

FDI Feature Interview

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Chris Ferreira: Community Links in the Urban, Rural and Regional Environments Through Sustainable Farming

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Key Points

- Global population growth will increase demand for high-quality foods, which will need to be sourced from local and community producers.
- A wide range of methods of communicating the importance of local agriculture and community farming practices will be necessary – school-based agriculture programmes are key enablers.
- Changing old methods of farming and adopting sustainable agricultural practices, including carbon farming, can help to address global warming.

Introduction

Australian society understands the critical importance of nurturing our landscapes to preserve and protect our soils and our ability to be able to grow food. A significant factor in that understanding is a global move to farming systems at the local and urban community level, where people are offered opportunities to produce their own food and learn about the importance of healthy soils. Significantly, the crucial interface to city dwellers knowing and supporting their regional farming communities is also enabled.

FDI recently interviewed Chris Ferreira, a leading speaker and author, about his experience of sustainable farming practices in the urban, rural and regional environments.

Interview

FDI – As we become more isolated and disconnected from our rural and natural environment, what do you see as the immediate issues for society? What do you feel are the main strategies we can adopt to reverse this trend?

Chris Ferreira – It's been said that we live in the most dis-connected time in human history; less than one percent of us has anything to do with the commercial production of food. We are also told we are the most urbanised population on the planet and that people are racing from our rural areas to our urban fringes.

The shift in migration is causing massive problems. Firstly, we don't value farming. We are happy to see food prices driven further and further down, and so farmers can only survive by getting larger or 'pushing' their land to the limit. We're also not valuing the quality of the product; we just want to have something that is cheap and aesthetically appealing when we see it come to us in the shops.

Secondly, our kids are becoming dis-connected from nature. We see that in simple things like how sedentary kids are now and the associated spiralling rates of obesity through to their lack of natural resilience against stress, infection, disease and allergies.

The issues are manifesting in many different ways and they are undermining our natural resources which we will need into the future. Of course, our human capital, the next generation of kids, as a result, are at risk.

The solutions are fairly obvious. We need to, wherever possible, re-connect people to those links. I call these our 'biological imperatives' – there is not a human being on the planet that can live without good quality air, access to clean water and of course food which comes from good, healthy soil. To me, we have to re-connect people to these imperatives. There are some logical ways in which that can happen, and some fantastic movements are now occurring in that space. The emergence of school veggie gardens and nature play landscapes, for example, are a great positive step in kids learning to grow food and connect to nature. The growth of farmers' markets demonstrates that people want to get back and access local foods as opposed to supermarket shopping. Fundamentally, we need to be building the bridges where people understand the value of our farmland and of nature and this will occur through a range of complimentary programmes.

FDI - How do you effectively get your messages across?

Chris Ferreira – We are increasingly distracted and time-poor. Technology has a lot to do with that and so we need to be much smarter in getting the message across. With our business, [The Forever Project](#), our passion is to connect with all walks of life, not just people wanting to learn about composting and tree planting, for instance. To achieve this, we have learnt to embed our messages in a format that is both palatable and understandable for the great majority. These are the people that are not necessarily hostile towards the environment; rather they are just ambivalent and really don't see the connection or how it affects them.

Hence the need to be smarter when trying to get these messages across. If we look at the health of our farmland for instance, we created a program called **'Food Theatre'** to tap into the mood of the population and their obsession with cooking shows and chefs - who I believe are seen as the 21st Century Gods. We team up with a celebrity chef, using this as the perfect platform to say, "look at the beautiful meal the chefs have created" and to link this to the message that the food is only as good as the quality of the landscape and the farming community that created it.



Figure 1: Chris Ferreira The Forever Project Source: Chris Ferreira

Thereafter, in partnership with the chef, we talk on aspects like the value of sourcing higher quality, more expensive but better grown food, ('biodynamic' or 'regenerative farming practice') that is locally produced; seasonal food; the impact of ['food miles'](#) and those sorts of food-related issues. In such a setting we can unpack and form messages in a way that makes sense and will enable people to understand their importance. In an increasingly polarised world, I think we need to 'side-step' the sticking points and drill down, to what we have in common.

Climate change is a classic case in point. I don't think young people have a problem understanding climate change: it's the older generation, who are not going to be around when the real negative impacts of climate change occur, who are creating the roadblocks. So, for the kids of today, we side-step the quagmire around the climate change debate by focusing on all of the exciting opportunities future generations will have with renewable energy, stored battery power, electric cars and even ['Carbon Farming'](#). These are really sexy technologies that kids can wrap their heads around.

The same thing is happening with food: we all want healthy, clean and nutritious food but this is just the starting point to the bigger questions of how do we make this happen? How do the current, un-bridled, industrialised food production processes threaten this? Once we start to bring people back to that awareness, we can move forward with positive steps,

inspiring and empowering people to make better choices. I think that is how we can start to make some changes.

FDI - Why is the fate of the rural lands important, when all the rural population makes up only a tiny fragment of our overall population; why should we give them so much attention?

Chris Ferreira – History shows that every single failed civilisation collapsed because it refused to prioritise and nurture the land that had fed them. From the ancient Romans to the Samaritans, it does not matter who you are or how technologically advanced you think you are, society is still tethered to the biological imperative that the farmland is the most important asset we have. Healthy, viable and productive farm scapes and the communities that support farming are the reasons we can have amazing, vibrant and prosperous cities. For those reasons it's absolutely critical to all of us now in the 21st century.

I've often thought how wonderful it would be for sitting governments to break with tradition and not spend their war chest of money on a new sports stadium, train station or a great big road network but rather, committing spending to our food bowl; the funds could protect our farm scapes now and into the future. Imagine if our State and Federal politicians had these visions. We wouldn't see the death of the Murry-Darling River or the [salinization](#) of our landscapes or our rural communities in declining health.



Figure 2: Saline landscape Source: Dept of Primary Industries and Regional Development

Similarly, security of our water supplies is a major issue - we're the fastest drying part of the world's driest continent. Where is this passion to make sure we can protect our water now and into the future? We've been spoilt in WA as we have had our state water utility keeping

two steps ahead of our drying climate. It has had the money, the technology and power to build super-effective de-salination plants. Those strategies have solved a particular problem, but at massive expense and through the consumption of large amounts of energy. Unfortunately, it hasn't solved the bigger issue which, in an environmental context is that we need to learn how to do better with less; we need to be so connected with our water cycle that we understand that no civilisation can prosper without having good access to natural supplies of potable water.

For me it's a simple case of getting people to understand and value their connection to our resources, nature and the rural landscape. When this occurs, you will have people valuing and protecting those assets. People will demand governments spend money on looking after our resources - you don't protect what you don't love. If our society continues to be disconnected from nature, they won't learn to see the value in looking after those spaces and making sure our farm scapes and farming communities are sustainable, beautiful, prosperous and productive well into the future.

We should ask ourselves that whatever the farming situation or system we have now, how will these work in a few hundred years from now? If there are question marks, then we have to identify what is wrong with the system. It's not good enough to say we'll limp through problems with a bit of [farm aid](#) to the next year. We must question what we should be putting in place now, to ensure these farming systems will work hundreds of years into the future.



Figure 3: Sandalwood tree crop Source: Sanatol Group

FDI - What are the opportunities to reconnect the rural with urban regions and why is sustainable farming such an important part of this strategy?

Chris Ferreira – We have massive problems which can be turned into massive solutions: as a nation we're hand-wringing about reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and yet the solutions are in the vast and struggling farmlands of Australia. Soil carbon, tree farming and perennial farming, all offer huge solutions, once we start to recognise that those massive problems can be addressed by just changing our farming practices. We should reward farmers who are building up their soil organic carbon and their perennial farming systems. We can audit that really simply and we can start to transform those landscapes.

When you start to encourage farmers to plant diverse tree crops, to be financially rewarded for increasing their soil carbon, suddenly the ailing communities that have long-supported those farmers will start to come back to life. We can use this as an amazing opportunity to launch a whole suite of new careers.

The recent proposal by the [West Australian Environmental Protection Authority](#) to bring in much tougher carbon offsetting requirements for the big miners, whilst not particularly popular with the big polluters, could usher in a whole new era in the carbon farming industry where we could use these funds to employ thousands of trainees to understand and embrace sustainable farming. Linked to the 'flagship' sustainable and regenerative farmers and landcare practitioners in our rural regions, we could effectively pass on this amazing wisdom, skill and resilient farming experience to forge a whole new chapter in modern 21st Century sustainable farming, ensuring that wonderful knowledge and hard-won understanding is not lost but is actually rewarded and honoured. This is especially important as we see the parlous state of landcare funding and prominence in our modern community and the fact that many of the 'Landcare warrior' farmers and landcare pioneers of the late-80's and 90's are all retiring, and so we need to inject fresh energy into this space to build the momentum for the next generation of sustainable farming.

I think the opportunities with carbon and soil farming and traineeships will all help to bridge the gap between urban and rural regions – there is no better way to entice people to regional communities than with jobs and opportunities. Just as people are drawn to jobs in mining, we can be getting people to regions like Pingelly, Kellerberrin or Dowerin because there are jobs in farming, in soil restoration and rehabilitation and the next generation of sustainable farming and tree-cropping that is a part of that process.

About the Interviewee:

Chris Ferreira is one of WA's leading sustainability celebrities and educators. He has regular roles on electronic media where over 130,000 people have been to his talks and performances through *The Forever Project* environmental education programmes - *Great Gardens*, *Heavenly Hectares*, *Food Theatre* and *The Hami Hill Sustainable Home*.

In 2018 he launched, his first book '*A Place in the Country*' that focuses on how the next generation of landholders can buck the trend and create beautiful, productive and sustainable farm scapes.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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