

Why Tom Abbottsmith Youl believes biodiversity on farms is crucial Podcast Episode 16

Transcript:

Daniel: Daniel O'Brien here, welcome back to Green Grass Egg Farming. Today I have Tom from Tom's Paddock, welcome to the call.

Tom: Thank you very much, Daniel, how are you going?

Daniel: Very well, I do appreciate you being on the call today and I wanted to talk a bit about your journey. We've known each other for a few years now and I think you've got a great story of how you had a farm and then you've brought chickens in; so do you want to take us back to where you were at on the farm before you had chickens and create a bit of context.

Tom: Sure. It depends on how far you want to go back, Daniel. When I'm talking to people and taking them through the farm, I often start about 400 million years ago, where the actual soil on our property was developed, to its devonian period. That's a pretty fascinating history, might talk about that a bit later. It's my grandparents that really bought the property here in Glenburn in Victoria, about 80 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, just over the dividing range from the Yarra Valley. It was a bush-block and one or two paddocks had been cleared and then they proceeded to clear the property, very sympathetically to the environment, for cattle breeding which was quite unusual at that time, we're talking around early 60s. They left really significant tracks of remnant vegetation and also covenanted those areas. So, they're on the title as Trust for Nature and should be there as remnant ecology for perpetuity, hopefully. Then my mother inherited the property and she was really interested in conservation and increased some of those areas to kind of strengthen the resilience in the ecology on the property and continued the beef herd.

I went off and did a mechanical engineering degree at Melbourne University, and by the time I got to the graduating end, I decided not to do it anymore, pretty much. I just didn't really want to work in that area. So, I came back to the property and stuffed around for a little bit, for about a year. I've had some interesting jobs, one of which was technically called 'milking salmon'. That was over at the Rubicon River, at an Atlantic Salmon farm. It's quite an interesting picture to think of, but about ten guys and a couple of girls too, standing around a table, gently massaging fish that we've netted out of the pond and expressing the caviar. So yes, I wandered around doing a couple of different things for a while and came back to the farm then to try and work out how I was going to make a living there. What became pretty apparent early on was the beef herd on the area or land that we had available to us was not going to generate an additional income for me.

Daniel: So what sort of area, some of the land is conservation and then you've got grazing paddocks, but what sort of area of grazing paddocks are we talking about here?

Tom: The total property size is about 135 hectares, with now around 65 hectares primarily agriculture in form of grazing country. That's about half. The other half is something that is quite unique these days, which is the actual remnant bush that was there forever, which is great. So 65 hectares and we probably run at a rate of around a cow-calf per hectare, maybe a little bit under. There was a time when I was just kind of sitting around, trying to figure out how I was going to be able to stay here and help my mother with the farm work but also earn a living here. We'd looked at buying property in the area, which is very difficult to do. The real-estate pressure around here is pretty heavy, it's pretty hard to buy a property and be able to make a return just in grazing livestock.

That was really when I was introduced to an American farmer named Joel Salatin. He came out and spoke at an event for the Goulburn Valley CMA, and some of his ideas about regenerative agriculture in the form of stacking animals on top of the same kind of pastoral environment, it really struck a chord with me. I got 30 chickens, pretty much a week after hearing him talk, and I built a little mobile poultry hut in an 8x5 cage-trailer and that's kind of the start of Tom's Paddock as it were, the egg side of the business, which has grown to around 30-50 birds now.

Daniel: How long ago did you have those 30 chickens?

Tom: We're talking late 2009, so let's say seven years.

Daniel: Okay, so you're all inspired, you've seen Joel Salatin, you've gone home, you've made a coop, you got 30 chooks. What was the next progression after that? Did you get eggs straight away or were they sort of young and you have to grow them up?

Tom: Yeah, so I raised them from day olds and that's what I've always done. The five month wait, certainly. Also Daniel, we're talking from a zero capital at this point. A really, really small scale and doing what I could myself - salvaging bits and pieces and a trailer from my dad, actually, from his building business. Really slow, really low risk, that was important for me. I kept adding chickens to the system, I got up to about 80 chooks in that trailer and they were pretty happy to pile in together and roost in that trailer. I'm getting customers too at this point, so I'm getting eggs in a natural, material nesting system.

And I did get customers. One actually, a fairly big customer for me, and I've thought, "Oh! This is it. I'm going to go and bigger here." So I did actually buy some Ponteland Pullets, about 50, and that jumped the egg numbers quite a bit. I was also thinking then "This trailer is not big enough, what am I going to do next?" I was driving home one day and saw on the side of the road a stunning 70s era caravan, blue horizon type thing, and it had a little sign on it, I think it was only maybe a \$100. It was a rolling wreck but it had a beautiful floral lino on the walls inside and I thought "The chickens are going to love this!" So, I ripped the guts out of that, just pulled all

internal walls, all the floor out, absolutely everything pretty much, everything inside. I put some roosts in there, some nest boxes, and the floor reserve so the poop would fall through, and it lasted us six months, Daniel, before it just completely fell apart. I'd taken all of the internal structure out, you'd think a mechanical engineer or graduate mechanical engineer would have known better, but oh well.

I despaired a little bit for a while there because I had about nearly 300 chooks on the property at this stage and I did think I could use my degree a little bit more to my advantage and design a trailer. This was before I'd heard about Chicken Caravan, and it was around 2011 at this point. So, I did design something I thought was pretty whiz-bang and took it to a trailer manufacturer in Maine. They shocked me. They shocked me by telling me that it was going to probably cost around \$50,000 to get a prototype built. That was a little bit steep for little old Tom at that point. So, yeah, I despaired for a little while at that point. I thought I'd just get some more caravans, old caravans, and try to turn them into something that I can use. But luckily enough, it was probably three or four months later actually I came across the Chicken Caravan, your trailer. I could just see that it had been made by people who were actually doing it. I built up a little bit of knowledge about chickens and their habits, what you really need from a mobile trailer, so I saved my bacon a bit.

And then fast forward, I've now got three trailers and a lot of chickens on my hands, and a lot of eggs, this time of year.

Daniel: So how do you run those three trailers? Are they all in one flock or two or three separate flocks?

Tom: It's evolving a little bit as I think all good farming systems should be allowed to. So, at the moment I do have two flocks, so one flock with two trailers in it, that's the 2017 flock. A little portion of the 2016 flock is still on the farm and they are the other trailer and the other flock.

Daniel: Yeah, okay.

Tom: I kind of roll them out, it's kind of a process here about rolling the chooks as I raise them from day old, still. That's just kind of going to the current used flock and out of the previous year's flock as we kind of need.

Daniel: So, you've got two flocks on the ground at the moment - do you sometimes have three flocks because you've got some young chicks and then you've got two flocks out the paddock?

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm talking about laying birds, as such. They're definitely be a series of younger bird in different systems too. Over that three-week period under heat in a static environment in a shed - it's actually my grandparents old chook house - and then they move into an adjacent shed that is concrete floor, again with wood chips on top so it's nice and easy to clean it out once the chicks have had their time there. Another two weeks there, then once their

five to six weeks old, they'll then go out into a mobile hatch that's got aerial protection. Aerial predators are probably the biggest problem for younger birds because they're small. Eagles and small harriers and small falcons but also owls as well. We found in the past they like to have a go for the young birds. So, there's a lot of chickens everywhere, to say, Daniel. But in terms of the laying part of the business, probably no more than two flocks and sometimes only one.

Daniel: Yeah, okay. So what was the journey, you had your 30 chickens and you started selling eggs and you increased, did you increase because demand increased or you just wanted more chickens? How did that progression go from the marketing and selling eggs side?

Tom: Yeah, so it was definitely an organic process of finding customers slowly and getting myself out there fairly slowly. And that was to do with just investment on being fairly risk averse when it comes to debt. I did want keep things totally under my control. Also just the exploring the market and letting the market kind of work as it wanted to. Trying to probe into it and just find where the sweet spot is, in terms of how many eggs I should be producing. I do imagine having other people on the farm doing things in the future, but at this point it's just me. Also just working out how much I can take on in terms of planning my day. In winter down here we also, we don't get a lot of daylight, so that is also a bit of concern. There's plenty of daylight in summer but you got to think about your laying times to be safe.

I just wanted it to develop itself and that's been the case of how I started off. Going to cafes and giving them samples. We're at a point now where people are still finding us through word of mouth. That's really where I would like to be. I'm not the best marketer and I don't really like doing it. It's a good situation at the moment with some people searching us out, which is lovely.

Daniel: I find that interesting, you don't call yourself a marketer but you're at a stage now where they're calling you. In some ways you don't necessarily have to be a brilliant marketer to start a farm and get out there and sell eggs.

Tom: No, you definitely don't have to be brilliant. You do have to put in some leg work and face off to that thing of loving your work, and talking about your product. But if you love it, I think that does make marketing easier. I certainly do love the chickens and the eggs that we produce. We feel pretty good about that. That makes the marketing job a lot easier. You do have to do quite a bit of leg work if you wanna have a small farm, which is certainly the way we'd like to remain. It's not about, I mean it's all about margin, but we require quite a large margin. So I'm trying to get into the highest bracket of egg that I can produce. That does require a bit of work. That's small business for you, isn't it?

Daniel: Yeah, that's right. So with the cattle coming onto the landscape and the chickens and the soil and the grasses and trees, how does that work together on your farm? Because one thing I do like about your farm, you've got these nature corridors. So, you haven't just gone "Hey, let's clear this thing from fence to fence and just put cattle or just put wheat." You've got, from what I've seen on your Facebook page, echidnas and all sorts of birds species and such.

Tom: Yeah, biodiversity on farms, I reckon, is really critical. And that building soil thing is really where we end up here with the cattle as well. The cattle are really good at building soil. I think you spoke to someone about soil grazing last year and all those things are absolutely right. The animal is like the tool basically that we use to manipulate the plant into feeding the soil and creating more soil. In terms of the strong remnant vegetation areas, there are a lot of services actually there. So we do get area where the wind is definitely dispersed a bit, and so some good stock sheltering, which is just a physical benefit. Also, we do have a species of native wasp that will go out into the paddock - it's actually a nectar eating wasp so you need some nectar for it to survive - but it will go out into your paddock collect beetle larvae.

It brings it back to the nest and it lays egg on these poor little grubs, which we don't like really because they chew on your root system. We're spraying to try and get rid of these things, spraying insecticides. But this little wasp, it goes and gets some and takes some back to the nest and lays its eggs on them. The grub unfortunately lives on and eggs hatch and they eat it alive. But that's quite a nice little service there that's happening. Because the wasp has somewhere to live. That is that remnant ecology and that great biodiversity. There's lots and lots of bird life on the farm, which is lovely. 70 percent of Australian birds live in the understory, so not actually in the canopies. So low-lying shrubs and the low-lying understory is critical for our bird life, which then again maintains a good balance in terms of insects. There are a lot of benefits and it's just difficult to put that in economic terms somehow, but I think that's where the economics is and absolutely everything we are focused on here. It's a total whole approach, looking at the whole.

Daniel: Well, it's hard to measure when you've got a wasp coming in and grabbing that bug that could have potentially eaten some roots and then put less pasture on the ground and then you go well, hang on, if I spray insecticide to get rid of that and then what are all the other concerns of spraying.

Tom: Leap of faith there. But yes, the other thing with insecticides is you could damage the microbiological population, that's a big no no for us. I like to think about these things whether I would rely on them as such or not, probably not. But I think it's a good thing to think about certainly.

Daniel: And to understand that everything can have side effects, so it may be great today but the consequences tomorrow, next week, next year could be, "Oh my goodness, I shouldn't have done that".

Tom: Yeah, that's right. So, the soil fertility program comes from using our animals in a certain way. It's a 24-hour rotation grazing with the cattle and short quick moos with the chooks and covering. We're a little bit limited with some of our hills but about 40 hectares of that 65 hectares the chooks cover in about six months. So all those things mean that we're not relying on

synthetic fertilisers and also herbicides because we're using the cattle also to manage any wheat problems we might have.

Daniel: So you move your cattle every day?

Tom: Yes, every day. I mean, sometimes in certain seasons I need them to be moving a bit quicker and might leave them, say, a couple of days and move them fast. If we're trying to conserve feed and actually get them to do some landscape functioning, that's where we have them in a really tight mob with very high stock density. Then, certainly around that 24-hour period I reckon is a good time frame for me, in terms of how much work I can do with them. I do know people who are doing maybe six moves a day, Daniel. So, we're trying to mimic again their natural growth kind of system, where you do have massive herds moving with a lot of pressure on the grasses, but also always moving on. But 24 hours seems to be manageable for me and we're seeing some good results out there in terms of the species diversity and the pasture sward and just the growth rates we're getting. I mean, things are really shooting out the ground at the moment here.

Daniel: How often do you move your chickens?

Tom: The chickens I move every two days pretty much, two to three days, so three times a week. That's quite a personal thing. I think it's gonna be different in every farm. I feel like that kind of system works well for me. I don't wanna move the trailer inside the area where they are, as most mobile poultry farmers are doing at the moment or these days, they're using electro netting. So, an electric perimeter fence to keep foxes out. That area is about a quarter of a hectare, 2500 square meters. Two to three days there will give me around three tons of chook poo per hectare under the trailer, which is quite a lot. I don't wanna overload the soil microbes. We want them to be able to metabolise and get that chook poo back into the nutrient cycle in a timely manner. I move the whole flock physically instead of just moving the trailer inside the area.

Daniel: Okay. So, where the chickens have been on your farm, what difference have you seen from when you had no chickens to now, because obviously those chickens have been over that land for several years now and put down a lot of kilos of manure and scratched around and been involved in the soil grazing, what's the pasture difference?

Tom: It's very responsive to chick poo, certainly if it's going down in the growing season. It's quite remarkable how the pasture, and I say pasture because we're really growing quite a number of species of plants, herbs and forbs as well. They really respond vigorously in that kind of year. I think in the long term, yes, there would be a cumulative effect. How great that's going to be, well, I'm not sure. I think if people were looking at getting chooks because they want to put chook poo onto their pastures, well, there's more efficient ways to do that. Such as buying a truckload of chook poo. It's probably gonna be more of the way to go, but I wouldn't endorse that just because it's really, the whole idea here is to try and get more species and more

productivity per hectare on small farms. You certainly can do that with chickens. I guess the other thing is you do is also have other revenue stream, so there's more money. And the chooks are on the pasture and so they should pay for repair or enhancement as well.

Daniel: Yeah, fantastic. With where you are at now, you've had the journey, thirty chickens and then to eighty and then to a few hundred, you've got a few thousand now, what are you focusing on next? You talked about the sustainability of what you, Tom, can handle but where else do you see the direction of your farm going, staying congruent with your values of conservation and sustained farming?

Tom: Well, you've got a lot of big ideas, Daniel? I'll probably never ever get to and won't ever get to but whenever we're grazing a bit, maybe not so crazy, I do like to do a bit of education. I think that's a really great place to look at. On small farms there's a picturesque, like ours is, quite a beautiful place, I think some small bit of education or agro-tourism is probably a good bet for diversification again. Now, it does take quite a lot of time, But, again that's something you really could get someone else to manage or even to start up and run. I think there are rural areas, communities are suffering from a lack of local work and so you getting other people onto farms doing things so the people want to come because they want to see the chickens. And so this adds a nice relationship there where someone else might be able to make a living out of the fact that we do have chickens and that we do have certain values and ideals here.

I really like yabbies. I'd love to do something with yabbies. Because it feels like, I mean, in Victoria we've got some crazy regulations here, but yabbies are such incredible little creatures. I think mushrooms too. Once you start selling eggs to cafes you really need to think to yourself, what else can I sell to these cafes? It's quite hard to sell, say, let's not think about cafes anymore, but just a person you're trying to sell something to, it's quite hard to sell them twelve dozen eggs but it's quite easy to sell them a dozen eggs or a whole chicken and some mushrooms, and kind of that diversifying your products. Say your catering for more of what your customer needs, I think is a good idea. I'd like to do some really large farm-scale composting.

Daniel: Yeah. That's one way you can really grow soil faster.

Tom: Yeah, absolutely. And do a local service. So trying to get our food scraps from local businesses actually back into the nutrient cycle rather than going to landfill. We've got to do a lot more of that as a world. So valuable stuff actually that we're just throwing away.

Daniel: Yeah, I know, another one of our clients just outside of Canberra, he told me some of the figures that some of the restaurants, like in kilos, in tons, that they throw out in I don't know if it was a week, or a month or something, it's just staggering.

Tom: Yeah, it's crazy, isn't it.

Daniel: Unless you're in the catering industry, you don't realise how much they go through, and we've got another client that actually has that, a catering company and who is saying that each week or day or something, they produce one and a half tons of scraps like potato peels, carrot peels, just numbers that you're like "How many carrots do you have to peel to get one tonne of carrot peels?" In his operation, actually, he's composted, but so many aren't and I think, as you've said, if we can use the word collaboration and actually do that with different industries and farmers, because there'd be someone saying, "Hey, I'm paying to dump this" and you've got another farmer saying, "I want it to stop, I want it to be composted." How do we get it from point A to point B, and keep it sustainable?

Tom: That's it, well, you start within the local and talk, you've got to talk. Talk to as many people as you can, find out where the action is. But yes, it's definitely something to look into. I worry about places that, I feel like phosphorus let's just say, farmers do know but a lot of people don't really know where it comes from, they know we need it and we use it in conventional kinds of farming systems, but it's a mind resource, it's a possible resource, you could say. Which means it's going to run out at some point, I mean, it's not going to become economic anymore to actually pull it out of the ground because it's not in a high enough concentration.

What does the conventional system do when we don't have enough phosphorus anymore? Well, it's going to fall over really quick, or it's going to become really expensive. The food that we are producing in that system. Yeah, transitioning to something that is just more local in terms of imports too, is just so critical I think for the future. I'm 31, I'll probably see some huge changes in this industry and it's probably why I like doing what I do, because food is just going to be so incredibly important in the future, we're going to have to produce more with a lot less. So, it's exciting. It's also pretty scary. There's going to be a fair bit of change, so increase in productivity in small farms is totally where it's at, and chicken and carrots do that and it's really some interesting growth kind of relationship. That's really old too, herbivores have been around for a very long time, but with us, they've been keeping the system running in grassland throughout the world so we've just got to be a bit clever and make sure we let them do their job and help them too.

Daniel: I just want to jump back to when we were talking about collaboration, you were saying it's a lot easier to sell someone one dozen eggs as opposed to twelve dozen eggs and then after you've got that customer, your mindset should be "What else does that customer want?"

Tom: That's it, yeah.

Daniel: Jump back into earlier in the call where we talked about layering farms and I think that's where so many of those things come together right now when we go - Okay, can we keep it local? Can we lay the farms? Can we keep conservation and farming side by side? - And we could, you've done it. Yeah, and once we do have that customer that's buying one dozen eggs, that we can sell them beef or mushrooms or yabbies or honey or other things.

Tom: We sold them the tranquility in sitting next to the yabby dam and coming over for a meal that night. Yeah, it's all about keeping farms small and sustainable, it's all about leveraging all of the resources that you have in an efficient manner as you can. I think that's the thing where the resources you have, if you don't have them as well, like for me, for instance, I don't really enjoy marketing, I should have found someone who really did because he's going to do a better job than me potentially too, so it takes a lot of people to keep a small farm or a small business up and running. A regenerative farm certainly takes a lot more labour, it's about getting those resources where you need them and leveraging all the amazing things that you do have at your fingertips.

I think sometimes too, the problem with us is just working, Joel Salatin talks a bit about this, is working in the business as opposed to kind of working on it, stepping back to what you're doing and having another look at it, seeing where your time efficiencies are off. There's so much you can always do, which is what keeps it interesting too. If you're getting to that kind of routine, I mean we've had a lot of low chicken farms startup in Victoria recently, which is fantastic. They've all got really incredible passion and they're really excited, but it can be quite mundane too, collecting eggs everyday, the routine. You really have got to take a long view and a step back from the business sometimes, make sure you're leveraging all the areas as you can.

Daniel: Yeah, and also understanding why you're doing it. It's different for everyone, you'll have someone who goes, "I want to make more money" and someone else goes on, "I want to actually bring manure to my farm in a profitable way, through the chickens." Or I love the people, they want to get into chickens because they want to show their kids that there's a future in farming. That they might only be on 20 or 30 hectares, and they're like, "Well, I'm not going to make it out of beef farming but if we have a few chickens, hey, we can show the kids that, 'Look, there is a future'." And there are so many reasons.

Tom: Chooks are a great gateway drug to a sustainable agriculture, Daniel, it's a good place to start.

Daniel: There are definitely harder things, like I say to people, like, "Almost everybody eats eggs," so if you're going to start in farming, you could start growing beetroots or you could start with eggs. There's not too many.

Tom: I love beetroot.

Daniel: Yeah, okay, well, you love beetroot, there's not too many things like eggs, that you could go to. It's like 97% of the population eat them, go find a vegetable that's like that, maybe tomatoes, I'm not sure. And then, I've worked on tomato farms, you got to look at the input of tomatoes, and then the lay time in that.

Tom: It's a perfect little package too, I mean, it's a dream really that chickens just do so much good work for us. They give us this beautiful little package that contains the food, the egg shell,

and we just put it in containers basically and flog it, it is a great place to start, I think. You just need to be a little bit careful, I'd say to people, about getting too big too quickly. There's quite a lot of work involved and it's everyday, and I guess the other thing is that we are in the natural environment, so we are going to be affected by things that someone with a shed full of chickens is going to be affected too. And to work out what's going to happen actually in a 24-month period before you really ramp up, I'd say.

Daniel: Yeah, well, excellent, if you want to find out more about Tom's Paddock, check out his website or Facebook page, and Tom, because you said you're not heaps good at marketing, I'd love to send people to your website and Facebook page, and send on a message, say "Hey, tell me when you're having your next field day." And that might just make Tom say, "Right, here's the day." You've got an incredible farm down there and I really encourage people to see it.

Tom: Yeah, we love having people out here, 100% transparency to our farm, so come and have a look at what we're doing, absolutely. And thank you, Daniel, it's a great opportunity to talk to people at large and I love your work, obviously, so thanks a lot for the opportunity.

Daniel: Thank you, we'll talk soon.