

REVIEW

A Review of *Rachel's Farm*

Michaelis-Thorpe, L. (Writer), & Ward, R. (Director, Writer). (2023). *Rachel's Farm* [Film]. Wildbear Entertainment.

Review Author

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Many childhood holidays were spent exploring the Victorian countryside, where I became privy to both the virtues and impacts of farming. We often frequented the farming community in Cohuna, in Yorta Yorta Country, where my mother grew up. As a teenager, I took up whitewater kayaking; hence, many hours were spent traversing through Gippsland farmlands in Kurnai Country whilst undertaking whitewater adventures. These visits to and through farmland highlighted the immense dedication and hard work it takes to farm and the fragility of the landscape.

Impacts of agricultural pollution were witnessed on these river trips, ranging from stream erosion to chemical containers floating downstream. One memorable occurrence was a bloated cow carcass that exploded all over me as the nose of my kayak pierced it as I entered an eddy, obviously rendering the water undrinkable downstream. Carrying this backstory with me, I came to watch *Rachel's Farm*. I found this a timely, thought-provoking, and inspiring documentary with pedagogical content that outdoor and environmental educators will find useful.

The 87-minute, PG-rated documentary *Rachel's Farm* (Dalton, Michaelis-Thorpe & Ward, 2023) details Rachel Ward's transformation from a traditional to a regenerative farmer (Figure 1). Rachel Ward, an award-winning actress and film director, and her husband Bryan Brown engaged a farm manager to operate and run their conventional commercial beef farm in northern NSW for 30 years while continuing their professional careers in Sydney. During this time, Rachel, Bryan and their family created fond memories on the farm, visiting during holidays. However, as Rachel admits, she did not pay much attention to how the farm was run using conventional farming methods — with limited paddock rotation for cattle causing land degradation, and with high chemical use and the over-tilling of the land in the preparation of feed for the cattle, and the control of weeds.

A pivotal change for Rachel occurred with the birth of her first grandchild and the 2019 Black Summer fires, which devastated some of their neighbouring properties, coming as close as 300 m to their property. Rachel entered what appeared to be a depressive and contemplative time of deep thinking as she searched for answers on how to not continue with the business-as-usual approach but look for ways to be more climate savvy. Rachel knew something needed to shift, as the farming methods were neither financially nor ecologically sustainable; however, she did not have the farming know-how to initiate this change.

Fortuitously for Rachel, around this time, Mike Green, Rachel's neighbour, approached Rachel with an idea to combine their farming land and utilise a regenerative farming framework, which



Figure 1. Rachel Ward with her cattle on Rachel's Farm. Taken from theregenerators.org/rachels-farm.

operates on the premise of reducing global climate change through increased storage of carbon in soils whilst improving soil quality, watershed integrity and function, biodiversity and enhanced ecosystem services (Burns, 2021).

The remainder of the documentary showcases Mike and Rachel's tenacity, ingenuity, resilience, challenges and celebrations as they grapple with experimenting and changing their farms from conventional to regenerative farms.

The storyline takes the viewer on Rachel and Mike's journey, which involves harnessing the ecological knowledge of local First Nations Custodians, collaborating with other regenerative farmers and for Rachel undertaking a horticultural farming course. Rachel and Mike found the first few years of transition the hardest as the farm's soil needed to be weaned off its addiction to chemical enhancement.

Mike and Rachel's tenacity exudes in their efforts to enhance the soil quality of their land and create an environment that is both hospitable to dung beetles and compliant with the Ecological Outcome Verification (EOV) standards used by farmers to assess regenerative outcomes. Rachel's tenacious spirit came to the forefront as she, at 60 years of age, was forced to manage the farm after Mike had a serious motorbike accident. This moment defined itself as liberating and pivotal for Rachel, one in which she became a role model and inspiration for other female regenerative farmers.

Mike and Rachel showcased ingenuity, combining their herds and, at the same time, slicing 30 paddocks up to 90 using portable fences and increased portable water troughs. Their idea was to rotate the herd into a new pasture every few days, allowing for the land to regenerate. Rachel and Mike also integrated landscape contouring and vegetation, resulting in a more productive water retention system on the farm.

Constant resilience was shown by Rachel and Mike as a 1 in 100-year flood descended on the property, washing away topsoil and taking out fences. Rachel and Mike needed to swiftly repair and replace the fences and move cattle constantly to avoid the cows damaging and plugging the soil.

Rachel and Mike celebrated as they found dung beetles. Rachel learned how to drive the tractor, and the farm achieved its EOV certification, becoming both sustainable and financially viable.

The documentary is cleverly constructed to embrace various topical themes pertinent to outdoor and environmental educators. These themes include climate change, mental health and wellbeing, women's role in agriculture, healthy living, Indigenous agricultural knowledge systems and deep connection to Country.

Rachel and Mike's ability to generously story tell the narrative of *Rachel's Farm* from the heart not only opens up viewer 'buy-in' to the concept of regenerative farming but also provokes a 'call to action' to change the way we undertake farming and engage with farming and agricultural practices from a consumer perspective. Rachel admits that regenerative farming is a conflicting paradigm to the one in which conventional farming was founded and sold, and she provides farmers and consumers with a pluriversal alternative (new ways of knowing, being and doing farming and consuming).

The concept of regenerative farming parallels that of 'regenerative education' (Poelina et al., 2022, 2023) and 'regenerative place pedagogies' (Sutton et al., 2023), which are central to transformative environmental education philosophy in which the more-than-human world, Indigenous philosophies, climate change education (Fox & Thomas, 2023; Jukes, 2023), environmental and social justice ethics of care are central in conversation and practice.

Rachel's Farm has also aligned with educational bodies to spread its reach as far and wide. It is showcased on the Regenerators platform, which acts as a regenerative solutions hub. This hub showcases many of the regenerative farming techniques, resources and approaches used at *Rachel's Farm* and provides ways to adopt regenerative farming principles and practices. *Rachel's Farm* has also aligned with Cool.org, a non-profit organisation offering seven Australian secondary curriculum-aligned resources that showcase *Rachel's Farm* and focus on regenerative farming.

Although the natural landscape of the farm provides a majestic background for the film, Rachel's son Joe, a graphic designer and illustrator, created captivating 3D illustrations and graphics to bring concepts such as cattle rotation, healthy soil and carbon sequestration creatively to life.

Rachel's Farm has already gained notoriety by being shortlisted for the 2023 Sydney Film Festival Sustainable Futures and Australian Documentary Awards. In closing, I recommend this film for outdoor and environmental educators as a conduit for regenerative farming, regenerative education, regenerative place pedagogies discussions and practices, action, collaboration and change.

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Author Biography

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Cite this article: Fox, R. (2024). A Review of *Rachel's Farm*. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 40, 91–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2023.40>