Anna Hughes

- Farms with parents-in-law Philip and Adele and brother in-law Alister
- Banchory Grazing and Rangeland Quality Meats wholesale business
- *Create Australia* 2026 graduate

Anna's wild *and* measured life

By Melissa Pouliot

When she was 17, Queensland cattle farmer Anna Hughes did a science experiment tracking the lives of 20 ducks at her childhood home on a few acres on the outer edges of Brisbane.

With a naturally inquisitive and scientific mind, she fed them different rations and measured their weight every week.

She's not sure where those ducks ended up, and says her ducks are definitely still not in a row, but remembering that high school experiment provides an insight into early signs of her curiosity, love for animal production and trialling and observing new things.

Animals and landscape have always featured strongly in Anna's life; from a young age she had an animal menagerie and grew up 'free-ranging' at home and the old dairy farm next door.

Her Mum, Margaret, was an accomplished dressage rider and spent her working years in Parliament House as the office manager for the Liberal National Party. Her Dad, Spencer, is one of Westpac Bank's longest-serving employees and worked in various roles and branches around Queensland.

When it came to city life, Anna needed a hand-drawn mud map find her way to her Mum's city office building.

But when it comes to navigating her way around rural and outback Australia, Anna has always felt right at home.

Dulacca in the wet and dry.

After graduating from high school she deferred a science and agribusiness degree for a gap year in the bush, long before gap years in the bush became fashionable.

She took a job at Mt Leonard Station, Betoota, in southwest Queensland, 1200 kilometres west of Brisbane.

She loved every minute and could have spent a lot longer working between her employers' Betoota property and their other cattle breeding property in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

"It was a fantastic experience where I connected with livestock and landscape," Anna says.

After a year she returned to the University of Queensland, Gatton UQ, to study a joint degree in Agribusiness and Animal Science. This was an opportunity to further her love for science, innovation, animals and the environment, and she paid her way by working at feedlots and as a chemistry tutor.

A reciprocal exchange with Queensland Cotton to Texas A&M University College expanded her world view and grew her love for meat science, agroeconomics and agribusiness while enjoying the many perks and novelties that living in another country offers.

Dulacca

Lachlan Hughes, a champion polocrosse player and breeder of Australian stock horses, became Anna's 'study buddy' for an accounting subject. They clicked, he proposed and she moved to live with him on one of his family properties, 'Dulacca Downs' near Roma in Queensland.

Tourist brochures refer to Dulacca as a quiet rural town on the Warrego Highway. It sits in a flat landscape surrounded by farmland well known for producing quality cattle stud stock. It's also famous for its local hotel built in 1908 named the 'Pink Pub'.

Anna recalls the early years well, including a generous gesture by elderly neighbours looking to downsize and retire from the land. They were keen to see a young couple 'have a crack' and offered the Hughes family first buy on their farm, 'Heatherlie' where Anna and Lachlan settled to start their lives together.

The adjoining properties, 'Dulacca Downs' and 'Heatherlea', are around 5,100 hectares (12,600 acres), average-sized for the area. The land was initially used as a dairy farm producing cream for Brisbane and transported by rail, before moving into sheep in a big way, with two shearing sheds.

It had once been highly productive but when the Hughes family took ownership it was stripped back to the bare bones.

A stark memory is one paddock that would only grow galvanised burr – a dense-coverage Australian native tap-rooted burr plant.

"It was very tired country, you couldn't even run a dog through that paddock."

Undeterred, Anna and Lachlan roared through their twenties, travelling to polocrosse tournaments while Anna followed her passion for breeding and working Kelpies.

In the early days their focus was on 'learning the ropes' of working together, being part of a multi-generational farm and living their lives. High priority tasks included water and fencing, and they did the best they could with what they knew.

"We worked together, the two of us, side by side every day, as a team. What he did, I did."

Importance of context

As well as the Western Darling Downs properties, the Hughes family – parents Philip and Adele and younger brother Alister – had another family property, 'Banchory Station', in central Queensland.

The development techniques they used successfully in central Queensland didn't translate so well to the more fragile soils of the Western Darling Downs.

"In the early days we brought down some of those central Queensland techniques like blade ploughing then seeding. With our fragile soils that take ages to respond we ended up having these rough corrugations for a really, really long time," she recalls.

The area has a rolling annual rainfall of 650 millimetres, with August and September their driest months. Summer storms arrive from October onwards but if you miss the early storms, you can miss them right through.

This makes winter hit and miss and in those early years their cattle would gain no weight during winter.

"We wouldn't necessarily expect any weight gain off native pastures through the winter. We'd just be happy if they maintained their weight; that was our measure of success."

Health and nutrition

Anna has always been highly conscious of human health as she grew up with a lot of sensitivities.

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"My family used to joke I was the canary in the coal mine as I would always be the first one who would show up any toxins or poisons. This gave me an early awareness of health, nutrition, what I put in and on my body, and the environment around me."

The combination of Lachlan being a *head in the clouds* dreamer and Anna's background in health and wellbeing created a chemistry between them that led to them both questioning the way they were farming.

"We would often talk about the things we were doing in our veggie garden to keep us healthy, and ask ourselves, why couldn't we take that out into the paddocks on a bigger scale?

"Between my health and nutrition focus and Lach's curiosity, we developed the production side of our farm as we grew our awareness together."

Anna says as well as being curious, Lachlan was an amazing accumulator of people and knowledge.

It was a different time, when information was not at our fingertips like it is today, but Lachlan always seemed to find people who could help progress their journey.

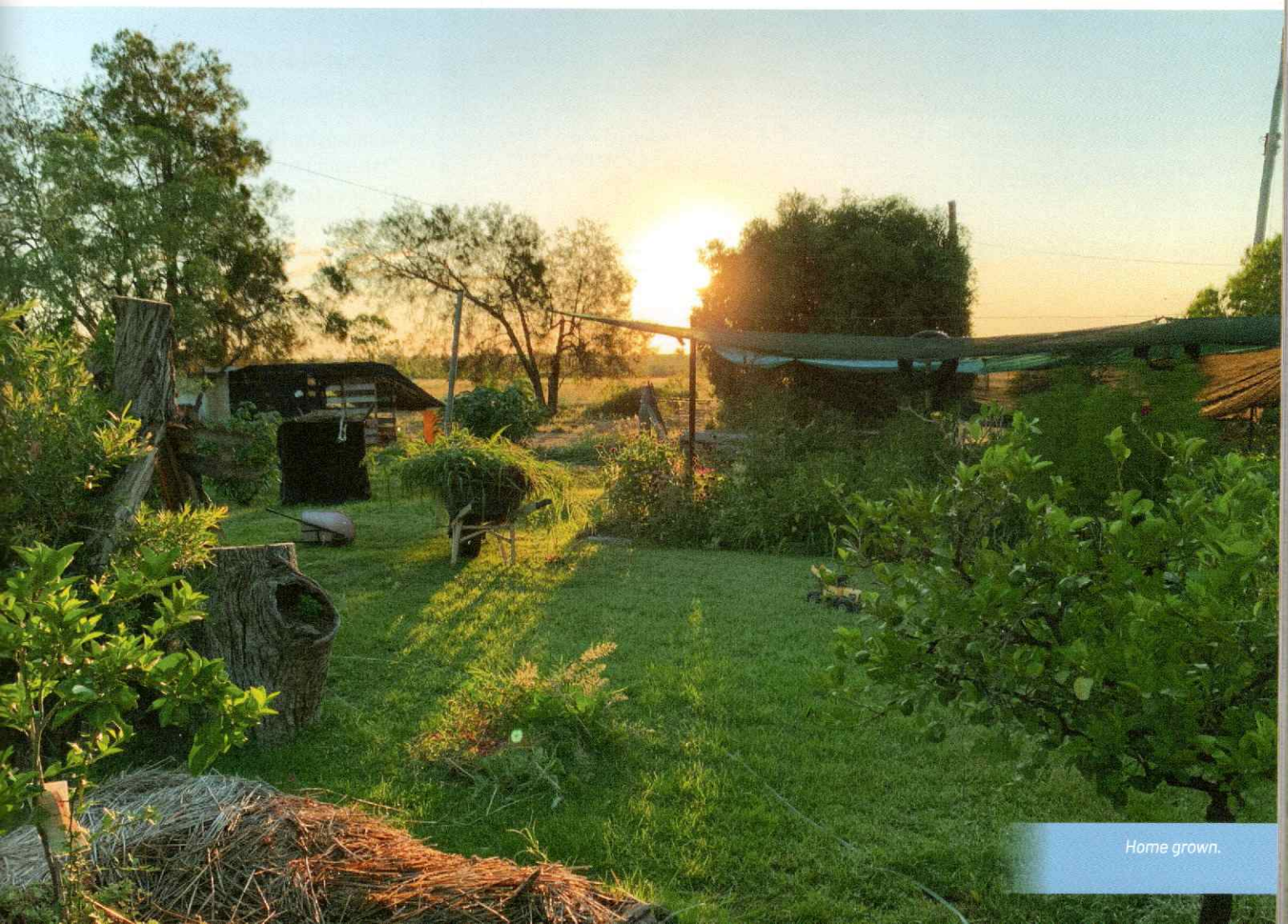
"I don't know where he would find people from; he would dig them up from all over the place. He was amazing at connecting the dots between who to talk to.

"Early on he was keen on biodynamics and he'd say, 'let's talk to Neal Kinsey'. Next minute we've got Neal Kinsey standing in our vegetable garden which was just a couple of round corrugated tanks a metre and a half across.

"I look at those photos now and can't believe we took Neal Kinsey to see our veggie garden!"

Over the years they've also had visits from Charles Massey, Stuart Andrews, Rhonda and Bill Daly, Hamish Mackay and Charlie Arnott.

"We have been so fortunate to have all these people, among many others, in our lives at various times, sharing their knowledge and experience and helping us grow our awareness of soil health and regenerating our land."



Home grown.

Rainfall ready

Anna says severe droughts, where they had to 100% destock, presented a whole host of challenges, particularly during the recovery period.

"I remember having conversations about how much rain we needed to have an impact. If we didn't get 25mm in an event, we may-as-well not get any – the country just didn't respond.

"We had no cover and it was just this barren landscape, both above and below ground.

"We knew we had to make ourselves 'rain ready' and we set a goal to increase our groundcover so that regardless of whether we got 15 or 30mm, the country would be able to respond."

What ensued were passionate discussions among the family about changing the way they farmed.

Regenerative thinking

Anna says they tried cover crops but learnt quickly that trying to manage two totally separate systems – an annual food production system and grazing system – didn't align in their environment.

"We tried a few things but they were failures. Some of it was seasonal and some of it was a knowledge gap on our part."

She says they have soil tests going a long way back but lacked the knowledge to do much with them. They did discover they had clay soils that are quite sodic in places, with high magnesium, very low organic matter and high CEC (cation exchange capacity). To achieve a better balance they required a lot of amendments – too many to be economically viable.

They shifted their regenerative focus towards minimising grazing impact and working with what they had available to them. They split their paddocks, fencing according to vegetation and land type.

"We're really fortunate here to have ridges that run right back down onto two main creeks that run through the place. This gives us the ability to impact from the top right down through to the creek and it became really important how we managed that."

They sourced funding to fence off two dams and created riparian zones to increase bird life and stabilise the banks.

"The impact this had on the water quality blew us away. So did the increase in diversity – the difference was so clear in the contrast between outside and inside the fence.

"When we saw that diversity of species come back on its own it showed us that it's there in our seed bank if we provide the conditions that allow for it. The good stuff's there, it just needs that opportunity to flourish."

Other changes included using pre-mixed supplements for their cattle during winter, and in 2014 they did the Meat and Livestock Australia challenge which focusses on production targets, key performance indicators and preparing a quarterly review.

Managing the dry

In 2018, with two young children, William and Georgia, and Anna pregnant with their third son, Hamish, they were making progress towards their regenerative future. They were busy travelling between the two properties, eight hours apart, and plans for taking on more land to grow their cattle production business were on track.

"The trajectory we were headed on was to grow. We were confident we could do that because Lachlan had so much energy, drive, passion and an incredible skill set," Anna says.

Another dry period had set in and to manage through it they created 'sacrifice pens' and installed a feed mill. The pens enabled them to manage cash flow and still produce something even when it was dry. The purpose of the feed mill was to minimise the cattle's impact on the paddocks so they wouldn't have to completely destock again.

Lachlan put everything he learnt and everything he wanted to do into spreadsheets, keeping an incredible record of observations, goals, ideas and plans.

Then everything came to a stand-still when Lachlan tragically died in an on-farm accident, aged 36.

> "Not only did we lose an incredible human being, we lost all that intellectual knowledge that was behind everything in those spreadsheets."

At this point the manager of their Clermont property moved to 'Dulacca Downs/Heatherlea' as operations manager, giving the family the space they needed to grieve, fall in a heap or do whatever they needed to do to get through their trauma.

"The realities of life don't go away when you lose someone. Those first few years it was just about survival and keeping the business going in that production sense so we still had somewhere to call home."

Lachlan

Anna says the family pulled together and found a way to move forward and honour Lachlan through forming the Lachlan Hughes Foundation. It started as a scholarship program to link one young land manager with regenerative agriculture professionals for training and mentoring.

"We all agreed that we wanted to follow the regenerative path Lach put us on because it's pretty amazing, and we wanted to share that with others because we genuinely believe in it ourselves.

"This not only gave us an injection of energy to stay regeneratively focussed on our land, it gave us something really tangible to anchor ourselves to."

After three years it developed into a 12-month program for 10 participants. Around 40 people have graduated so far, with another group halfway through this year's program.

Anna says in part, the foundation has resulted in her own post-traumatic growth.

"When you experience a traumatic event, it makes you consider the importance of what you choose to do after that event. I made a choice not to be defined by Lach's accident, and we have all worked really hard as a family to move forward and adjust to this new dynamic where Lachlan isn't here.

"It's been important to move forward, not move on, especially acknowledging that our three kids are growing up without their Dad. We're making sure they grow up knowing him, and having his memory and his essence all around them."

The foundation is in its fourth year and focusses as much on personal development as landscape change.

"It's an amazing process – we are supporting people to regenerate themselves so they can regenerate their land," Anna says.

Syntropic food forest

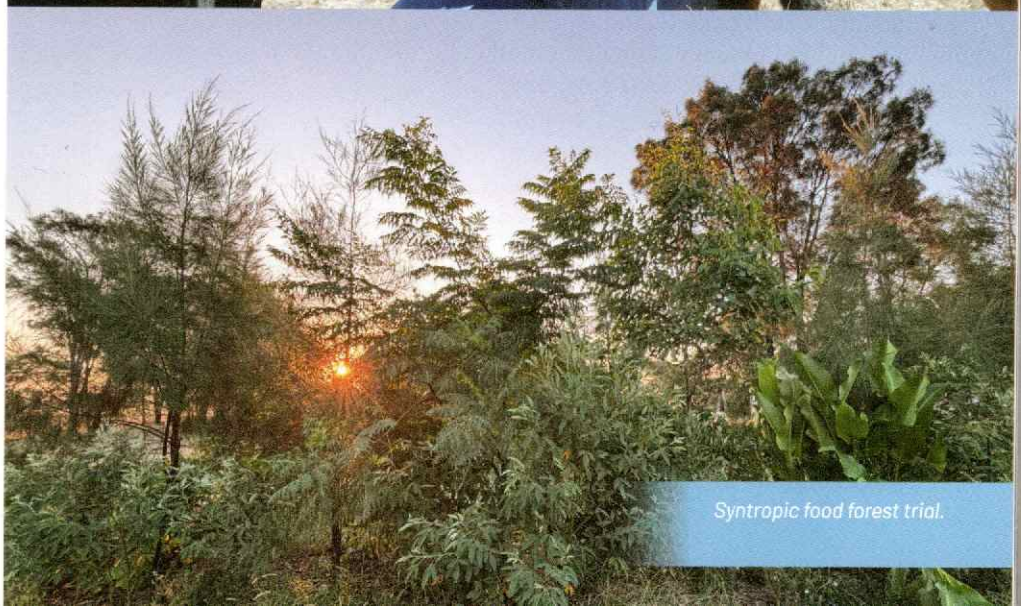
Anna participated in the first year, with her set task being to trial a project that could be upscaled for longer-term benefit.

With several kilometres of natural sequence farming contours already on the property, her trial was to test the potential of planting trees on the contours to create shade breaks. They were already seeing the benefits of the contours in terms of preventing topsoil from sheeting across paddocks during rain events, promoting plant growth and biodiversity and keeping soils functioning.

Anna chose to create a syntropic food forest – a regenerative agroforest system where you plant eucalypts alongside fruit trees. Developed in Brazil, it's designed to mimic the way forest plants work symbiotically to grow in abundance.

"I chose an area at the back of the house and we had to use a jackhammer to dig the holes, the ground was that hard. I planted eucalypt trees at tube stock size and four years on, they're 8-10m tall. This food forest is now very lush and diverse. It was a good experiment and I can now see how it would work if we scaled it up across the property."

Lachlan.



Syntropic food forest trial.

Utopia

Anna says one of the barriers to regenerative agriculture is that people expect utopia.

"Let's be honest, when it's dry here, the landscape does not look like anything close to utopia, but that doesn't mean we're not farming regeneratively.

"People put the pressure on themselves and think if they can't do a 17-species cover crop then they're not doing 'regenerative' properly. Regenerative systems aren't prescriptive where you have a list of what you should and shouldn't do.

"We are continually doing regenerative projects here and there, when and as we can, which is what I really love about it.

"You don't need to do a massive overhaul of your whole property; you can just focus on one area at a time and still feel like you're moving in the right direction."

Composting

Another passion Anna has followed in the past two years is making compost on-farm to spread across paddocks to better utilise the waste they produce in their hay feeders.

It started with completing Dr Elaine Ingham's *Soil Food Web* program, followed by tutoring with Rhonda and Bill Daly.

"I think it's a case of just following where your interests are. My interest is in the composting and it's also a process that benefits the farm overall because it's dealing with a waste product and making that useful."

The more she makes the more passionate she becomes.

"I cannot even tell you how much I love making compost and turning compost. It is a very satisfying thing to turn compost and end up with such a well-composted product. There's a real process to it and I love the science behind it all. And when you are interested in something, it makes it so much easier to do it."

Initially Anna's goal was to spread stabilised nutrients that were highly microbial over paddocks to bring them back to life by making their soil more biologically active, but has since narrowed her focus.

"I'm now taking a much more targeted approach. Rather than just spread it across whole areas of country, I'm looking at areas that need it the most."

This is the beauty of regenerative systems which start with curiosity and inquisitiveness.

"Where can this take us? Where can we go? We're not making it at this point to make a profit, it's just part of our regenerative work where we are trying to stimulate some sort of action.

"This compost is so good. It is a jump start and kicks us along so we can leapfrog past those early stages of plant succession that will take things to a whole new level."

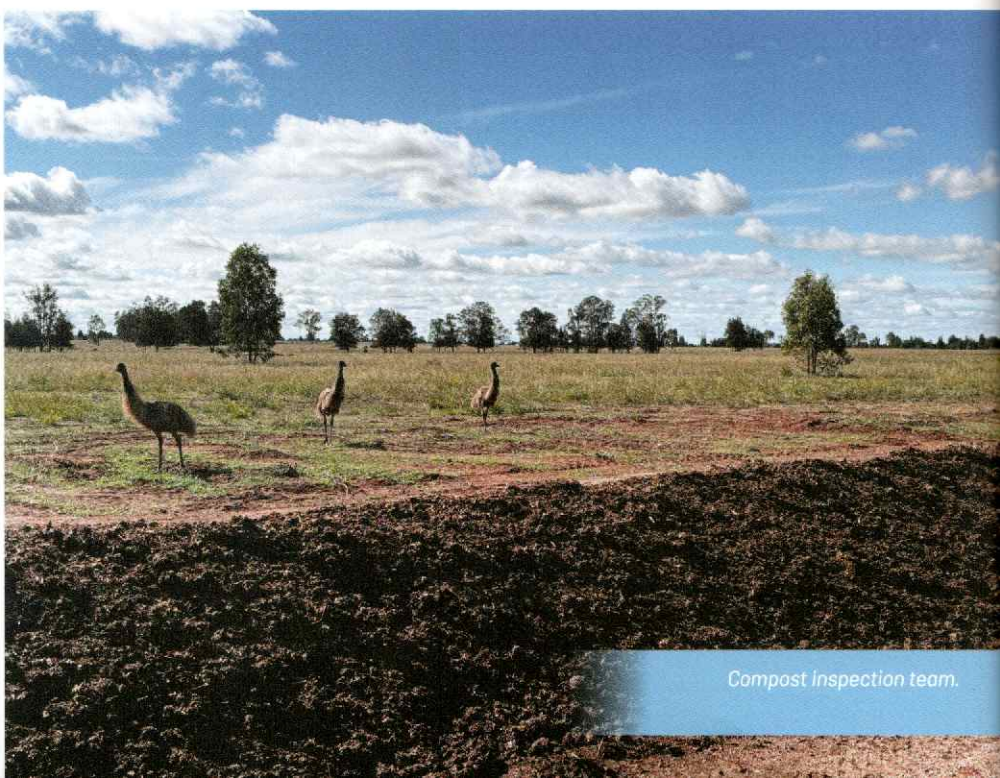
Landscape changes

This year they had no summer rainfall until March. The first rain was 50mm, followed a fortnight later by 190mm.

"I was out in the buggy looking at where all the water was going and it was running clear into our dams. That in itself is the most exciting thing to see – clear water running into a dam and the topsoil staying where it should be.

"This was because our cover was really good, our grazing management has been effective and we've maintained that baseline of dry matter even in a really dry time."

In the past decade they've installed two bores and are gradually running pipelines to all paddocks, with the goal of being able to have a secure water supply in all conditions. When dams are low they have troughs in paddocks they can link to the bore water network. They can switch back to dam water for livestock once they have running water from rain.



Compost inspection team.

"Looking at last summer as an example, four or five out of 70 paddocks were unusable because they still rely on dams for water. But for the most part we could still do our rotations because we had secure water."

The impact of their changes is a 'massive' increase in carrying capacity.

"It has increased by almost 1000 head, and we are still producing during tough times."

Rangeland Quality Meats

Anna, Philip, Adele and Alister have grown a paddock to plate market dream into a wholesale meat trading business, Rangeland Quality Meats (RQM), where they buy cattle every week and sell them fortnightly.

Alister, who has a strong marketing background, joined RQM and took over its management 10 years ago.

"Alister's been able to help grow RQM into a strong profitable wholesale business that aligns strongly with our grazing and business values," she says.

Anna admits there was a lot of trial and error involved, and initially it was done on a wing and a prayer.

"We did it really tough in the beginning in terms of not being able to turn a profit. In the end it has come down to the grit and the tenacity of the family not giving up."

Anna's role initially was managing animal nutrition through the mill where they mix their own feed. This year she's stepped up to take over full management of the grazing and finishing/feeding enterprises.

"In all our feeding and supplementary feeding programs we've got a really strong emphasis on animal and gut health. Gut health has always been really important to me in the human sense and it's also really important to me in the livestock sense."

They follow principles from RCS grazing for profit and low-stress stock handling. They track their dry matter levels and growth and are continually adapting and improving the way they measure and track mob and paddock sizes.

"We're doing our best to grow good pastures, feed them nutritious supplements and handle them carefully. All our handling is done on horses and everything's calm and that's as much as I can control before they get on the truck.

"I feel good knowing we've done the best we can for them while they're here."

Price driven

The 'idealistic view' is that people will pay more for beef grown in a regenerative system but the reality is that consumers are entirely price driven. An added challenge is customers only want 20 to 40 percent of the carcass, leaving 60 to 80 percent of cuts to find a home for.

"A lot of people really value where their food comes from but the vast majority of consumers make decisions based on price.

"We still have our story attached to our brand and it's something we really believe in, but we are still subject to competing on the price."

Regardless of the challenges to remain sustainable and profitable, their focus remains very much grounded in Lachlan's vision: ***improving landscapes and communities by fostering regenerative agricultural thinking and practices.***

"We've got this production side that is constant and always turning but something we really believe in is 'balance'. It's not just about extractive agriculture, it's what we can return, that reciprocity. It's very much about what we can give back to the landscape and our community."

Creating connections

Anna's life is pulling her towards creating more connections. Having just graduated from the Integrity Soils ***Create Australia*** program, she has started a new business ***Wild Measure Coaching*** which brings together her passion for healthy food, healthy animals and healthy land.

"I'm more in conversation with our landscape now than I have ever been. I'm more observant of the land we're on and have found a deeper settling in of where we are. Now I am thinking more and more about how I can give back."

Create has also given her more self-confidence.

"The technical side of the course and the other content was absolutely incredible but I think the main thing I got out of it was to recognise my own self-worth and how I can play a meaningful part in bridging the gap between conventional and regenerative thinking."

Although a lot has changed, a lot has stayed the same. Anna's never-ending curiosity and observation that started with 20 ducks in a high school experiment is still strong.

"I'll always have that emphasis on food and health, the power of observation and giving back to the landscape however I can.

"What I would really love to see is everyone getting to a point where nobody feels the need to be defensive about their farming practices, where people are allowed to be curious without judgement."