



Photos: Jo Curkpatrick

To reverse the loss of biodiversity the Milsom's have planted the native *Atriplex* spp. (Oldman) saltbush on their Mt Hope property.

OLDMAN SALTBUSH

Taking a blunt approach to tackling salinity

Case study: David and Jill Millsom
Location: Mt Hope via Pyramid Hill, Victoria
Area: 500 hectares
Average Rainfall: 350 mm
Enterprise: Sheep and cropping



David Millsom doesn't apologise for his blunt approach to tackling dryland salinity. He says salinity is a symptom of the loss of biodiversity and if farming systems are to be sustainable they have to be integrated into the natural system that supports them.

It's hard to argue with a man who is as committed to the cause as David. Together with partner Jill, he's putting his beliefs to work on his property, Mt Hope, near Pyramid Hill. As Greening Australia's Technical Development Officer, he's also passing on his expertise to others in northern Victoria.

By the 1980s our place was over-tilled and weedy with Patterson's curse and cape weed. Basically it needed a rest and some restructuring — so that's what we're doing now.

Mt Hope was selected in 1838. Part of it has been in Jill's family since 1875 as a dryland cropping and grazing enterprise. The rainfall is irregular and the soils range from light granite sands to heavy clays that don't leach easily, so salinity is a problem.

In Edmund Curr's book *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria 1838-1849*, Curr talks about the large stands of saltbush he observed at the foot of Mt Hope. Well back in the 1960s, the saltbush that grew naturally on the place was taken out and nothing much has grown since.

We thought planting exotic salt tolerant plants wasn't the answer, it's just treating the symptoms not the cause — which is loss of biodiversity. So we looked at returning the native

Key points

- Loss of biodiversity is the reason for dryland salinity
- Exotics are not the answer

Atriplex spp. (Oldman) saltbush to the property.

We started to re-establish Oldman saltbush on Mt Hope in 1991, planting into D-class soils - that is, soils classified as having salt levels of nine deci-semens or higher and considered unsuitable for farming.

We now have about 60 hectares of saltbush-dominated pasture, 40 ha planted as seedlings, and 20 ha direct seeded at the cost of about \$50 a hectare.

One of the paddocks we've direct seeded was disc ploughed for 50 years. Today it has well-established saltbush and plenty of native grasses that have moved in from the paddock edges, such as curly windmill grass.

The carrying capacity is a bit lower than conventional exotic pastures but we don't have to cut hay or supplementary feed and we won't have to re-sow for about three generations.

We originally started this project to solve soil erosion. We began to fence the hills out and direct seeded these areas using about a dozen species - mostly acacias. These included casias, some bulokes, and creeping and Oldman saltbush. We've also fenced off and direct seeded the eroded gullies with local vegetation. Native pines are now starting to show through. We didn't plant them, they were either there or have been carried in.

Using small paddocks and rotational grazing methods we have developed a farming system that is sustainable and shows that you can change the landscape and still be productive. The carrying capacity is now averaging about



David Millsom in a three-year-old stand of Oldman saltbush at Mt Hope.

nine dry sheep equivalents (DSE), four on the salty country and up to 10 DSE on the better land.

While we have the knowledge to do a lot better out there, I believe the level of understanding about biodiversity is dangerously low. We are certainly not on top of the salinity problem yet.

- David Millsom spoke with Jo Curkpatrick, NDSP Communication Co-ordinator (VIC)

NOTE: David's article on direct seeding of Oldman saltbush and associated chenopod species in saline clay, can be found in Branching Out, Greening Australia's Victoria update, issue 21 Winter 2001.

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