

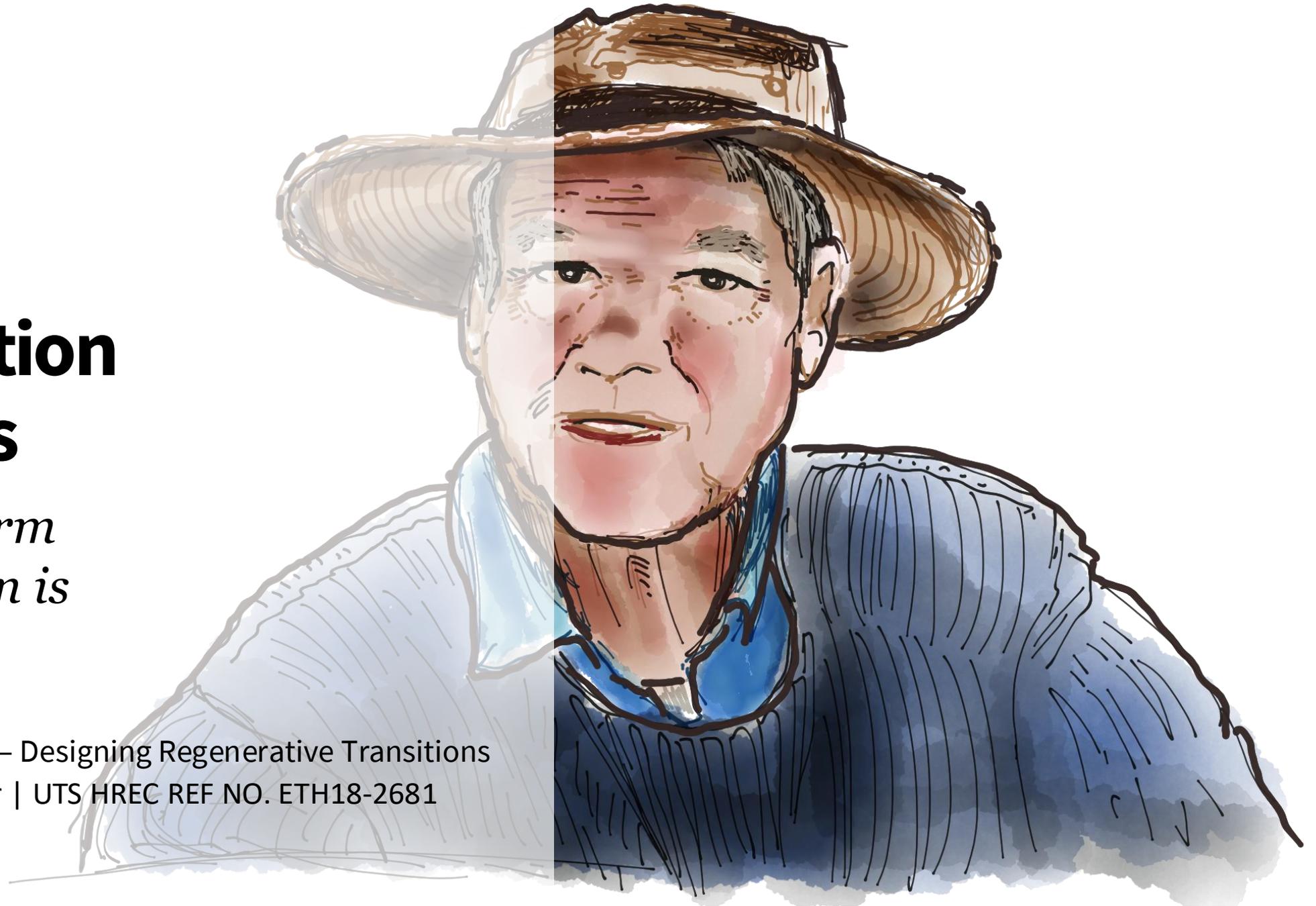
Farm transition stories

*Every farm
transition is
different*

PhD Research – Designing Regenerative Transitions

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About this document

No two farms are exactly alike. The combination of practices that will enable one farm to be resilient, regenerative, and sustainable will not necessarily work for the next farm or in a different region. No two farmers will approach a farm transition the same way, either.

This document presents 13 stories that illustrate this diversity. Each story includes challenges, barriers, and potential transition strategies.



Use these stories – with care

These transition stories are based on patterns observed through PhD research. They do not represent any one individual or family. If you find it helpful, you are welcome to use these stories to help identify farmer needs and test transition supports.

If you do use them, take care with them. Test them in your context first. Be cautioned against over-generalization, stereotyping, and over-simplification. They may not be relevant to your context. They are no substitute for engaging people.

Contact me with questions about appropriate use and to share your use cases in return.

Presenting transition challenges through a design tool called ‘personas’

These transition stories are based on a tool from design called ‘personas’. Personas are an exercise in empathy. Rather than using individual stories (which may be identifiable), personas present an aggregate picture comprised of the experiences of multiple people. These stories reflect some of the diverse challenges and pathways to farming system transitions, including scale, industry, product type, biome, climate conditions, circumstances, business model, market, the conditions of the property and ecosystem, the personal goals and choices of each farmer and farming family, etc.

Personas must be crafted and used with care. Personas come with risks of stereotyping, over-generalization, and stigmatization. They are not readily transferable, with potential issues regarding cross-cultural validity and local relevancy. Their framing and use can perpetuate hegemony, privilege, and existing structural inequities. See literature panel at right.

Empirical origins of these stories

The source of data for these stories (personas) is empirical e.g., based on patterns observed across interviews, workshops, and ethnographic experience in working with farmers over the course of my PhD. The stories have been synthesised inductively from this data and so are specific to this data set i.e. there could be more or different stories (personas) depending on the context. For this reason, these stories represent sketches of potential ‘users’ of policies, extension, education, products, etc., meant to support regenerative agriculture transition, but any further application requires testing and iteration for the specific context and use. Fictional elements have been used to tell believable stories. As the agricultural context changes, so too will the conditions that led to these stories. Whilst they have the potential to point to user groups, they will also have a limited shelf life. The level of detail in the stories is meant to be indicative and suggestive of salient user characteristics, (not comprehensive) to afford space for the design of a range of interventions to support transitions.

These stories are consistent with the Cooper-type personas, as compared with other types of personas described in Floyd, Jones and Twidale 2008. As ‘intuitive archetypes’, these stories “capture intuitions about [user groups and their needs and characteristics] before real needs and characteristics have been investigated” (p 21) with respect to specific interventions like policies, etc.

Relevant literature and critiques

Origin of personas

Cooper, A. (1999). *The inmates are running the asylum*. Houndmills, UK: Macmillan.

Types of personas; Potential for methodological corruption

Floyd, I. R., Cameron Jones, M., & Twidale, M. B. (2008). RESOLVING INCOMMENSURABLE DEBATES: A PRELIMINARY IDENTIFICATION OF PERSONA KINDS, ATTRIBUTES, AND CHARACTERISTICS. *Artifact*, 2(1), 12-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17493460802276836>

Risk of stereotyping

Guan, K. W., Salminen, J., Jung, S.-G., & Jansen, B. J. (2024). Leveraging Personas for Social Impact: A Review of Their Applications to Social Good in Design. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 40(19), 5569-5584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2023.2247568>

Cross-cultural validity, local relevancy

Cabrero, D. G., Winschiers-Theophilus, H., & Abdelnour-Nocera, J. (2016). A Critique of Personas as representations of "the other" in Cross-Cultural Technology Design.

Risk of over-generalising and stigmatizing

McKercher, K. A. (2020). Beyond sticky notes. *Doing co-design for Real: Mindsets, Methods, and Movements, 1st Edn*. Sydney, NSW: *Beyond Sticky Notes*.

Risk of perpetuating hegemony, privilege

Mages, M. A., & Onafuwa, D. (2019). Opacity, Transition, and Design Research. *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación. Ensayos*, (73), 262-280.

The next generation

Making their own way

From a few generations of farmers, perhaps having come back to the farm after education and work elsewhere, this farmer navigates protecting the family reputation while making their own way. In many ways, they have the support of their family. On some things, however, the father just won't budge. They are making changes, but it's slower than this farmer would like. There is a lot of upkeep, maintenance and some landscape repair to be done, and not a lot of cash lying about for that work. A degree in ag science was a good foundation, but this farmer's values are more in line with regenerative approaches, and no matter how many extension events they go to, they still end up working it out as they go.



Transition challenges and barriers

- Hard to find practical, real-world examples of application
- Regenerative approaches have to be integrated
- Have to save for a while for big changes; making infrastructure improvements a little at a time

Potential transition strategies

- How-to videos, case studies, demonstrations
- Integrated education / extension offers
- Grants and funding for fencing, water infrastructure and tree planting
- Succession planning

Industry lead

Best in class

This farmer aims to be a best-in-class producer. Always offering their property as a research trial site, they quickly adopt proven new technology. Targeted spot-weeding, beneficial pests, sensors, drones? You got it. Careful, vigilant management keeps this sizable farm organized and profitable. Not much can be done about drought, it's part of being a farmer. You can anticipate that climate volatility will be a part of the big picture, and you just have to take it in stride when it comes. As part of an export industry, there are constraints on what they can do, but collaboration keeps the industry competitive. This farmer is proud of their product and doing their part to “feed the world”.

Transition challenges and barriers

- This farmer always looks for opportunities to lead innovation, but taking up innovation from outside industry channels is risky and can be socially unacceptable
- Making drastic changes on farm risks years of production
- Export markets dictate product and price settings

Potential transition strategies

- Research into regenerative approaches and product development for cropping in their industry
- Further development in diversifying and transitioning broadacre monocultures
- Building local and alternative markets, processing, and distribution channels





Transition challenges and barriers

- The landscape—or what's left of it—is one of the only resources that remains
- Limited knowledge of regenerative practices
- Significant damage impacting farming viability

Potential transition strategies

- Support to develop/revise the farm master plan
- Training in regenerative approaches
- Funding and incentives for regeneration

TRANSITION STORY

Crisis response

No other way forward

A farming family for decades, a future in farming seemed like a solid bet for this farmer. Some crises creep up—like slow erosion of profitability, soil, and ecosystem health year on year. Other crises come fast—a health scare that stops them in their tracks; a flood or bushfire that rips everything away. Either way, this farmer reaches a point where continuing to do things as they have been doing becomes untenable. They have to find a new way forward, even though the path is unclear and resources are thin. With low input costs and some farm modifications, perhaps paid for by selling off remaining equipment, they might survive. Whether discovered through experimentation or coming across a course, this farmer arrives at working with nature as the most cost effective strategy. Research has shown crisis to be one of the most common causes of a dramatic shift in perspective leading to transition.

TRANSITION STORY

Tree change

Seeking quality of life

Well educated, two incomes, experienced entrepreneurs and business people, familiar with navigating grant and funding mechanisms, and social media savvy, this family bring skills and resources that other farmers don't always have. They are hoping to bring an ethos of sustainability and community building to the farm. But they still have to learn the basics of land management. As graziers, they will be grass farmers and livestock managers. And the property, overgrazed for a long time, will need rest and repair.



Transition challenges and barriers

- New to farming
- Off-farm employment—funds transition efforts but constrains time to weekends and holidays

Potential transition strategies

- Building skills: reading the landscape, holistic decision-making, practical skills, e.g. managing grazing
- Support to develop a plan for regenerating the farm
- Business model and financial planning
- Grants, labor, and expertise for key projects



Transition challenges and barriers

- Sufficient funds for a down payment and work that will need to be done once a property is purchased
- Getting experience managing a property

Potential transition strategies

- Options like farm share, farming on other people's land (FOOPL), cooperatives, and farm management positions as a stepping stone
- Alternative funding and investment mechanisms
- Grants for on-farm projects

TRANSITION STORY

Just need the land

How to make a dream come true?

Always looking for ways to live a more self-sufficient lifestyle, deeply connected to country, this pair have taken every course available—Permaculture, Biodynamics, Holistic Management, No-Kill and Pasture Cropping, Syntropic Agriculture, Agro-forestry, learned from Aboriginal cool burning, you name it. They've put everything possible to use on their tiny 1/4 acre block in the city, but they long for land. They've been renting for years and are still saving up for a down payment on a small block. People leaving the cities during the COVID-19 pandemic have driven up land prices, and their dream looks even further away than before.

Strong & determined

Success requires more than 'regenerative'

This farmer has returned to the land, buying an old dairy after a successful but gruelling career in management and marketing. She's determined to make a success of it, and through her contacts has found a niche market interested in specialty, high-end wool products. She's a hard worker and grew up on the land. Patronizing comments about 'lady farmers' have made her even more determined, but she knows to work smarter, not harder. And besides, most of the food around the world is produced by women. Her farm will need to be regenerative, but she needs more in order to compete: the best breeding and genetics, state-of-the-art facilities, and a competent team. Her challenge is to establish firm footing in her market while transitioning the property and getting everything working well.



Transition challenges and barriers

- Property was flogged out by previous use
- Business would benefit if the whole property could be transitioned faster but has to make a choice about where to invest available cash

Potential transition strategies

- Markets favorable for small producers and high-end products
- Access to niche markets around the world
- Grant packages for end-to-end transition or eliminate the paperwork with one-off grants (tree planting, fencing riparian areas, infrastructure)

Continually improving

Quietly making changes over time

This pair don't make a fuss or ruffle any feathers. They get on with their work. They have a family to raise and a large property to manage in a fairly remote area. They've never been comfortable with chemicals, and they're always looking for more natural options. It has to make sense financially, too. They have crops and livestock, and extensive re-fencing is impractical. With such a large property they have to feel confident that any changes they make will be cost effective and deliver a return—so they trial things. In a remote area, new things either have to be readily available or they have to be able to do it themselves. They like to be open minded but clear about what works for them and are happy for the latest technology to sit alongside centuries-old practices. With their strong partnership, they've been able to think things through and implement a lot of changes over the years, even if they took their time.



Transition challenges and barriers

- Remote location
- Property size requires cost-effective practices
- Limited access to new and novel approaches

Potential transition strategies

- Online learning for exposure to new practices
- DIY how-to videos and case studies
- Research that includes economics

What's old is new again

Regenerative organic?

This farmer's family have been growing food for centuries and operate a multi-generational business growing veggies outside Sydney. Her Chinese relatives came to Australia with the gold rush and found their living through market gardens, adapting to the climate and geography. The Vietnamese side of her family migrated during the 'green revolution' and felt forced to give up many of their traditional practices to keep up with cost pressures. They cannot expand locally and so have to be smart about what they do. When supermarkets introduced organic sections, they transitioned their blocks to organic and brought back some of their traditional practices. They are curious whether regenerative organic is meaningfully different in outcomes from what they've known all along. They are looking into certification, wondering if it will hold value long enough to make the expense worthwhile. Either way, they've gotten good results combining the old with the new and will just get on with doing whatever works.



Transition challenges and barriers

- Do regenerative practices get different outcomes as compared to traditional practices, Biodynamics, or elements of Permaculture that they might incorporate?
- What will 'regenerative' add to the business?
- Will the growth in demand continue?

Potential transition strategies

- Information comparing models and results
- Growth in consumer demand and regenerative organic certification schemes

All in the family

Four generations of land managers

This farmer is proud of the family legacy and is determined it won't suffer on their watch. Their family has been managing the property for generations, and grandfather was an absolute legend. They've done well in good times, got lucky a few times—found a sweet spot in the market, and there have been tough times too. They've built their industry relationships so as to make well-informed decisions and even have a bit of influence. People sometimes suggest that they do this or that differently, but what's the reason in making change when they've done OK so far? Sure, things are tough right now, and people talk about climate change, but this land has always been a land of drought, flood, and bushfire.



Transition challenges and barriers

- History of success favours a steady hand and risk avoidance
- Legacy and succession are important: Finances, management, family, reputation
- Climate variability is to be respected but change is not perceived as real

Potential transition strategies

- Growing social acceptance and accessibility of regenerative approaches
- Products and methods requiring little adjustment to machinery, application, or practices and that are readily available alongside products currently being used
- Incorporating changes over time
- Succession planning

The innovator

If there's a popular new practice, chances are they're already doing it

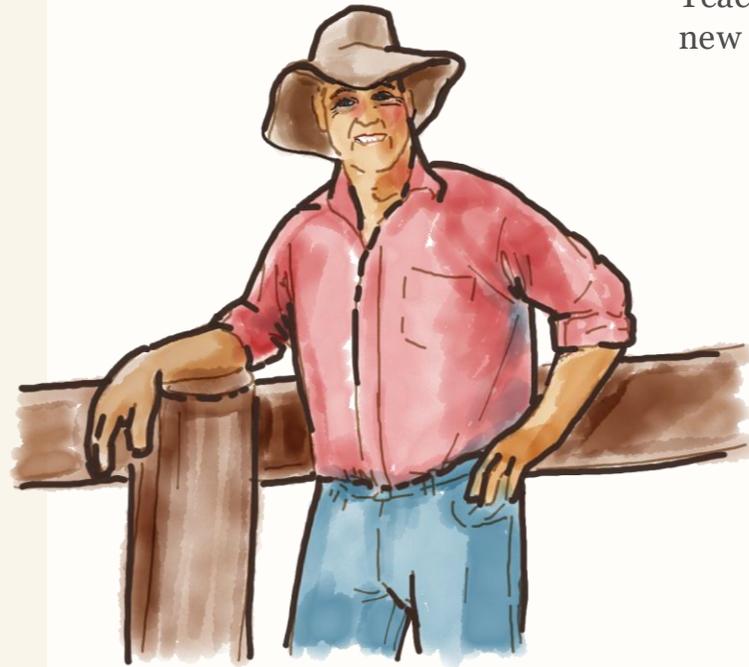
A natural innovator and early adopter, this farmer is relentlessly experimenting with new ways to meet their own ideals and make ends meet. Scouring any available resource and following leads, this farmer is far ahead of trend. If there is a new practice getting popular, it's highly likely that this farmer has been doing it for a long time—and may be well beyond it— but no one knew what they were talking about back then. That part has been pretty hard on them and their family. He's had so many experiences of being dismissed out of hand, derided, and even shunned, then proven right decades later—with no recognition. There is a social price for marching to the beat of a different drum. Investing time and resources in forging his own way forward, profitability can sometimes be thin or non-existent.

Transition challenges and barriers

- Relevant supply chain and market likely does not exist yet
- Financial management
- Push back from others; social isolation

Potential transition strategies

- Creative development of supply/market options
- Business model and financial planning
- Partnerships for business, advertising, marketing, social media influencing
- Teaching/training others in new methods



TRANSITION STORY

Weaving community

Local is the future

This pair believe deeply in the power of community. When not working on the farm they can be found organizing some new gathering. They are constantly weaving relationships and the fabric of community. They also believe that investing in local—regional, remote, and rural local—is how we can transform both our economy and our environment to something that feels more livable, more regenerative. But they can't depend on farmer's markets without off-farm income. A level of inter-connection across regions is a necessity for food security, but the dominance of global markets doesn't seem to be working consistently in favour of food security or healthy ecological systems. They want to help address the disconnect between local and global markets and build community at the same time.



Transition challenges and barriers

- What markets exist in the space between local, national, and global scales?
- Incentives, markets, funding etc., all seem to favour large scale, conventional producers

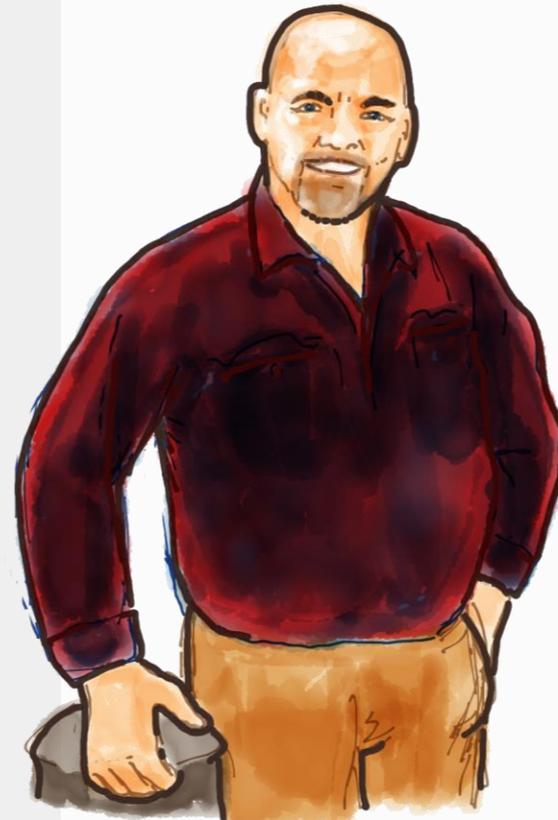
Potential transition strategies

- Investment and incentives for local, inter-local, and cross-regional, small to medium-sized producers, entrepreneurs, technology, communications, supply chains, and markets

Locked in

Interest in transition, but the path is unclear

This broadacre farmer is convinced of the value of regeneration for their property and the environment. They have started with easy things: fencing the boundaries of the property and re-introducing animals, but they can't incorporate more fencing at this point. They are miffed by the idea that zero chemicals and high-density rotational grazing is the only way to be regenerative and feel slightly rejected by the movement. Although they currently rely on a monoculture, they see the value of biodiversity and business model diversity, but they are not finding a lot of information on regenerative cropping. The local information seems to all be about grazing or mixed farming—and there's definitely no information on how to transition. They feel locked in, either way they go, and frustrated.



Transition challenges and barriers

- Scale plus sunk costs in equipment and machinery
- Limited regenerative options for broadacre monocropping

Potential transition strategies

- Further development in diversifying and transitioning broadacre monocultures
- Awareness and availability of regenerative strategies: multi-species and cover cropping, pasture cropping, no-kill cropping, stress-free stockmanship, self herding; liquid and pellet compost and biological products
- Market support for regenerative products

RESPECTFULLY, NOT A STORY.

For Country



On country, without Country

[Author's discussion] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, like other First Nations cultures, is embedded in country—in place. History, identity, community, kin, and lore (as law) are tied to place. Through colonization, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were removed from their country, cultures, and kin. Colonization is still here: the effects of those actions together with existing societal norms and systems tend to structurally reinforce and perpetuate both marginalization as well as harms done, causing ongoing harm.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people walk in two worlds—mainstream Australian culture and the culture and lore of their ancestors (to the extent it remains). Programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been developed (and some have gone). The land rights movement has helped to return some land to Traditional Custodians. An Australian Prime Minister has said, “Sorry” and there is a growing reconciliation movement, but at the time of this writing there has been no treaty or Voice. The “gap” is not “closing”.

Many opportunities require access to land, including ranger programs, cool burning training, native food industries, cultural tourism, clothing, crafts and art, and more. Some of these are in combination with agriculture. How might Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and agency be supported, in ways that do not perpetuate colonization, are not extractive, and are careful with commodifying culture and nature? How might we restore access to land? How might we give back, pay the rent, and reconcile? Some regenerative practices originated through millennia of First Nations practices. How might the knowledge traditions that informed regenerative practices be better acknowledged? Holding a goal of local and global environmental regeneration, there is potential to learn from First Nations wisdom—if there is a willingness to share that intellectual property. How might we learn what it takes to transition, together?