

3BBR Bilby community Radio

John Russell audio transcript

- Voice of Interviewer
Shelley Varcos: Welcome to *Back to Bilby* – a journey through our history and the people who shaped our town....
Our focus today is on John Russell, the owner of Russell Native Nursery, which is the place to go for specialist local grasses and native vegetation.
John, it's good to talk to you again.
- John: Yes Shelley, we had a good chat over at the Hundred Nugget Creek landcare site the other day. How are you going with getting those grass seeds propagated?
- Shelley: Fine thanks John. Your instructions are always pretty clear. You're one of the leaders with Bilby Landcare, perhaps you could start by explaining what your role is, why you got involved?
- John: Of course. Bilby Landcare is about regenerating the land, replacing imported trees, grasses, plants with what used to be growing locally, so it's more self-sustaining. It's also about getting some of the original seeds and plants back into the local district – my nursery specialises in propagating them so you can replace the grasses and trees along a creek bed, try to restore it to its original environmental condition.
- Shelley: What have the farmers had to say about that?
- John: (laughs) You've put your finger on one of the main problems. We have spent so long destroying the vegetation, just to get the maximum amount of money out of the soil – ploughing for crops, planting the wrong grasses, putting fertilizer in cleared paddocks so cattle and sheep can break down the grass roots and erode the sides of creeks... and farmers, they're not too keen on me coming in and saying it's their fault!
I wish I had a dollar for every time a farmer has told me people have got to eat...and they are just providing the best way to support the community!
- Shelley: I gather you've had some problems, trying to change people's ways...
- John: That's understandable. Everyone's been farming here since the 1860s or so, and it's been the major source of income.
But I want to make greenies more than just a dirty word – it should be a way of living with our environment, everyone needs to think green.
- Shelley: Have you always been interested in green issues, the environment?
- John: As you know, Shelley, I've done a Masters in Natural Resource Management, and that all started when I was a kid and my parents used to take me on long hikes – rambles, Mum would call them. And we rambled everywhere, all around the state. Never got lost, I always seemed to have an inbuilt compass. Sometimes Mum and Dad would ask me to get us back to camp, in really thick bush, no tracks, and I could always do it. Dad calls me the GPS – you know,

Global Positioning System. I never had to buy one!
And we'd camp out overnight, listening to the birds and animals by a campfire, trying not to leave any footprint, any rubbish or sign that we'd been there. It was a bit of a game then - they were magical times.

Shelley: Were your parents from here?

John: Dad was from Bilby, Mum was from the UK. You know my dad, James, he used to be a bit of a farmer himself. He had inherited his father's small farm over on the plateau next to the old Lambert place, and was busy doing all the things I criticise farmers for now. He went off on his 'big trip' to the UK, and met this girl, who talked him into going off to Germany for an environmental protest march. I'm not sure if it was the girl or the issues, but he became a real greenie after that! Mum persuaded him to set the farm up as a model self-sustaining environment, she started the Russell Native Nursery.
And that was my mum – she's always been pretty persuasive!

Shelley: Did she come over to Australia right away with James after the German protest march, settle down?

John: I don't think Mum ever settled down. She was fascinated by different countries, always liked travelling. She took Dad on quite a few long trips – visits to all sorts of environmentally endangered places, protesting all the time about deforestation, waste of water resources, tearing down the jungle, wood chipping – you name it, she protested about it!

Shelley: What did she think about Bilby?

John: You can imagine she found it pretty hard – she never really felt like she belonged. It takes about three generations anyway for anyone to belong here! And no one understood what she was trying to say about the environment. I know they called her Greenie Gabrielle, just to tease her. She was pretty fiery, got in lots of arguments. Then when I was about ten she finally left – she got a great job offer, travelling with Greenpeace to every environmental hotspot she could find, organising lots of protests. She's never been back to Bilby...

Shelley: You must have found that hard. How did your father cope?

John: Well Dad and I have always looked after each other, it works well. He got a bit lonely when I was at university for so long – that was for about seven years. I'd come back and help him at the nursery in the holidays, but I know he misses Mum. He still hears about her, he's a member of Greenpeace too, and sometimes she writes – but she was never one to stay in the one place too long so it's hard to keep track of her.

Shelley: Do you have family John?

John: In a manner of speaking. I have a partner, Marian Loh – we met about eight years ago when I went to a conference in Indonesia. We've neither of us thought we need to marry. I guess I'm a bit nervous of pinning someone down, after Mum!

We think there's enough starving children in the world, so we made the decision not to have children. I have to say that's been hard at times, but you've got to stand by your principles. I'm not convinced we've got much of a world to leave to the next generations anyway.

- Shelley: What's happened to that farm on the plateau? Do you live there?
- John: No, we live in town with Dad, near the nursery. He needs the company, he's getting on a bit now. But we're setting the farm up to be a model sustainable working environment, with a small area of organic vegetables, natural vegetation, a wetlands area to attract birds and other wildlife, solar and wind power, recycled water. We're going to open it to the public next year we hope – to show people how to set up a self-managing farm. Marion has put so much time into it, she's the one who's been setting it up, talking to the Bendalong Regional Tourist Authority about how to get into the local tourist guides, all that sort of thing. When Dad goes we'll probably move up there. It's like a miniature paradise – it's hard to get time off from the nursery and the Landcare business, but I just love the days we both spend there.
- Shelley: How much do you think Bilby has changed? What was it like in the old days?
- John: Yes, it's funny looking back. Bilby used to be such a farmer's town – you know, there with the shops and pubs all for the local farmers, the football teams full of farmers' kids...
- Shelley: You played football didn't you?
- John: For a while. It's the best way to belong to a community like Bilby used to be.
- Shelley: Didn't you have quite a few fights with Chops Lambert on the footy field?
- John: (Laughs) I wouldn't call it fights – after all, we were on the same team! Chops has always been a bit prone to barge through the packs without thinking about tactics – I guess he still does that now with his business association!
I remember one fight though – it wasn't on the field, it was after the game in the changerooms.
- Shelley: Was this the one about Myfanwy Fallenby?
- John: You've heard about it have you?
- Shelley: Not the details – Chops refused to discuss it on our program last week.
- John: It wasn't all that big an issue, but you know how important life is to teenagers. Myfanwy had just broken up with Chops, and he was badmouthing her a bit in the changerooms. You know she was a bit of a wild kid when she was young? Went to lots of parties, flirted with the boys on the football team, wore the most amazing outfits! But there was absolutely nothing in it, she was just a loving sort of person, very generous, really enjoyed being with people and having a good time - pretty creative too. Well, Chops went a bit too far, so I

told him not to be so rude – and he was feeling a bit sensitive anyway because Myfanwy had told him some home truths about his lack of communication skills – so he just lashed out, caught me a beauty...I hit back, didn't have nearly as much strength as him so I sort of bounced off him and I ended up at the bush nursing hospital with a broken wrist. But he was there too, with broken ribs – because at least three of Myfanwy's friends on the team just piled into him, knocked him into the lockers. They thought it was about time he was taught a lesson!
The only problem was that we lost the finals because there were about three of us injured and unable to play!!

Shelley:

I remember hearing about that finals series – everyone was so disappointed, it was Bilby's best chance at a premiership in ten years. (Pause) In some ways you're still in a fight aren't you. And the same people are involved...how does it feel to be opposed to these two now? Myfanwy and Chops?

John:

Oh, we're not opposed – it's not a personal thing. We all want what's best for Bilby. You asked before how I think Bilby's changed – well, it's at a really dangerous point. If we have much more growth, Bilby will just turn into a town without any heart and soul, without any sustainable ongoing income, like a third world country depending on tourism. You know what will happen if Bilby loses its wetlands area, the frogs and grasses? It will lose what has made it so attractive through that TV series, what is so wonderful about its ambiance. Bilby is more than a series of historic buildings or coffee shop culture...it's a living and breathing community full of people and natural resources who need to exist side by side, in harmony. We need trees to provide us with oxygen, the plants and animals to keep our environment in balance.

Shelley:

But don't we also need the tourist dollars?

John:

I'm realistic, we need tourism, it has certainly helped Bilby economically – it was a bit of a ghost town when I was young. But Bilby has a great chance here to set up sustainable tourism – ecotourism, not growth at all costs. Instead of getting jobs for our kids building houses and hospitals, we could teach them how to build boardwalks for the wetlands, or ecologically sustainable retreats with solar and wind power, recycled water systems. It is a chance to set Bilby up, not with a leading-edge medical centre, but as a leading-edge ecotown. We shouldn't be going for Tidy Town awards – how about environmental awards to showcase what can be done with sustainable tourism?

Shelley:

Have you had many people listening to your message? Is there interest in ecotourism?

John:

There certainly is globally. Look at the issue of global warming at some of the world's most beautiful tourist destinations in the Pacific, they're having to think really laterally, and do something now before it's too late. There's some great ideas...we in Bilby can learn from what's being done to set up ecotourist resorts around Australia too – Marian and I went to this marvellous eco-resort for a holiday recently – all totally self-sustaining, beautiful vegetation being restored, all the wildlife left in its natural habitat, and everything was done to stop human footprints being left on the environment...it reminded me of when I went camping with Mum and Dad as a kid...

- Shelley: What do you think you and Landcare can do to set this up in Bilby?
- John: I don't really think it's up to me and Landcare, I think it needs everyone in the community to get involved. I can suggest actions, start by showing examples of what works – but nothing will happen unless we can get everyone thinking more green, acknowledging that we need to change.
I'm a great believer in the power of community activism, grassroots people power that takes responsibility for every part of what being a true environmentalist means. Maybe there's a bit of my mother coming out in me – perhaps we should organise a Save the Growling Grassfrog march down Main Street! We could march right past the mall – give Chops something to really complain about!
- Shelley: I can just see Chops enjoying that – he's such a fan of the Growling Grassfrog!
Thank you for your time today John. You have a very strong vision for Bilby – I'm not sure that we're ready for ecotourism yet, but it has raised lots of questions for the people of Bilby to discuss and consider.
- John: Thanks Shelley. That's all I want at the moment, getting everyone involved in thinking about Bilby's ecological potential.
- Shelley: That was John Russell, of Russell Native Nursery, the last in our series of third generation Bilby residents.
If you want to find out more about his ideas for the future, go to the Bilby Landcare website.
Thank you for listening to *Back to Bilby*.