

Lower River Murray

Wild Eats: Growing opportunity on Ngarrindjeri lands



Background

The Lower River Murray, Lakes and Coorong region is home to the Ngarrindjeri nation. The Ngarrindjeri people have a long and proud history as the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waters in this region. Their vision is for all people to be caring, sharing, knowing, and respecting the lands, water and all living creatures in the region.

Ngarrindjeri people have been nurturing the land since time immemorial. With a wealth of experience and knowledge of sustainable and culturally appropriate resource management, their shared goal is for the Ngarrindjeri people, children, and descendants to lead healthy lives on healthy land and waters.

Following the 2009 drought that caused extensive damage, the Ngarrindjeri people received funding to revegetate the land most severely hit, specifically around the Coorong National Park and lower lakes. They built three nurseries at Meningie, Murray Bridge, and Raukkan, which three organisations – Ngarrindjeri Ruwe Contracting (NRC), Ngopamuldi Pty Ltd and Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association (NLPA) – have together been managing. Over the years, the nurseries have emerged as a significant employer of Ngarrindjeri people, successfully building skills, experience, and capacity across their staff. However, the grant which supports the nurseries is expected to reduce significantly in the 2019/2020 financial year. Given their role in providing employment opportunities and caring for country, the three nurseries have sought Jawun's support to commercialise their operations.

Approach

In the last 18 months, nine secondees over five rounds were tasked to help the nurseries transition from a government funded project to a full commercial operation.

In Round 1, 2016, Grant Parfitt (Senior Business Analyst, RAA) explored ways the three nurseries could move towards a commercial basis. While he identified measures necessary to increase revenue, reduce expenses, and improve efficiency and effectiveness, Mac Bollella (Communications Manager, SA Government), worked with key stakeholders on a retail brand for the nursery: 'Wild Eats' was born.

Three secondees arrived in Round 2, 2016, to build on these efforts: Chris McNamara (Geologist, Woodside), Kirsten Bernhardt (Transaction Advisory Services Manager, Ernst & Young), and Cole Butler (Customer Service Officer, Westpac - Bank SA). They undertook a series of projects to implement the business case, which led to clearer understanding of financial position and cost per plant. This was used to develop a funding application that was then awarded by the SA Government.

Then in Round 3, 2016, Sam Hughes (Continuous Improvement Engineer, Woodside) brought fresh eyes to the business case, and after careful analysis was able to refine the cost per plant as part of a new business case. The new case recommended the nurseries participate in the native food market through intensive farming, rather than be limited to revegetation and tubestock production.

Sally Knight (Corporate Affairs Adviser, Woodside) in Round 4, 2016 conceptualised key products for market; specifically, native herbs, spices, and greens. She also refined the Wild Eats food and tube stock product line to develop a marketing strategy, including the development of www.wildeats.com.au. Meanwhile, Suzannah Randle (Project Engineer, Woodside) scoped the planning requirements for wild harvesting and intensive farming.

In Round 1, 2017, Julia Beardsley (Business Development Manager, SA Government) supported the nurseries to pitch to a leading Australian wildflower exporter, following an introduction to a Jawun Board member's philanthropic network. The exporter has since expressed strong interest in a joint venture.

Outcomes

Through Jawun's continued support the nursery alliance has successfully received \$540,000 from state and federal governments. This funding will be used to support the utilisation of the existing nursery facilities to enter retail and wholesale markets, and also support ongoing revegetation projects. By tapping into the niche emerging native plants and foods industry, Wild Eats hopes to attract the attention of national and international markets.

Ron Clarke (Nursery Manager, NLPA) relayed how the community's goals and visions for the land have a direct connection with the nurseries: *"Our ambition is to maintain the capacity we have developed over the past five years to keep planting on our country and contribute to the health of our lands and waters. The plants and their stories are integral to our culture and history. There is a symbiotic relationship between our plant nurseries and the wider community."*

Luke Trevorrow (Managing Director, NRC) appreciated the secondees' work in transforming the nurseries into a commercial enterprise: *"Kirsten's efforts will allow us to grow and employ Ngarrindjeri to work on our lands and waters, which our people have done for thousands of years. This funding supports us to develop our Wild Eats line of native food and medicinal products, and to also keep planting on our country and contribute to the health of our lands and waters."*

Reflecting on Sam Hughes' contributions, Kevin Kropinyeri Jnr (Nursery Manager, Ngopamuldi) said: *"Sam helped us focus towards an outcome that perhaps we weren't as focused on initially. Sam helped me with simple process management tools that I could apply. He also helped set up regular inter-nursery meetings to improve our own coordination. Before Sam arrived we were headed towards a situation where we were internally competing to provide one type of product - tube stock. Sam helped us to think about diversifying and that has me very excited for the future."*

At the same time the secondees each had a valuable experience, and believed that skills had been transferred both ways. Round 4, 2016 secondee Sally Knight said: *"I believe all the nursery guys have picked up on elements of communications/branding and my work has got them thinking about all the possibilities for Wild Eats. I have always been open to listening and learning from the guys, which in turn has made them feel more empowered and valued. It's been a very rewarding, eye-opening, and memorable experience for me. I will continue to advocate for the good work Jawun does in communities around Australia."*

Next Steps

With the commitment of the Ngarrindjeri nation and the support of the secondees, the nurseries are now well positioned to create a sustainable and long term investment in their people and assets to realise economic prosperity, while caring for land and water in a culturally respectful and appropriate manner. There is still work for the team, as suitable products, growing requirements, times, and equipment and material all need to be organised. However, with increased awareness of their brand and by actively promoting native plants, Wild Eats hopes to create a niche market in supplying plants that can be used in everything from modern cuisine to medicine, scents, beauty products and wildflowers.