

Steep country grazing

Ron Barnacle - Beef Farmer, Bass Hill

Areas of concern

- Poor pasture growth
- Lack of paddocks
- Gully erosion
- Lack of shelter
- Stock water quality
- Access and safety
- Efficiency of management



The property sits high above the Bass River valley and Westernport

Benefits

- Higher stocking rates
- Improved stock water quality
- Safe access to whole farm
- Nine hundred acres reduced to a one man operation

Action Taken

- Application of chicken manure and lime,
- Rotational grazing
- Fencing and revegetating gullies as paddock boundaries
- Fencing off and planting above dams
- Gravity feed trough water system
- Creating a network of access tracks



Revegetated steep gully that also acts as a shelter belt and paddock boundary

Steep country grazing

Ron Barnacle - Beef Farmer, Bass Hill



Ron speaks at the Targeted Land Stewardship launch at his property

Ron Barnacle and his manager Col Knox represent an emerging management model in the Gippsland hills; that of tree-change owner and local manager. Ron brings many years of management skills, business acumen, capital and creative thinking to the enterprise while Col brings generations of local farming skill and knowledge and a thorough, considered approach to whole farm management. Between them they have created a 900 acre steep country beef enterprise that is run as a one man operation.

When Ron first bought the property he was captured by the panoramic views of green hills, mountains and water and gave little consideration to the inherent farming difficulties of steep wet gullies and exposure that came with the property's elevation. The subsequent 11 years have been spent turning gullies into paddock boundaries/shelter-belts, creating a network of contour access tracks and instating a fertiliser and rotational grazing regime to maximise soil health and pasture growth and smooth out the peaks and troughs of feed availability throughout the year.

Who: Ron Barnacle and manager Col

Where: Bass Hill

Size: 900 acres

Enterprise: Beef and adjusted dairy heifers

Soil: Rick Strzelecky clay loams

Rainfall: 1100mm

Aspect: Steep hill country

Grazing Management and Access

Ron and Col now have 60 paddocks where there were once around 20. They aim to eat paddocks down to a maximum of 2cm and maintain 100% grass cover in all paddocks 100% of the time.

All hay and silage is produced on the property with no bought in feed. In the wet winter of 2011 they grazed 700 animals including 400 dairy heifers and maintained good weight gain through the cold wet months.

Because cattle are excluded from steep gullies, paddocks are relatively small and access tracks are located for maximum visual coverage Col can check stock virtually at a glance and move on to the next paddock. Gone are the days of clambering into steep slippery gullies in search of lost stock and the often dangerous process of recovering stuck and injured animals.

Col's previous dislike of working the steep country has been a prime motivator in setting up the safe, efficient system they now have in place.

Steep country grazing

Ron Barnacle - Beef Farmer, Bass Hill

Shelter Belts

Ron has given over around 200 acres of the property to shelter belts and other plantations which is around 22% of the whole area. While this might seem like a large proportion of a property to give over to trees Ron says the majority of the plantings were in steep and dangerous eroding gullies and that in a net sense, despite reduced grazing area, the property is far more productive.



One of Ron's diverse shelter belts

The shelter belts have produced multiple production benefits:

- Shade and shelter for stock and pasture that has proven production benefits
- Because the shelter belts are also the gully plantings they exclude cattle from steep dangerous country creating the management efficiencies mentioned above
- The availability of shelter across the whole farm creates a far more pleasant working environment particularly in the extremes of weather we experience from time to time

Ron is an advocate of diverse shelter belts that include over storey, under storey and ground covers. He says they create better wind protection because they form a continuous barrier from canopy to ground level and they reduce opportunity for weeds because the plants take up all available niches and shade out opportunistic seed after the first couple of years, where control is necessary. Plants flower and fruit at different times of year attracting a wide range of pollinators and insect eating birds throughout the year. Ron also sees a unique win/win situation where you do these things for production reasons but also end up with increased bio-diversity and enhanced property aesthetics.

Fenced and revegetated dam and creek line



Water Quality

The majority of dams have been fenced, planted upslope and connected to a system of gravity feed troughs. Dam over-flows are channelled into vegetated gullies where possible to lessen the possibility of landslip.

Ron believes water quality to be integral to animal health and weight gain. He cites a scientific research paper reported in the Weekly Times saying clean water can increase cattle weight gain by up to a quarter!

The filtration of dam inflows and deep formerly eroding gullies with vegetation also contributes to the water quality of the whole Bass River catchment.

Steep country grazing

Ron Barnacle - Beef Farmer, Bass Hill

Fertiliser

Ron and Col have been applying chicken litter on all machine accessible land at a rate of 3m² per ha each year and are going to be applying lime at 2 ton/ha on some acidic paddocks this summer.

For the 200 acres of steep land inaccessible to machinery Ron uses conventional superphosphate spread from a plane as it is the only pelletised fertiliser suitable for application from the air. He says that if other natural fertilisers became available in a suitable pelletised form he would prefer to use them.

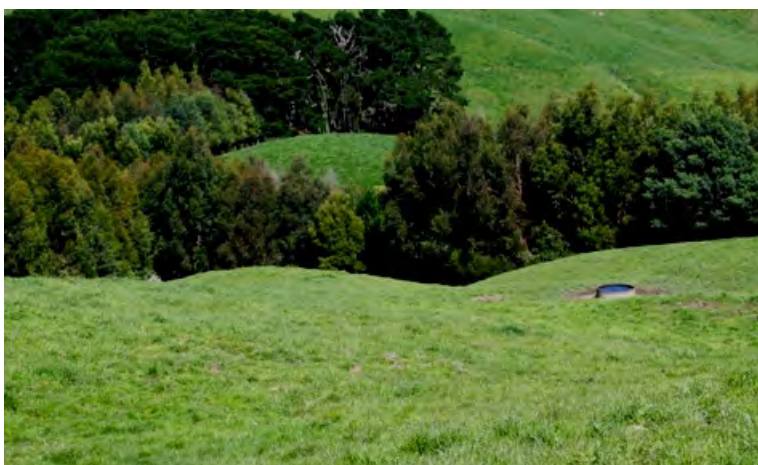
In the future Ron sees himself moving more towards organics sighting long term animal and soil health as his primary motivators. He says people are sometimes disappointed when trialing organics because they don't see the immediate hit that comes with conventional fertilisers. He sees the organic approach as building a long term, resilient 'capitol' base of soil quality and animal health on which to base his enterprise. As Ron says 'It's not about how the farm's going to look this summer but how its going to look in 5 years'.



Ron's pastures show a good diversity of species



Col does his rounds on the quad bike



Steep paddock with planted gullies and water trough



CARING
FOR
OUR
COUNTRY