

Banrock Station – Environmental rehabilitation of wetlands

Banrock Station is a wine producer with a difference. It has a thriving environmental program, which the company refers to as ‘the main driver in Banrock Station’s success’. This program aims to restore the natural elements such as soil, water, natural vegetation and animals as they existed at Banrock Station over 200 years ago.

Banrock Station is a part of the Hardy Wine Company, which is committed to good environmental stewardship, through its environmental management system (EMS). Wetland sponsorship is the core of their program. As well as its Australian conservation work, Banrock Station has projects in nine countries and each project is tailored to the country in which it is developed. More details of these projects can be found at the Banrock Station web site at www.banrockstation.com.au.

At the same time as caring for the environment, this global wine producer has emerged as one of the fastest growing brands in the major wine drinking countries of the world. Banrock Station’s success demonstrates the role consumers’ support can play in contributing to attempts to improve the environment.

Origins

Banrock Station was established in 1994 on a 1750-hectare (4200 acres) property at the junction of Banrock Creek and the Murray River. The property is near Kingston-on-Murray, about 200km north-east of Adelaide and consists of 12.5km of river frontage, 600 hectares of mallee woodland, 900 hectares of wetlands and 300 hectares of previously cereal-cropped areas. The aim was to establish a vineyard to supply premium grapes, working to increase the 12 hectares already planted.

The property had been intensively farmed and grazed for around 100 years, disturbing the fragile environment. In addition, the main lagoon associated with the property was destroyed when a lock was built in 1925. The water level rose and began flowing permanently into the lagoon, preventing it from drying out. As a result, no new water entered the lagoon. The key ingredient to new life is fresh water because it triggers breeding of aquatic animals and germination of plants. Without it, native plant and animal breeding in the lagoon declined. In 1969 European Carp invaded the lagoon, which gave them with ideal breeding conditions. They became the dominant fish, removing many of the aquatic plants from the area.

Wetland Care Australia and the previous owners combined their efforts to develop and implement a new wetland management program. This included building structures to manage the flow in and out of the lagoon, building screens to prevent carp entering the lagoon and emptying the lagoon of carp that were there.

Banrock Station wine sales have contributed more than \$400,000 to Landcare Australia and Wetland Care Australia for environmental projects. BRL Hardy developed new projects, including the concept of establishing wetland projects outside the property in conjunction with Landcare Australia.

Management

The Manager, Tony Sharley (M.Sc.B. Ap. Sc. Ecology, Dip. App. Sci.), is enthusiastic about conserving wetlands. He grew up on the River Murray and his previous work dealt with managing the environment. Before joining Banrock Station in 1999 he was with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission as its Catchment Scientist.

Ecotourism

Banrock Station is keen to develop public understanding of its environmental projects. To this end they established the Banrock Station Boardwalk Trail, jointly funded by Banrock Station and the South Australian Government. It gives the public unprecedented access to the River Murray wetlands and helps inform visitors about the complex lifecycles of wetland environment. The seasonal nature of the Banrock Station wetlands provides visitors with new experiences on each visit.

In addition, the Boardwalk Trail increases visitors' awareness of the need for continuing protection of the River Murray from environmental threats such as salinity. This is particularly important, as the Murray River is part of the massive Murray-Darling Basin that drains approximately one fifth of Australia.

Ecotourism Australia, the country's peak body for the ecotourism industry, recognised Banrock Station's work in November 2003, when it awarded the Centre an "Advanced Accreditation" under the organisation's prestigious National Ecotourism Accreditation Program - the highest level of accreditation possible.

Vineyard

Banrock Station also demonstrates a concern for the environment in the vineyard, where they have installed state-of-the-art trellising and computer controlled drip irrigation. Computers and soil moisture probes allow workers to monitor water usage and to prevent the local water table rising. This ensures that salts are not released back into the Murray River system. At the same time, it maximises grape quality.

The business ensures both the quality of the product and the environment. Eighteen 'Enviroscans' probe sites monitor moisture levels in the soil. They are set at varying levels, down to 2 metres, in the soil profile. Vineyard workers use the probe sites to determine the volume of water being applied and at what depths the vines remove water from the soil. This information is then used to plan the watering schedule. As a result, the correct amount of water is applied at the right time, ensuring that the vines are not over irrigated. In turn, they achieve an environmentally sound outcome by preventing drainage of water, salt and fertiliser into the groundwater, and ultimately the River Murray.

Staff

Banrock Station employs 5 vineyard and wetland staff as well as casual workers. In addition, many others are involved globally in marketing the wine.

Company

The company's environmental conservation work gives it a point of differentiation and a promotional advantage in environmentally conscious markets, such as Europe and North America. This has led to exporting success with 65 percent of Banrock Station's earnings from export markets.

The Banrock Station parent company has changed in recent years. In 2002 its owner, BRL Hardy, formed a 50:50 joint venture partnership with Constellation Brands to form Pacific Wine Partners in order to gain access to the three-tiered US market (importer, distributor and retailer). In 2003 Constellation Brands bought out BRL Hardy, merged it with its own company and renamed the Australian subsidiary Hardy Wine Company.