

My Story by Kylie Stretton

I wrote "My Story" just after the Suspension of the Live Export Trade in Australia. At the time there was a lot of "farmer bashing" going on, saying that the farmers of the north didn't deserve a livelihood if we relied on Live Export, we deserved to go bankrupt, we were cruel and lots of very awful and un-true things. Thankfully things are slowly settling down, and most people are realising that at the moment there is no other option for cattle producers in the north of Australia (although there are still some out there who disagree).

Now twelve months down the track, so many positives have come out the turmoil. I've met so many wonderful people, learnt so much and have had some fantastic opportunities. Never before have I been more proud to be a part of Australian Agriculture.

My Story.

About 14 years ago, my high school geography teacher planted a little seed of anger in my head about people's preconceptions of the rural industry when he told our class that "graziers were the bane of this earth." That seed lay dormant for a while, until last year, it started to shoot when the Bligh Government labeled producers as "environmental vandals." Now it is positively blooming with the fall out of the Live Export Issue.

I believe we are fighting for much more than to be able to market our cattle. We are fighting for the education of and acknowledgement and understanding from our city neighbours that we are not rich hill billies, stupid or backwards or cruel. That we do not rape and pillage the earth, that we love and cherish the land we work on and the livestock we produce.

We are fighting for respect because we too are hard working people and pay our taxes. That we do our best to provide our nation and the world first-class produce. Despite the "hardships" of isolation, distance, Mother Nature and above all constant criticism. And we do it with pride.

This is my story:

My dad left home when he was 14 to go ringing and droving. He worked extremely hard, finally gaining his own property after years of working in the mines, and stock work on the side. We have grown up with the stories of mickies, rodeos, good dogs, freezing mornings and aboriginal stockmen just to name a few. He is an extremely hard working man, so caring and compassionate to others, always ready to help anyone in need and always with a smile and a joke. My brother is just like him.

My mum's family managed "Banchory" between Clermont and Alpha for the best part of 40 years. Mum worked as a nurse in the Clermont Hospital before marrying Dad and moving out to the station he was working on. My mother is the salt of the earth, the rock of our family and I once heard her described as ruling with an iron fist in a velvet glove. My sister's the same, I hope I can be too.

In 1990 we moved to a station on the Burdekin Dam when I was 9. It was full of cleanskins and run down fences, that's when I learnt what it meant to be a rural Australian. By 1993 we were in the grip of a severe drought. The days became a blur of keeping crows from pecking poddie's eyes out, hundreds of weaners needing to be fed hundreds of bales of hay, dry dams (including the house supply), mixing lick, dead and dying cattle. There were whispers of men committing suicide from the feeling of sheer hopelessness. My hands were so rough and calloused from lugging hay bales, I'm surprised I could lift them, I was so tiny. I used to only do a couple of hours of school a day through a School of Distance Education. I did a lot at night too just to free up my days to be a part of things. I remember my dad's usually sparkly eyes being so dull with despair as we were carting water, and him saying to me "A man just feels so useless".

They always say the darkest hour is before dawn. Between Christmas and New Year in '93 we had a couple of inches of rain and our hopes were raised. Everything turned green, but not from the grass. We had a plague of caterpillars that ate all the leaves off the trees. Then the heat wave struck. We were in town in the first day of crippling heat. We came home to find dead chooks and one of our bitches had killed all but one of her pups trying to keep them cool. Dad did a lick and water run the next day, he took for ever to come home, we started to worry. Throughout the morning birds such as kookaburras and tawny frogmouths found their way into the house, seeking out the cool of the cement floor, so exhausted from the heat they let us pick them up to wet them. Dad finally came home, every time he pulled up, birds flew under the car for the shade as there were no leaves left on the trees. He told us how he tried to wet the dirt down to give them some relief. It's men like this that activists have labelled barbaric.

Throughout this time my mum, was just like every other rural woman. Stoic, supportive, extremely hard working and never showed her tears, although surely there were many when nobody was looking. I have no doubt that it was her, like every other rural woman, that held things together. It's women like this that activists have said don't deserve Australia's support

After New Year it was time to go to Boarding School, I knew I was lucky to go and I really don't know where the money came from. I also didn't want to go, who would have the time to keep the crows off the poddies? As Mum and Dad dropped me off, the heavens finally opened up. My parents more or less dropped me and ran, like so many other parents. I had mixed feelings that day, elation that the drought had broken, sadness because I wouldn't see "my" place coming back to life. I went home for a weekend a few weeks later and the change was amazing. As I lay in my bed that night, I could hear an eerie noise. It became louder and louder and all I could think of was a story an Indigenous dorm mate told me about Kadatchi Man. As I lay in my bed in the dark listening to the shrieks getting louder, I couldn't bear it anymore and ran to my parents' room. At 13 years old, I had forgotten what the sound of frogs rejoicing in the running creek sounded like. It's children like this who activists have said don't deserve a future.

I'm grown up now, with two small children of my own. My husband has worked so hard and we've sacrificed so much, this year we were finally living the dream. We have our own company, totally reliant on the cattle industry, doing what he's always wanted to do, and he's damn good at it. Now he's losing hope and talking about going to the mines. It's people like us, activists have said don't deserve a livelihood.

So that's my story, there are so many others out there, many much more heart breaking than this and if the ban on live export continues, there will be thousands more. They will

be stories of despair, heartbreak, death, bankruptcy and loss. They will be stories of people who have been forsaken by their nation.

Just like us, everyone in the cattle industry has invested so much blood sweat, and tears into what they do. We have worked at it for generations, through flood, fire, drought and cyclones. Through accidents, death and illness when your only medical help is a Flying Doctors Medical Chest and their doctor on the other end of the radio or phone if you were lucky enough to have one. Past generations have kept their head down, and tried to stay out of trouble. They went about their immense work load quietly.

Well not any more! It's time that rural Australia stands up and be heard! And be heard we will. We are sick and tired of being pushed around and we will not go down without a fight. Because we are fighting for our past and we are fighting for our future. We are so damn proud of who we are, and you can never, NEVER, take our pride.

Kylie Stretton



This is what it looked like after the caterpillars came through and ate all of the foliage off the trees. We sold the place 5 years and many good seasons later and most of the trees never grew back.