

## Land & Water Australia Community Fellows

In their search for a sustainable future, Land & Water Australia Community Fellows, Bill and Debbie Hill often reflect on Thoreau's message, together with their own dictum, "if we can conceive it and believe it, we can achieve it". Bill and Debbie thrive on the challenges of constantly learning about, adapting to and communicating their farming techniques and experiences. "Through these activities, we are achieving our vision of sustainability, financial rewards and, importantly, enjoyment from our farming lifestyle," says Bill.

For almost 30 years, the Hills have managed three properties totalling about 560 hectares grazing fine merino sheep, prime lambs and beef cattle at Warrenbayne, south of Benalla in North East Victoria.

Bill's passion is communicating their extensive farming knowledge and experiences. He enthuses, "I am developing a 'mind map', a diagram showing key concepts and thinking pathways, to illustrate the big picture view of our farming operations. I also apply 'mind mapping' to plan and prepare new ventures.

"And when we combine the mindmaps with photos in a Power Point presentation, this approach helps to clarify and share ideas with other farmers and also land carers and university students," says Bill.

Over the past few years, Debbie has recognised a variety of native grasses on their property and their importance, if well managed, in providing a green pick even throughout severe drought periods.

Debbie has since developed extensive knowledge and networks, spreading the word about the benefits of retaining native grasses and managing them for production farming.

"We have successfully applied rotational grazing to our native and introduced pastures for maximum production and profit", Debbie adds with a smile as she signals Zip, the kelpie, to assist with moving a mob of freshly shorn sheep into another paddock.

A common goal

Bill and Debbie's community spirit was originally kindled when the Warrenbayne Boho Land Protection Group was formed to address spreading salinity in the area. Low-lying areas were showing stark evidence of salinity discharge, with large sections of almost bare ground with little productive value and, worse, polluting valuable watercourses with salty water.

The Warrenbayne Boho Land Protection Group, formed before the Landcare movement and name became popular, has achieved major changes throughout the local landscape. Debbie explains that, "like other Landcare groups, this one gave local landholders a common goal, regardless of their personal interests and views, resulting in strategic revegetation works being carried out by members on a number of properties around Boho and

Warrenbayne".

Bill and Debbie's properties have been in the Hill family for 100 years, so old photographs provide a valuable reference for long-term landscape changes. The Hills have transformed their most salt-affected discharge areas by fencing and revegetation that uses direct seeding. Now these areas not only look good but are highly valued, short-term refuge areas for sheep, especially during the current drought. Similarly, fenced-off native vegetation remnants on hilltops, where recharge occurs, help lower the water table in low-lying parts of the catchment and provide important refuge areas for woodland birds and other native wildlife. They also add colour and character to the largely cleared landscape and form useful shelter belts and wildlife corridors, especially when linked with roadside vegetation.

#### More Information

Land & Water Australia's Community Fellowship will support the Hills' production of an integrated document detailing their nearly 30 years of experience in farming sustainably.

See Land and Water Australia Website. <http://www.lwa.gov.au/education>.