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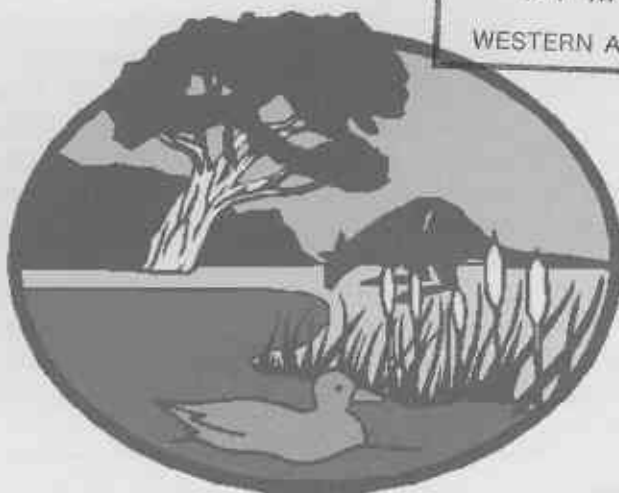
NATURE-BASED FARM TOURISM

Fleur Porter

IN Jan 2001 we embarked on a nature-based tourism venture on our family farm located on the Murchison River in the Midwest of WA. We called our venture "Riverside Sanctuary" to compliment our existing farming enterprise "Riverside Ajana", and in the two and a half years since its inception have enjoyed (almost) every minute.

My family has been at "Riverside" since 1927. The Porters originally settled in Ajana in 1910 on a block 'big enough to starve on' before acquiring more land further north-east. "Riverside" was a traditional wheat and sheep farm, riding along on the sheep's back for many years and supplementing the farm income with various crops. After many years my dad, Bob, slowly began to decrease the number of sheep with a view to phasing them out entirely. The damage being done to the land and the bush was not worth the work or the income. We took on share-farmers in about 1995 and we would crop part of the land and they would do the rest, but for the last 3 years they have cropped the entire property. This arrangement has worked really well and has taken the management pressure off dad and given us time to focus on other things.

We have about 15kms of Murchison River frontage running through the middle of the property. Most of this area has been protected from livestock since 1965 because it was easier to muster stock at watering points rather than having them roaming free-range in the river, but this has been one of the best management decisions



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made on the farm during that period of time. The river had always been a popular place to visit, for the family and for the local people, and it had become quite degraded. Duck shooting was a regular activity and the river had stopped being a safe environment for native wildlife. In 1989 the entire length was fenced off to protect the riparian zone from vehicles and to give the bird life some peace. The changes to the river have

been amazing and documented on a series of slides Bob has taken. This Slide Show and a number of walk trails to the river are just a few of things we offer our guests during their stay with us.

But to begin with we had a long way to go.....

Barriers/the hard stuff and Opportunities/the good stuff to consider:

Employment: One of our weaknesses was 'employees', or a lack of. At the early stage I was working in Geraldton and couldn't commit to the farm full-time so an opportunity arose to employ someone to assist. We employed Angie Goddard as a Landcare Trainee for 18 months, thus providing her with a fantastic training opportunity and giving us the extra assistance we needed.

Finance: Once we had acquired some more hands, Bob and Angie started on the hard task of renovating existing accommodation. We had spare houses on the farm, all of which have now been fixed up. This

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Murchison River at "Riverside Sanctuary".

brings in another barrier - money. We are fortunate that our venture is backed up by a profitable farming business. If we did not have the money to invest in getting started we would be struggling now. Fortunately we started with a view of doing something different and not of making money and this has meant we are not struggling to make tourism financially viable in the first few years. This takes some of the pressure off and means you are able to work at establishing your product and reputation before stressing about raking in the dollars. Our initial set-up costs have been the biggest expense, but then there are ongoing costs such as employment, maintenance, marketing and new big ideas. At present (after 2.5 years) the venture is probably just beginning to pay for itself, but it will still take a while to get ahead.

Making it a comfortable place to stay: People are more and more looking for comfort in the bush. There are those who will be happy with shearing shed-style backpackers accommodation, but in general we have found that people like creature comforts. They love seeing the bush and the river and the flies all day, but like to have somewhere clean and comfortable to go home to. For us it was a matter of thinking about what kind of places we would like to stay in. We have also since expanded and made changes to our shearing shed to accommodate groups, and we have found we can just about do anything - it is a matter of being flexible with our arrangements. This flexibility is definitely another trait important to running such a venture.

Marketing: The next hard task has been marketing. We have had to consider our product carefully

and therefore our market. We have a definite conservation angle to what we do, the focus on nature, conserving the environment and the Aboriginal and European heritage of our area. The most important thing, I think, is establishing our reputation, almost all the visitors say they would like to come again. We had 10 000 brochures printed. It is definitely worth getting more printed, you are much more eager to give them away, which is how people get to know about you! Our website www.riversidesanctuary.com.au was designed by my brother and has generated many bookings. Marketing is definitely a tricky one and is worth talking to as many people as you can to find out what works for them.

Beautifying our surroundings: We are beautifying the farm bit by bit. We had a major clean-up to get the houses in order and

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plans are beginning for gardens and pathways and walk trails. It just makes the place you live a much nicer place to be, not just for tourists but for us too!

Mixing farming and tourism:

Certain times of year at the farm are pretty busy, and it's important to make sure that you can maintain your product when you may not have as many helping hands. During seeding and harvest Bob and my partner, Russell, work with our sharefarmers, so Mum and I have to manage the fort. Although it may mean a heavier load for us, many of our visitors love to see the big machines in action – and we can show them our cropping enterprise working alongside, and as a part of, our land management. It is almost impossible to separate the two, because that landcare work here has provided part of our tourism product and many of the stories of our history and heritage are related to farming.

Discoveries and personal education:

Taking people on tours and showing them around makes room for many more discoveries and for personal education. My parents started a herbarium collection in 2000, and still every time we go out in the bush we discover something new. Your appreciation of the Australian bush grows each time you hear someone exclaim how beautiful or amazing or diverse it is.

Event organisation and educational opportunities:

We have organised a number of events including National Tree Day planting events, the Great Marsupial Night Stalk spotlighting tours and tree planting events for school groups. These events don't make money, but they are a great social event, people get to come and see what you have to offer and there is the



Bob, Dawn, Fleur and Russell.

chance to educate people on the importance of looking after the environment.

Meeting people: One of the most rewarding aspects of nature-based tourism is the people you meet. Because we have a product that is based on what we do and what we are passionate about, the people who come often share those values. So we learn a lot from them too. Much of what we do is simply based on Australian rural hospitality, which is something we have always done, and they love it. Some of the comments we have received have been so good it's almost embarrassing. But I wanted to share one with you because often the simplest things are what people enjoy and remember the most. And that is an opportunity because often it is stuff you do every day.

"We enjoyed the most: peace and quiet, sitting by the river, seeing a red capped robin, April's 'news', the slide show, the generosity of inviting us to a meal, hearing about the innards of feral cats, everything!"



Which just goes to show that maybe you just need to see the potential of what you have! Once you have a vision and have the logistics sorted, you will just need to be ready to share yourself and your time with people and be passionate about the environment, your home, the local community - and want to talk about it a lot!

Ps 'Riverside Ajana' was assessed for Land for Wildlife registration in 1997 and we are number 18! Not a bad effort!