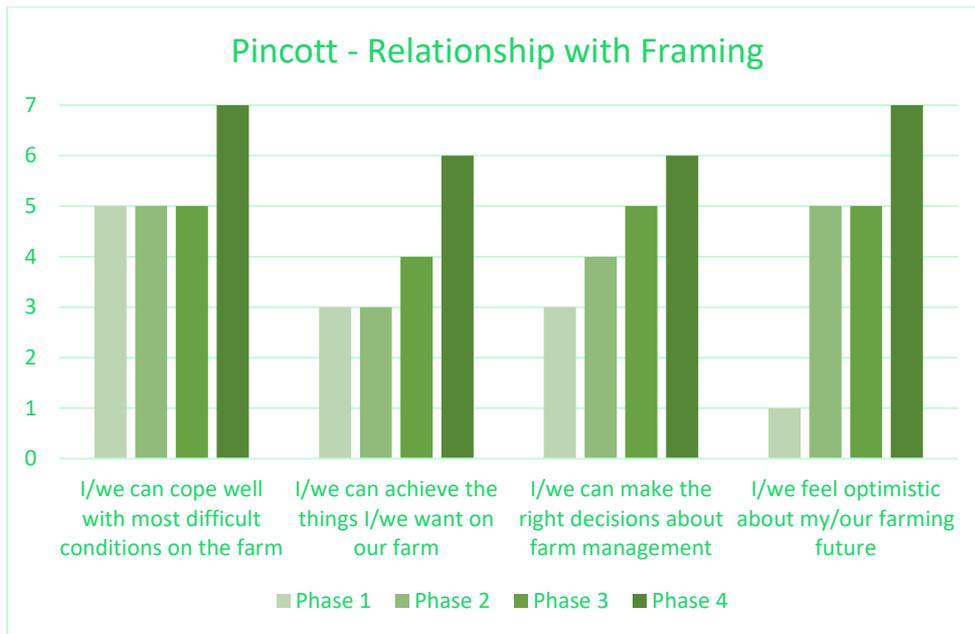


Figure 19: Relationship to Farming indicator, Pincott (scale of 1-7)

Focus farmer: Rebecca Gorman (Yabtree West)

Key Narratives of Transformation

Through a series of workshops and interviews, the Soils for Life team worked closely with Rebecca Gorman to reflect on and chronicle her pathway to change.

Figure 20 uses the Key Narratives of Transformation (through the trigger, activity, outcome) framework, and the 8 families' themes of land stewardship, holistic approach, peer support, as they relate to Rebecca Gorman's experience.

Key Theme
Trigger
Activity
Outcome
Land Stewardship

Grew up on family farm. Father died prematurely. Mother ran farm with help of a manager for another ten years, before the family left when Rebecca was 19 years old.

Worked as a journalist and continued to visit property as a farm stay with her children and husband. Realised if she wanted to return to the land it was 'now or never'.

Yabtree West in good condition, for conventional management – some erosion on hills and fertiliser on river flats.

Unsuccessfully looked for properties in Sydney.

Returned to childhood property and realised area was her 'country' and 'felt like coming home' - very quickly found place 1.5hrs from original property.

Kept existing farm manager of 17 years (Dean Hann) and his family on.

Actions are taken toward benefits '50 years into the future'. Rebecca's grown up son works in Canberra but returns to the property on weekends to plant trees and 'invest' in his future. Daughter 'into' horses.

'Feel like Royalty living on the River'.

Dean's long-term knowledge of the interaction of livestock, farming practices and the landscape (e.g. where stock are 'drawn to') directly influenced whole farm planning.

Holistic Approach

Inspired by thought leaders such as Martin Royds and Alan Savoury to contribute to bigger issues such as climate change.

Not mechanically minded, couldn't picture herself 'sitting on a tractor all day', preferred livestock.

Working as a journalist and in policy wanted to do something to contribute toward a greater good.

Holistic Management (HM) is used as a framework to bring various ideas together (e.g. NSF, Biodynamics etc).

Whole farm planning overlays the layers of different elements e.g. infrastructure, fencing, water etc on a topographic map.

Check decisions against a bigger context (HM context).

Continual gradual adjustments over time to fencing, water systems and contours.

Improved ground cover, biodiversity and water infiltration.

Successful trading operation.

Recognition of 'ecological mindset'.

Ability to let go of things that aren't working.

Son uses HM framework to make decisions about his own future.



Figure 20: Key Narrative Pathways of Transformation snapshot – Rebecca Gorman (Yabtree West)

Rebecca Gorman's Key Narrative of Transformation tells a story of change that differs in several ways from other members of the 8 families, offering insights for those who may be considering a return to a family farm, a tree change, or a change in careers and are new to farming itself, let alone regenerative farming. It was a combination of the right time to return to the land and a recognition that farming could actually be done in a way that had the potential to mitigate climate change, which drove Rebecca and her husband John Sevier to purchase Yabtree West. While other farmers were driven to learn new approaches because of past challenges and failures, Rebecca was not a farmer and so needed to find opportunities to learn.

The commonality with other members of the 8 families is that Holistic Management and the 8 families offered the support and structure that helped Rebecca overcome on-farm challenges and build confidence about her farming future.

A more detailed account of Rebecca's story of change can be found in the [individual summary for Yabtree West](#).

Personal wellbeing & relationship to farming

Through her regenerative journey, Rebecca Gorman has experienced overall a consistent and high level of satisfaction across most of the personal wellbeing indicators with a few exceptions highlighted below. Rebecca's relationship with farming has improved steadily since beginning to implement holistic decision-making, rotational time-controlled grazing and natural sequence farming on Yabtree West (Phase 2).

The consistency of wellbeing ratings as well as the use of the higher end of the scale and narrower point difference, stands out compared with the other members. Thinking about these results in relation to Rebecca's pathway into regenerative farming, suggests a few factors may be relevant. For instance, the baseline phase (Phase 1) was brief with no negative triggers on the farm (such as drought or farm debt). In fact, the farm was 'well run by conventional standards' and she continued to employ the existing farm manager of 17 years, Dean Hann who shared her interest in seeking alternative farming approaches. Quite quickly, Rebecca joined the 8 families group and also undertook Holistic Management training, giving her a network of support and a framework for decision-making. Rebecca knew she didn't want to farm conventionally and was, 'Always interested in biodynamics, permaculture but finally Holistic Management offered frameworks that I could easily use'.

Key changes over the transformation period (personal wellbeing):

- Overall consistent and high level of satisfaction across wellbeing indicators;
- Satisfaction of her life's achievements increased by 20% during the first stage of changes (Phase 2) and remained steady throughout the rest of the period (Figure 21);
- Satisfaction with life as a whole increased in the first stage of changes and plateaued during the second stage of changes, but has now increased to 'extremely satisfied' (scoring a 10 out of a potential 10 points) (Figure 21).

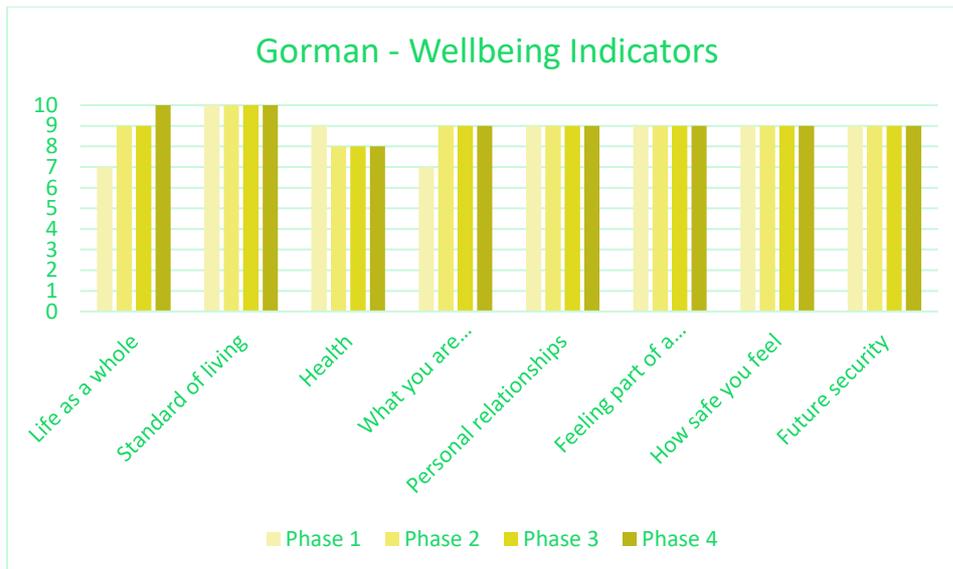


Figure 21: Personal Wellbeing indicators, Gorman (scale of 1-10)

Key changes over the transformation period (relationship to farming):

- Steady increase across all indicators with some plateauing at Phases 3 and 4;
- Her perceived ability to cope with *most difficult conditions* on the farm increased through the first and second stage of practices changes (Phases 2 and 3) before plateauing currently (Phase 4);
- Rebecca's perceived abilities to *achieve the things she wants* on farm, and to *make the right decisions* about farm management, increased steadily until they also reach a maximum level during the current period (Phase 4);
- Her *optimism about her family's farming future* reached a maximum level by the second stage of changes (Phase 3).

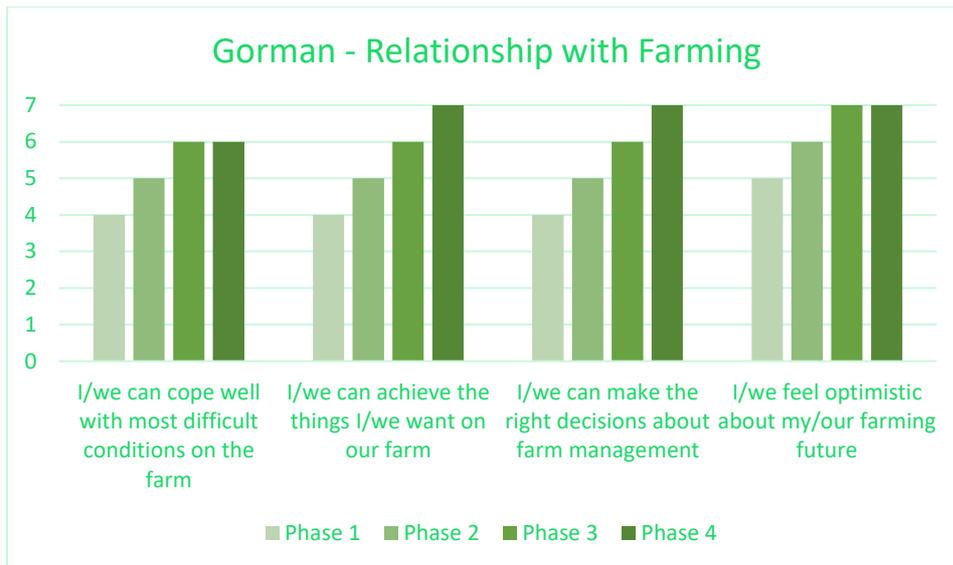


Figure 22: Relationship to Farming indicators, Gorman (scale of 1-7)

Focus farmer: Michael and Héloïse Gooden (Willowlee)

Key Narratives of Transformation

Through a series of workshops and interviews, the Soils for Life team worked closely with Michael and Héloïse Gooden to reflect on and chronicle their pathway to change.

Figure 23 uses the Key Narratives of Transformation (through the trigger, activity, outcome) framework, and the 8 families' themes of land stewardship, holistic approach, peer support, as they relate to the Gooden's experience.

Key Theme
Trigger
Activity
Outcome
Land Stewardship

Farm visit from Patrick MacManaway and read Bruce Pascoe's 'Dark Emu' resonated with 'being part of the land, rather than managing it'.

RCS course asks participants to consider what their 'purpose' is and whether farming aligns with that purpose.

Barefoot walking and grounding to connect with the country.

Constantly observing the landscape and livestock and their response to changes and conditions.

Looked into formal stewardship schemes.

Sense of clarity and connection.

Responsiveness to landscape.

Sound decision-making.

Built ½ inch of soil in the last year and has seen improvements to biodiversity.

Reject stewardship schemes as 'not holistic enough' focussed on 'poorly functioning area' and required land to be 'locked up' and exclude livestock.

Holistic Approach

Financial debt arising from succession during the Millennium Drought, an early divorce settlement and 'poor decision-making' during early years.

'We were watching the paddocks blowing away'.

Early exposure to and interest in livestock.

Took HM course in 2010.

Angus stud 70% carrying capacity, 30% trading.

Time-controlled grazing and water points.

Cease cash crop, introduced mixed species cropping.

RCS principles.

Sold homestead block of land with 1st pass fencing and water infrastructure and live in Wagga and commute.

Private sale of stud primary income, inaugural bull sale coming up

Financials 'up and up'.

Rebuilding infrastructure: took a more planned approach during the second attempt, incorporating the practical lessons learned about e.g. fence distance and water pipe size from the first attempt. Hope to build a new homestead and live out there in the next few years.

Peer Support

Michael was interested in livestock and his brother was interested in cropping. Each wanted to invest in different farming models so they decided to split the property into portions during succession.

HM good for vision but not for practicalities.

Tennis friends with Michael and Ana Coghlan.

Visited other farms doing regenerative farming, such as Michael and Ana.

Founding member of 8 families.

Did RCS training and became an educator.

Support to make difficult but necessary decisions such as selling off blocks of land including the homestead.

Confidence that advice comes from knowledge of their holistic context and has their best interests at heart.

Successful early experiments with mixed cropping lead to the idea that he and his brother may have been able to reconcile their farming models if they had fully understood HM at the time.

Figure 23: Summary of Key Narratives of Transformation – Gooden (Willowlee)

The Key Narrative of Transformation approach has offered insights into the importance of an ongoing supportive community of practice to help with many of the challenging situations that arise along the way and the difficult decisions that need to be made. The Holistic Management has provided Michael and Héloïse with a useful framework and helped them to make the shift to being more responsive to the land. The group has offered a community that they can trust to help in the decision-making process. Michael also believes that involvement in the group is mutually beneficial to individual members who all both *contribute* and *receive* advice and support. Like the learnings from other focus farmers, the significant learnings here are the importance of a learning opportunity (including an opportunity for an alternative framework) and a supportive social learning context. It would seem that these elements are essential to the successes experienced through the change process.

A more detailed account of Michael and Héloïse's story of change can be found in the [individual summary for Willowlee](#).

Personal wellbeing & relationship to farming

Michael was part of a strong family and community when the effects of conventional farming during the Millennium drought began to affect his relationship with farming (Phase 1). When he went out on his own and began Holistic Management (Phase 2) his relationship with farming began to improve (Figure 24), however his sense of community declined, as seen in the fluctuation in the indicator of ‘feeling part of a community’ (Figure 24). Over time, he and Héloïse built strong relationships through the 8 families group and with RCS and Landcare and felt part of a strong community again. The spike in *future security* in Phase 4 may correspond to overall farm improvements in the fourth phase of practice change.

Overall agreement went up across the four phases of practice change regarding their relationship to farming. This trend makes sense in relation to Gooden’s experience of the Millennium Drought, which resulted in big financial and ecological losses, and Michael’s shift in mindset and adoption of regenerative agriculture principles and tools from training (e.g. RCS). It is also interesting to note that for the statement *I can cope well with most difficult conditions on the farm*, after a rise in two points from Phase 1 to Phase 2, there is then a plateauing. During Phase 2 Gooden, ‘Began to make decisions in line with a “holistic context” to achieve an abundant place that captures sunlight, utilizes moisture and enhances our resources’. However, during Phase 2 and 3 Michael noted poorly managed grazing and cropping. He was also managing two properties (Holbrook and Willowlee) and was only just starting to develop the holistic infrastructure for Willowlee in Phase 3. By Phase 4, the Goodens had taken some time to work out the best balance in regards to cattle management, and were beginning to experience a number of successes on the farm, including better water retention, maintenance of cover through drought and subsequent flood.

Key changes over the transformation period (personal wellbeing):

- Overall increase in satisfaction between Phase 1 to Phase 4 across each area;
- Some fluctuations in the indicators of ‘life as a whole’ and ‘feeling part of a community’;
- Future security remained constant for Phases 1 to 3, there was a spike at Phase 4.

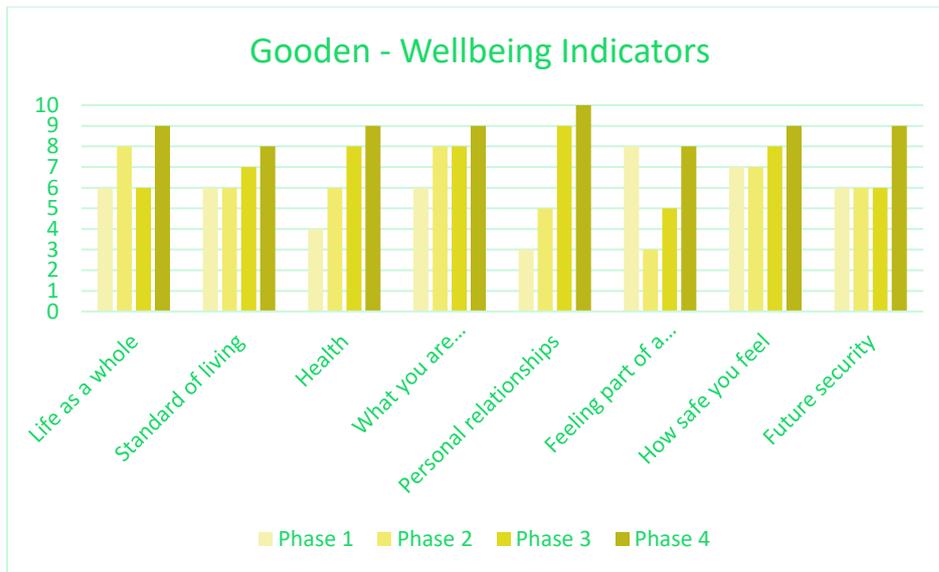


Figure 24: Personal Wellbeing indicators, Gooden (scale of 1-10)

Key changes over the transformation period (relationship to farming):

- Significant change in relation to self-efficacy (*we can achieve the things we want to on our farm*) and resiliency (*we can cope well with most difficult conditions on the farm*), which both increased by four points from Phase 1 to Phase 4;
- For Phase 1 and 2 there is a rise in agreement with the statement *We can cope well with most difficult conditions on the farm*, after which time there is then a plateauing.

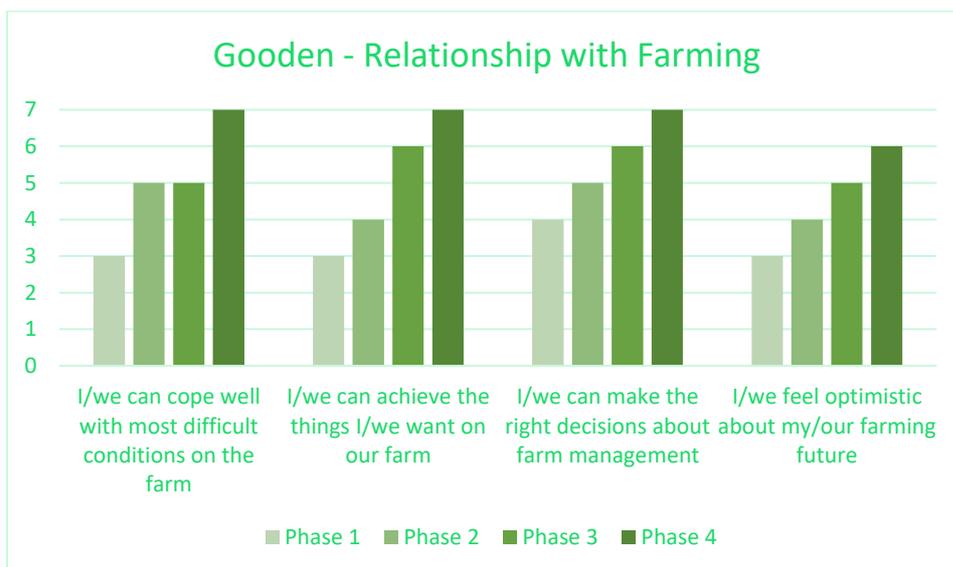


Figure 25: Relationship to Farming indicators, Gooden (scale of 1-7)

Discussion

Wellbeing through a Community of Practice and of place

Our findings support other studies which have found that regenerative agriculture contributes to farmer wellbeing by developing farmers self-efficacy, adaptive capacity and social connectedness (see Brown et al. 2021, p.4). The social research conducted for this case study adds to the evidence (Cross & Ampt, 2017) that following regenerative practice change, landholders' observations and experiences powerfully reinforce the conviction that the environment is responding to their change in management. This strongly impacts on their motivation to continue and sense of self-efficacy.

Unlike other wellbeing studies which have focused on specific points in time, our survey has asked participants to reflect on a time period that correlates to phases of practice change, including a baseline phase of before changes and three phases of practice changes. This approach of tracking change over time in relation to the adoption of regenerative agriculture, contributes to other studies which have accounted for variables (see Brown et al. 2021) or compared with conventional farmers (see Brown et al. 2017), and also revealed a positive correlation between regenerative farming and wellbeing in most measures.

The results relating to farmers satisfaction with feeling part of a community are interesting because they relate specifically to the formation of the group itself, and suggest that wellbeing is not only related to a shift to regenerative agriculture but to the formation of communities of practice, and in the instance of the 8 families, a community of place. The relationship between wellbeing and the group was also confirmed through interviews and workshops where members reflected on the value of the group.

While the results from the 8 family case study show an overall improvement in the 'feeling a part of a community' indicator for most members, a few exceptions warranted further discussion. The results of Rebecca Gorman compared with Michael Gooden were an exception offering us the opportunity to see a direct relationship between this area of wellbeing and the formation of a community of practice and place through the 8 families group.

For Rebecca, her relationship with the group began early on in her regenerative journey, which likely accounts for the high level and consistency in satisfaction with this indicator. Rebecca's experience is resonant with (albeit for perhaps different reasons) a study using cross sectional data from a sample of farmers who participated in the 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey which revealed a small but significant positive relationship between being a regenerative farmer and farmer satisfaction with community connectedness (Brown et al. 2021, p. 10).

For Michael, there was a fluctuation as he initially went out on his own to begin Holistic Management his sense of community declined before increasing overtime through the strong relationships he and Héloïse built through the 8 families. Michael may have been initially experiencing something similar to a study of 40-60 male graziers in NSW, which revealed that the regenerative farmers were less satisfied with feeling part of their communities (see Brown et al. 2017, p. 21). Regenerative farmers often mentioned that at the beginning of their journey, they can feel ostracized from their previous communities.

Looking at this aspect of the 8 families case study in relation to other studies highlights the mixed results in relation to sense of community connectedness. One of the main differences might be whether the farmers have found a like-minded group of people to share and learn with. Together, the 8 families case study and these other studies indicate that community connectedness and the role of peer support and social learning is a rich area for further research.

Encouragement from the group was clearly an important factor for all members in making key decisions about practice change. The group and focus farmer Key Narratives of Transformation analysis, has given us insights into the value of the group in supporting farmers through their ongoing evaluation and adaptation in the journey to achieve ecological, social and economic outcomes. It has also shown us that learning opportunities and a supportive social learning environment are helpful to guiding farmers through their transformation process. They all stated that the group helped them to strike out in a different direction, despite both internal and external pressures not to. Several made really big decisions, such as selling breeding stock and buying or selling properties. For others, it was having the courage and self-belief to go against family or local traditions. All members were strong in their conviction that the group was instrumental in their progress through the phases.

Research suggests that being ostracised locally for being unorthodox is a common experience, and that connections with like-minded people are very helpful in persisting with a desire to be innovative ecologically (see for example, Graham & Bartel 2017, p. 235). The 8 families group believes that 'the pendulum is swinging' on regenerative agriculture. Previously, the term 'regenerative agriculture' was 'almost a swear word', but now, some believe, it is a subject that can be discussed at the pub.

The 8 families case study have formed a Community of Practice facilitated by the Holistic Management framework. The Community of Practice shares many of the elements of a common culture identified by Cross and Ampt (2017, p. 593) in a Community of Practice of grazing eco-innovators, including: being aligned through Holistic Management; farmers' belief that they are making positive landscape changes; decision making involving experimentation and monitoring rather than set formula; an attitude of letting go of control over nature; the association of profit and production with increased financial stability and increased quality of life and satisfaction.

A Shift to holistic thinking and practice

The regenerative journeys of the 8 families is characterized by experimentation and adaptation on the farm, resulting in overall improvements across social, economic and ecological areas. Our research framework has allowed us to explore the triggers that have led to such experimentation and adaptation, including the Millenium Drought, farm debt, poor animal welfare and biodiversity loss, climate change, and inspirational ideas and approaches, and to see how these triggers have set members on a pathway of change which involved shifts in thinking, a reassessment of values, and in-turn changes to the ways in which members manage their farms.

It is clear from the interviews that all but one of the members of the 8 Families group already had a strong land stewardship ethic before the group started. This is consistent with published papers from the decade of Landcare era saying that most landholders had a strong stewardship ethic and this didn't change with membership of a Landcare group (Curtis & De Lacy, 1998). By the end of Phase 1, all members were looking for better ways to manage their landscapes to avoid the worst impacts of drought: soil loss and the financial burden of buying feed to keep animals alive. All experienced the desire to change following exposure to a number of ideas, but the experience that seemed to generate the strongest motivation to change was Holistic Management training. It was the shared experience during Holistic Management training in 2007 that inspired the ongoing contact which led to formalising the group in 2009.

This training has given members a framework through which to undertake both mental and practical shifts through an assessment of what they value and how their farming aligns with their values. Overall, the shift involves the adoption of a holistic approach to farming, in which the farm is seen as a system that involves family, community, as well as animals and ecosystems. In this holistic view, profit is important but also related to other social and ecological outcomes, such as time with the family (see the [Economic Report](#) for the survey in which families prioritise financial goals in relation to other goals).

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