

## Carrickalinga's ecological makeover: Tim Jarvis's rewilding project at Forktree



At this time of year, the hills between Carrickalinga and Myponga Beach are a barren landscape of pale grass, sloping down to the blue waters of St Vincent's Gulf. Where stock congregates around gates and water troughs, the dry grass has blown away, leaving bare patches. Scattered trees are still bristling with seedpods, each one holding over a hundred viable seeds. However, when the seeds drop, they will fall onto that bleached grass and be blown into the sea without the hospitable micro-climate needed to raise healthy seedlings. If this land was capable of repairing itself, it would have done so.

The story is different on the part of Tim Jarvis's 53 hectares where the process of re-wilding has begun. From here you can see thousands of saplings already well established, some of them taller than Tim, others ready to come out of their light green triangular guard tubes. Tim pulls off the tubes and snatches out weeds here and there as he shows me around. Like any gardener, he likes to talk about plant species and is particularly enthusiastic about some of the rare natives he has grown in the plant nursery.



But he's noticeably more ecologist than gardener – happy to focus on the details because that's where the work gets done, but he doesn't lose sight of the system as a whole. This means he's a pragmatist, not a purist. Tim points out a few weeds withering under the open sky where poison has been used on individual plants that threatened a native species he has been cultivating. However, he draws the line at broad-scale spraying. Similarly, the property is fenced to keep out kangaroos so they don't eat all the new plantings, but at this stage the few that get in are left alone because the system has developed far enough to handle them. One of the six or so roos relaxing in the shade further down the valley, flicked a relaxed ear as we passed by.

The process here is to apply more knowledge and fewer resources – it is sometimes called syntropic farming or agroforestry. Syntropic means 'cross feeding' or the way systems can tend toward greater abundance, complexity, and quality over time (the opposite of entropy). Basically, it's farming that mimics a forest.

This type of farming can achieve amazing things. It's been used in places like semi-arid Lightning Ridge NSW to coax tropical banana trees to grow in the hydrophobic soil that would otherwise barely support a salt bush. The method does not involve intensive watering. Instead, they plant something that will grow in that location – even if that something is prickly pear. Once the pears are established, retaining water and pumping it down into the soil, creating shade and supporting insects, another cycle of planting can add under story, or canopy – further improving the soil, increasing biomass, and creating a cooler micro climate with moister air. Once the micro-climate really is changed, the prickly pear will die of its own accord – no longer suited to the area. This may take a long time for one person, but after 20 years at Lightning Ridge, the farmer was rewarded by a visit from tropical Ulysses butterflies seeking out the banana trees.

Different locations require different approaches, and Tim is working from canopy down toward under-story rather than from grasses upward. He is carefully not over-extending, not watering after plants leave the nursery, and waiting until another threshold is reached before planting again for the next stage. The ultimate goal is for the Forktree Project to be like Deep Creek or some of the

remnant bush land between nearby Hindmarsh Tiers and Victor Harbor. Those areas are complex enough to be self-sustaining as a system – unlike the single 200 year old Melaleuca on Tim’s property that is simply enduring.

There’s no question Tim has the expertise to throw at this project. He holds degrees in Geography, Environmental Science, and Environmental Law from the universities of Brighton (UK), Sydney, and Adelaide. He also has an impressive list of outdoor adventures arising from childhood experiences of ‘learning by doing’ in Malaysia, Singapore, and then world-wide. He has made unsupported treks to the South Pole, North Pole, across the Great Victorian Desert and Lake Eyre, as well as re-creating Sir Douglas Mawson’s 1913 Antarctic expedition and Ernest Shackleton’s 1916 epic crossing of the Southern Ocean – with only the technology originally used. He is also known for his service to Nature Play SA, the Adelaide Zoos, for Rhinos, Koalas, and National Parks – including 25Zero which monitors equatorial glacial melting, and the creation of a Marine Sanctuary around Macquarie Island in the Australian Antarctic region. These activities have seen him recognised as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) and recently as South Australia’s Australian of the Year. What attracts this world traveller to Carrickalinga? There’s no family connection here, Tim’s from the UK originally, emigrating to Australia in 1997. He first came to do some work at Langhorne Creek with the Murray Darling Basin Project, and when he saw the bald hills, he says he knew how to work with them and finally bought the Forktree site, with his wife Liz, in 2019.

There is a public relations piece to the Forktree story as well, because Tim is not just about re-wilding his own patch, he is here to live out a model others could take up if they so chose. Landholders may reasonably be focused on maximising productive use of their land – how would re-wilding help? Maybe it would just create more of a fuel load in fire season. Tim takes a practical approach to that as well. He says you start with things everyone can agree on: farmers are passionate about topsoil and approve of windbreaks because they give stock shelter and that makes them produce ‘meat instead of heat’ in winter, prevents wind from sandpapering woolly coats, and can create fire-breaks. Windbreaks also bring the temperature down in summer and improve biomass. Re-wilding may not sound very

useful initially, but everybody likes windbreaks and Tim has a plant nursery full of native seedlings that would start the process nicely. As for fire risk, Tim thinks trees get a bad rap when most fires do start in grass and have to be going strong before they can ignite a tree. Native grasses contain far less fuel load than introduced ones. So far, at least one of Tim’s neighbours down the valley is looking side-long over the fence and vowing to extend similar planting efforts on their property.



Sustainability projects are naturally very focused on the long term, so education is another priority. The Forktree Project regularly hosts up to 60 students in its all-purpose classroom/giant shed. Students and teachers learn about the circular economy before spending the day planting trees, mending fences, washing punnets, and scouring bricks. They can be accommodated in campsites on the property and soon will have access to a house with bunks and a common room. There’s a big difference between the revved up angry energy of a young person just back from a climate strike and the settled quiet energy of one who has spent the day digging, building fences, working with their hands and their peers. Those who return year on year are particularly buoyed to see trees they planted starting to take off.

Ultimately, Tim Jarvis is farming ideas almost as much as he is farming trees. People can create thriving ecosystems on parts of their own property – whether it is fencelines and gullies, or suburban backyards - by planting what will grow and learning as they go.

You can find out more about The Forktree Project at [www.theforktreeproject.com](http://www.theforktreeproject.com), about Tim and his adventures at [www.timjarvis.org](http://www.timjarvis.org), and about growing bananas in the desert at Curiosity Mine [www.youtube.com/watch?v=llazeATdn7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llazeATdn7s).

Fiona Vogel - Copywriter [www.fionavogel.com.au](http://www.fionavogel.com.au)