

PEOPLE



Nature is not a background

Story and photos **Mark Muller**

A dynamic balance between art, agriculture and the environment in South Australia's upper south-east gives place and expression to the gifts of a remarkable man.

James Darling stands among a herd of his cattle, which graze quietly on the healthy pasture that abounds on "Duck Island", the South Australian property he and partner Lesley Forwood own and run. The beasts are peaceful, well-formed and seem at ease in their environment – traits shared with the man who bred them.

This amiable, tanned and quietly passionate 56 year-old settled in the sand and watercourse country between Keith and the Coorong in 1976. In the intervening years he has transformed what locals once disparagingly referred to as "that old swamp" and established himself as a gifted and dedicated practitioner of saltland agriculture and conservation, an artist of international repute, and a committed community activist. For James there are no boundaries between these things – agriculture, environment, art, community – all are interdependent and actively inform each other. He is anything but easy to pigeonhole.

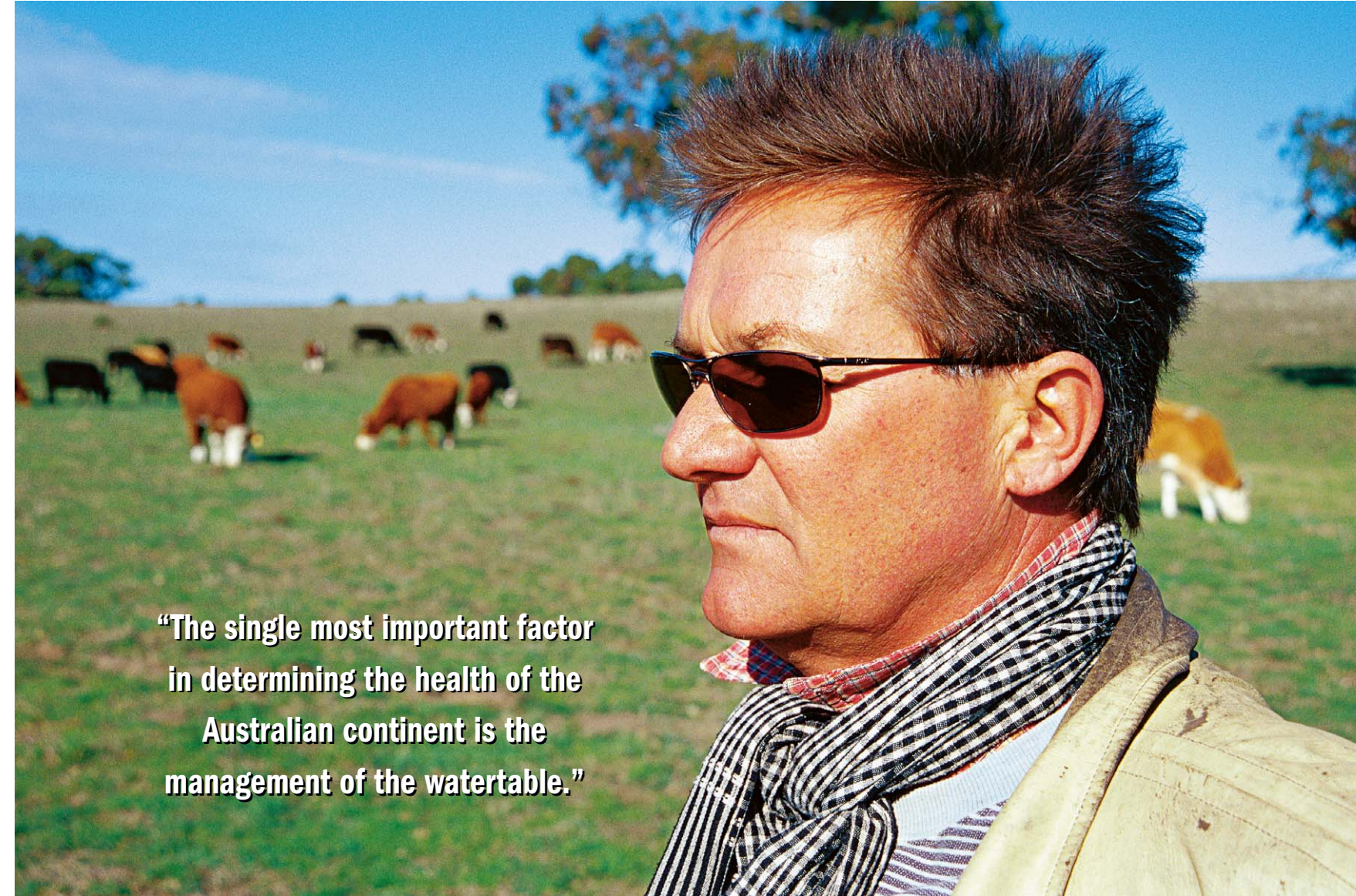
Working with salt, and by extension managing the watertable, is central to his farming and conservation practices. Paradoxically, the presence of salt was one of the reasons he

chose to return to Duck Island, which had been bought by his Melbourne-based father in 1964, when land-clearing attracted tax benefits. James worked on Duck Island as a jackaroo over three summers during vacations from Melbourne University where he was studying literature and philosophy. He eventually bought the property outright in 1970.

"My father called my decision to come to Duck Island and make a farm out of the bush 'typically rash'," smiles James, who had spent the previous eight years based in Europe trying to make a living from writing.

"One of the attractions for me when I came back to live here was dealing with salt. A significant part of that decision was my conviction that, having failed to produce anything of consequence as a writer or artist, I might be able to find some originality in the establishment of compatible conservation farming practices and to make economic sense out of farming with salt. The vision was, and still is, that Australians need to learn to do both."

The salt of the Duck Island watercourse country was always a presence, but James goes further, taking a larger-scale view.



"The single most important factor in determining the health of the Australian continent is the management of the watertable."

"Salt is a component of all Australian landscapes and must be factored in," he says. He emphasises that the effort is not to get rid of the massive amounts of salt in the Australian landscape, any more than we should try to get rid of rocks, but to manage it to its minimum impact.

He had always known that Duck Island was prone to regular flooding, and indeed that flooding was essential for the health of the area's ecosystem. "This country needs to flood – it is a part of the whole cycle of replenishment. It gives a sense of flushing and is intrinsic to the long-term health of this watercourse country," he maintains.

The need to develop a saltland agricultural system was brought home dramatically in 1981 when the whole region experienced a massive once-in-50-year flood. Duck Island was inundated. The depth and duration of the flood drowned out all low country pasture. When the water finally left, the ground was bared and the salt rose up, sucked to the surface by evaporation. "We became saltland farmers by necessity," James says ruefully. Following that debilitating flood, he lobbied extensively for action to be taken on saltland farming methods and research.

For him, the key element of saltland agriculture is "keeping a cover on saline ground over the heat of summer". After much experimentation, he settled on the salt-tolerant and highly productive perennial grass puccinellia to cover Duck Island's low country. "Minimising the evaporation stops water rising and bringing salt to the surface – it keeps the watertable down,

which keeps the salt down.

"The single most important factor in determining the health of the Australian continent is the management of the watertable," he says.

"The highest priority in terms of environmental and educational need is an understanding of watertable management. The component of the Australian landscape that has been most disregarded is salt. The two are inextricably linked."

The upper south-east of South Australia became one of the five focus catchments for the National Dryland Salinity Program. James argued that saltland agriculture is a vital component of Australian agriculture, one which required its own research and funding. "We began saltland trials on Duck Island through the 1990s and we gained a saltland agricultural officer at our local agriculture department in Keith. I became a contributor to the National Dryland Salinity Program and then a member of the Productive Use and Rehabilitation of Saline Land National Committee, one of only two landowners among nine scientists." He is also a member of the Reserve Planning and Management Advisory Committee, which advises the SA Minister for the Department of Environment and Conservation on management of all parks and reserves throughout the state, and more recently, a landowner representative on the newly-established SA State Dryland Salinity Committee.

"My appointment to the SA State Dryland Salinity

Above: James Darling on his property, Duck Island. Opposite: Malleefowl nest 3: Winter, created for the 1996 Penola Festival (photo James Darling).



Clockwise from above: The view towards Mt Monster, east of Duck Island; James gets a fowl's-eye view; a malleefowl on the apex of its nest (photo courtesy James Darling).

you can begin to use clovers and to fix nitrogen in the soil," he says.

However, Duck Island is more than a working farm and model for saltland agriculture. It is, says James, his "largest work of art". He has always been an artist, producing poetry, novels, plays, short stories, drawings, sculpture, photography and a series of journals that span decades.

"Every aspect of my farm has a sense of design to it. You can't leave art out of anything. Art is an informant. Art entails an open mind. It makes you observant, makes you see things you do not want to see." This sense of observation and critical intelligence underpins the range of his work. "I consider myself an international regionally-based artist. Much of the subject matter, as well as the raw material, comes from my farm," he explains.

Among the most striking of James's artistic endeavours – and the ones that have seen him exhibiting as far afield as Finland, Madrid and Paris in recent years – are his malleefowl nest sculptures. A malleefowl mound is essentially an incubating chamber for the bird's eggs. Built of sand and organic matter, its architecture is expertly and constantly remodelled to allow for changes in temperature and seasons. Deep in the centre of the mound, the subterranean egg-laying chamber is kept at a constant 33°C from late spring and through the summer.

James and Lesley make installation artworks that are life-sized replicas of actual malleefowl nests using the gnarled, spiky, misshapen roots of the ubiquitous mallee gum. Anywhere in the vicinity of five to ten tonnes of roots, kept from early and judicious clearing of some of Duck Island's scrub, are used to construct a nest. The finished sculptures measure between four and seven metres in diameter and are from half a metre to one metre in height.

"When I make my nests in Australia and around the world, each sculpture is based on one moment in the annual cycle of an actual nest at Duck Island," James says. He has a great deal of admiration for the rare bird (an endangered species) and in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife service undertakes programs to protect and enhance its habitat. Around two thirds of Duck Island's 9000 acres is native vegetation. ►

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◀ Committee is in part because I am a successful saltland farmer, but more importantly because I can find the words to express salt's role in the Australian landscape. Salinity, activated salt, is a problem of culture not agriculture. How we see, how we understand, how we express." He is also fond of saying, with the justification of history and a wordsmith's twist, "You can't have culture without agriculture". Again, there is a implicit recognition of the interrelatedness of all things.

It is clear that his activism and hard work have paid off when looking around Duck Island. The cattle, high-performance composite beasts containing Angus, Simmental, and Poll Hereford bloodlines, are sleek and healthy. "That's how I like to run cattle," he says, "Not fat, but fit – it's like running a football team." Duck Island is Cattle Care and EU accredited. Steers are grass fed for the EU market, reaching the top category carcass weight, 300-327kg, from 15.9-19.5 months. Crossbred and composite bulls are sold by inspection and at South Australian Beef Field Days. He is helped by farm manager Chris Oswin and skilled cattle hand Steve Gurr, calving approximately 850 animals, half in spring and half in autumn.

The pastures that enable him to do this are equally impressive and closely managed. "The ground is gradually being blanketed with puccinellia, which beds the salt down and minimises its impact. Once a blanket cover has been established,



Above: The wide skies of South Australia's upper south-east are a feature of life on Duck Island.

◀ Malleefowl are tenacious, diligent, effective and pair-up for life – all fine traits, whether you're a bird, a farmer, a companion or an artist. "They are remarkable: the only mound building bird in arid land on the planet. They will work throughout the year maintaining and adapting their nest," he says.

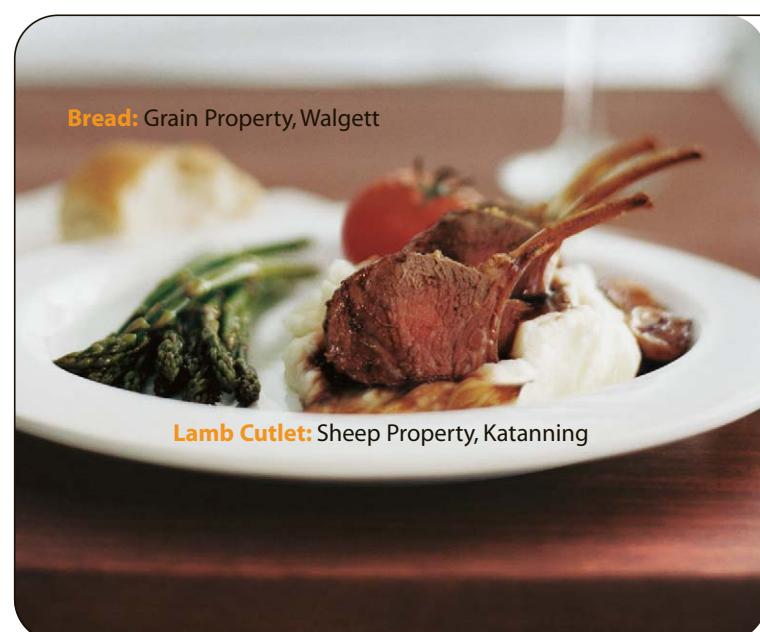
That constant working means mounds will be architecturally different at different times of the year, depending on conditions, climate and the stage of the nesting cycle. James titles his works accordingly: *Malleefowl nest 3: Winter*, *Malleefowl nest 7: Summer* or *Malleefowl nest 4: Autumn*, for example.

These monumental sculptures are indicative of the close relationship between their creator and his environment. They can appear almost smooth and seem guileless, but on a deeper level are complex, dense and forceful. Each installation brings its own singular sense of observation and knowledge, but the unlikely mallee roots and the captivating story of the malleefowl make James's work immediate and available to a wide range of audiences. His nests are organic, formidable and beautiful. They have an earthly, elemental power, anchored and miraculous, that rewards viewers all over the world.

This response has been particularly evident in his European exhibitions. "Art has a resonance that travels across national boundaries," he says. "My mallee root installations give people a different way to look at Australia and an entry into the larger issues of environmental management and survival in our contemporary world."

Daniel Thomas, Emeritus Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, writes in his book, *James Darling: Instinct, Imagination, Physical Work*, that the artist is "a progenitor of ecocentric art and a master of the ordinary".

"Nature is not a background" is one of James's favourite sayings. Indeed it could be his manifesto, an axiom which permeates and shapes all that he does, whether farming, writing, advising governments, working with the local theatre group or exposing others to the potency, beauty and art that can be found in something as ordinary as the mallee root.



Bread: Grain Property, Walgett

Lamb Cutlet: Sheep Property, Katanning

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