

LANDCARE ENTERPRISE OFFICER CASE STUDY:

WEONA FARMSTAY

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INTRODUCTION

Weona farmstay is located on a fully operational 7000acre wheat and sheep farm, 20kms north of the townsite of Narembeen. Kevin and Iona Mortimore run the farmstay in conjunction with their farm because they wanted to open their home to visitors, both Australian and overseas, who are interested in experiencing the farming lifestyle of the Western Australian Wheat belt. Iona loves to cook and Kevin and Iona both love meeting people and entertaining, so they are in their element when the farmstay is full of overseas visitors enjoying a barbeque or home made bread.

The two straw bale cottages were built 3 years ago, and each is fully furnished and able to sleep 7 people comfortably. When large groups book the farmstay, they are accommodated in an additional cottage and guest rooms in the house also. Bed and breakfast are provided at the farmstay, with additional meals provided if requested by guests. The cottages are roomy and comfortable with all the comforts of home except for the kitchen sink because you don't have to do the dishes! Visitors can spend time on the farm and see what a normal day on the farm involves. Animals such as kangaroos and emus are kept as pets on the farm for visitors to feed and view up close.

THE EARLY DAYS

Kevin and Iona considered the idea of operating a farmstay for several years before they set up Weona Farmstay. Iona was offered work in Narembeen, however she didn't want to work off farm so that she could be at home with her family. With their interest in entertaining and opening their home to people, and Iona's cooking skills, a farmstay was the best option for them. They saw an opportunity on their farm and after attending a Community Opportunity Workshop in Narembeen, the idea was cemented and they started to action the ideas and plans they had been considering for several years.

Initially the Mortimores accommodated several people and groups in their own home and as they found out this suited them, they looked into building further accommodation on their property. They saw straw bale buildings in a magazine and found out as much as they could about them. After visiting a few straw bale buildings and finding an architect experienced with straw bale buildings, they drew up a design, had it approved by the architect and local council, and then started building.

BUILDING THE STRAW BALE COTTAGES

The straw for the straw bale cottages was grown and baled by the Mortimores, which reduced the cost of building. Both buildings were constructed at the same time, first the cement pad was laid down. Next, the straw was cut and baled, Kevin cut and baled the straw between 11pm and 2am when the straw was moist so that the bales would be tighter. Building the cottages started the very next day and the walls were up in four days. Construction of the cottages took four months of non-stop work, the only setback being a heavy downpour of 4 inches of rain on the bales before they were rendered. This meant they had to take 11 days off to wait for the straw to dry out before the walls could be concreted. At the end of the four months, the buildings were established to the point where they had walls, a roof, veranda and all doors, windows and furnishings.

On completion of the building, the furniture was set in place. Both cottages have a theme of the 1920's/1930's era. The furniture and facilities of the cottage are all modern, new and comfortable, however the bed frames, quilts, oil lamps and additional furniture make you feel like you have stepped back in time. There is little heating or cooling required in the cottages due to the thick straw bale walls, the insulated roof and a full verandah around each cottage.



The furniture of Weona Farmstay Cottages is charming and creates a homely environment for guests.

Iona sought out furniture for the cottages to reflect the 1920's to 1930's era of Australia. This is reflected in the wrought iron style beds, quilts, cupboards, mirrors and extras such as old trunks and room dividers. Oil lamps and candles, lace curtains, 1920's style wooden business desks and tables, as well as a claws foot bath in the bathroom are added extras that add to the uniqueness and charm of the cottages. The black and white photographs of Narembeen pioneers farming create an almost museum style feel in the cottage identifying with the history of the region. A chocolate under the pillow is another added extra that indicates that the Mortimores have thought of everything to make guests feel completely at home.

The cottages have a very natural and rustic look about them with earthen floors on the verandah and bark remaining on the verandah posts for a more natural look. The gardens consist of native species of bushes and trees. There are no steps in or around the cottage for easy wheel chair and pram access.



The view from the front verandah of one of the straw bale cottages.

BENEFITS TO THEIR FARM

There have been a number of benefits returned to the Mortimores property since taking on the challenge of running Weona Farmstay as well as the farm. For Kevin and Iona it has been a great experience in meeting new people and enjoying the cultural exchange of getting to know people from other countries. The variety of people they have met from different countries has been an interesting experience for the whole family and has taught them about a number of different cultures. At the same time, Kevin & Iona love to entertain and cook for people and with the farmstay they are regularly engaged in this activity and have been able to modify their own lifestyle to incorporate something that they really enjoy doing.

Other benefits include the financial side of things, bringing in an additional income to that generated from farming. Due to the success of the farmstay they have also looked at other possibilities for the farm and recently introduced cattle to the property. Introducing a new industry to the farm has diversified the range of activities of interest occurring throughout the year to show farmstay guests. It has taken over two and a half years to develop the farmstay to its current position, it is now regularly booked out and has been a stable source of income for the farm.

While the Mortimores have previously been involved with landcare activities such as planting and fencing off trees on their property, the farmstay has given them further opportunities to be involved in landcare activities. The Mortimores property borders a reserve that is known to have Mallee fowl living in it, and the Graball Catchment Group have recently been awarded funding to establish a stretch of trees and fencing to create a corridor between this reserve and a nearby reserve about 10km away. Approximately 8km of the trees and fencing are located on the Mortimores property. This will improve the habitat of the mallee fowl and other local native species living in the bushland, as well as improving their farmland.

BENEFITS TO THE NAREMBEEN COMMUNITY

There are obvious benefits to the Narembreen community that have developed as a result of the farmstay and these are social, economic and environmental. Socially it has increased the variety of people passing through Narembreen and also provides a place to stay for people temporarily working in the area. The international visitors to the farmstay provide opportunities to people in the town to interact with people from different cultures and generate tourism income to the town. A number of travellers make their way from Wave Rock near Hyden through Narembreen and due to the high number of people making this trip, it is another opportunity to link Narembreen into the tourist route and increase tourism dollars being spent in the town. If events and venues are established and become known in Narembreen there will be further opportunities to attract people to the town in future.

Economically the town benefits from the farmstay as regular food supplies and household provisions are purchased for the farmstay. These additional purchases for guests support the local businesses and community. The farmstay also creates employment opportunities for people in the local community.

Environmentally the Narembeen area benefits from the farmstay in their assistance with the protection of the rare mallee fowl. The cooperation by the Mortimores in constructing a corridor between two bush reserves to improve the habitat of the species will increase the possibility of maintaining and increasing the number of mallee fowl in the area. This will also increase the knowledge and awareness of the species in the community. Kevin's involvement in another nearby bush reserve with excellent tourism potential indicates the enthusiasm of this family in protecting their local environment and incorporating it into a potential tourist attraction.

FUTURE PLANS

At present, Weona Farmstay consists of three cottages with bed and breakfast facilities and the opportunity to experience the peace and tranquillity of living in a rural community. It also offers the opportunity to see how a farm operates and experience the lifestyle that goes with it. At present the Mortimores wish to extend to accommodate 45 people, with an additional building to cater for functions or meetings. These plans are on the drawing board at the moment however Iona has visions of accommodating and catering for corporate retreats so that Perth businesses visit the farmstay to relax and unwind for a few days.

IN SUMMARY

- The Mortimores love running their farmstay and everything associated with it.
- They saw a need for accommodation in their local area and took on the challenge of meeting that need.
- Patience is important, this didn't happen overnight.
- Need to work hard, while they have enjoyed it this has taken a lot of hard work to get to where they are.
- Advertising – this has included brochures, website and good word of mouth. Advertising broadly at first to see what works and then stick with the advertising that works best, but don't keep paying for ineffective advertising.
- Be prepared – lifestyle needs to be flexible to meet the needs of farmstay guests.
- Setback, can't have a break as they work on weekends as well as during the week, but can get help in if required.

- The Mortimores are willing to give advice or information to others who are interested in taking on a similar venture.
- Through Weona Farmstay, visitors are able to experience the lifestyle of a farming family, this is how the Mortimores live and they want others to share that experience.

