



**ACTIVISM
FROM
AGRICULTURE**
Nicola Harvey


UnstressHEALTH



**Unstress
HEALTH**
with Dr Ron Ehrlich



Podcast Transcript

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to Unstress. My name is Dr Ron Ehrlich. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I am recording this podcast, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, and pay my respects to their Elders - past, present and emerging. I do this because I believe not only should we acknowledge those traditional owners, but we have so much to learn about connection and respect.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:29] Well, after a Summer Series of regenerative agricultural greats, and speaking with [Zach Bush](#) just recently, or at least released that episode just recently, I thought this was a great opportunity to go to the coalface and talk to a farmer. But this isn't just any farmer. For anybody that has thought about leaving the urban environment and settling onto a farm and growing food and making a difference. Well, today's guest has done all of those things.

[Nicola Harvey](#) is an author. She's worked in the city. Well, I won't spoil what she's done, but she's worked in the city and made that change onto the farm and learnt a great deal in the process. She's written a book [Farm: The Making of a Climate Activist](#) and she shares many of those insights with us tonight. It's a wonderful discussion covering so many topics that I think are relevant to all of us, particularly those of us living in the city, but also obviously on the farm. I hope you enjoy this conversation I had with Nicola Harvey.

Welcome to the show, Nicola.

Nicola Harvey: [00:01:41] Thank you for the invitation. It's lovely to chat with you.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:01:45] Nicola, Your book [Farm: The Making of a Climate Activist](#), it was kind of a just before we came on I mentioned that you almost living the dream, this sort of thing that I fantasise about with my family, about moving from the city to the country. I wondered if you might just share with us. Well, not just to the country, to the farm. I wondered if you might just share with us that journey,

what you were up to before, and how that brought you to that decision and how it's impacted on what you're doing now.

Nicola Harvey: [00:02:14] It's so funny, isn't it? It has a romance, this idea of leaving the grind of the city and heading to the country. And I had that fantasy myself. I was living with my husband Pat, who's Australian in a western Sydney, and we were very, very much ensconced in city life. We commuted to work. Pat was working as a property valuer and he was on the road driving for five, 6 hours a day navigating the city. I was working in media. I was a media exec managing editor of BuzzFeed, which is an American company in the Sydney office. Long days, I was managing a big team and everything that we did was focused around maintaining our work life and putting all of our energy and time into our careers. And then, you know, in the weekend we would sort of collapse on the couch. This was a very familiar story for a lot of people and dream about doing something else, something that was a little bit more relaxing. But the adage of we just need a bit more time to pursue our hobbies. Pat was very deep into the music scene in Sydney and he just desperately wanted a bit more time to play guitar and I had stopped doing all the things that I used to love writing and visiting exhibitions and being immersed in the arts that Sydney has so much of.

Nicola Harvey: [00:03:44] And so we started talking about what we would do next, career-wise, and it was around this time that we were also starting trying to start a family and I suffered a miscarriage, which was a tipping point moment for me. I felt very strongly that my body had sort of given up on me and I had pushed it so far that I was starting to suffer some ill health. And the miscarriage was, from my point of view, a manifestation of that. And around this time, my father, who is a career farmer, has been in and out of farming his whole adult life owned farms, leased farms, and he was back in Aotearoa, New Zealand, which is where I was born. But I've lived in Australia for almost 20 years and he sort of flippantly suggested, "Oh, why don't you come back?" You know, he had a lease property just north of Taupo in the middle of the North Island, and he needed some help. He was reaching that age where he wasn't physically able to do a lot of things on the farm.

And he suggested come back and rear calves, which we can go into. And we didn't really know what that meant or we thought of was, as you pointed out, this idea of change, of leaving the city, of leaving the grind of work and of reconnecting with each other and finding the time and space to start pursuing our other loves and our other passions. And so we said yes to him. And I think that was in December and we moved in February. We had no idea what we were doing. We had no idea what it meant to be farmers, but we had this idea of what we wanted to create as a life. The reality was a little bit different from the dream, I have to admit.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:05:28] Although you. Grew up on the farm, didn't you? So this wasn't a total foreign space for you.

Nicola Harvey: [00:05:35] I spent the first few years of my life on a farm. We moved off the family property when I was eight and moved into a small town in New Zealand. In saying that both sides of my family are farming families. My mum grew up on a farm, her cousins who I write a little bit about in the book, they run and manage the big family farm in Hawke's Bay. So yes, I had a lot of exposure to farming, but that was the 1980s and I was giving away my age and where the farming industry is now is very different. For a variety of reasons. So again, I had romanticised this idea of what life on the farm is like because for me and my childhood memories, it was vegetables and a huge vegetable garden. And it was meat off the farm. It was a very social, very community-orientated way of life. And people still do that and do it successfully. But where we were when we came back to Aotearoa, New Zealand and was coming back onto a leased farm, that was not what we found when we arrived. So yes, it was a steep learning curve.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:06:51] And Pat's background is not farming at all?

Nicola Harvey: [00:06:53] Pat's... No.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:06:56] Or is it? That was the question, that's actually the question.

Nicola Harvey: [00:06:57] No. So no, I mean yes and no. So his father was a career butcher. He grew up in Dubbo and his mum was a primary or kindergarten teacher, but his father was from a station out past Dubbo.

So there is farming in his background as well. But he had no exposure to it other than going to stay with grandparents when he was a child. So we are first-generation farmers to a certain extent in that we are very disconnected from the reality of farming and we don't come from land-owning families. But there is farming in our backstories. Yeah.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:38] Hmm. I'm just trying to visualise that day where you arrive and you've made the move and you've found the property and you walk out on the first day and look around. What do you do? What happened then? I know you went through quite a learning, a very steep learning curve. But I wondered if you might share some of those highlights with our listeners.

Nicola Harvey: [00:08:03] We didn't, we arrived. It was the height of summer in February, it was hot. I remember we were... We set off for a walk around the farm just following the main tracks. I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. We were wading through long grass and, you know, there's little things that you come to appreciate once you learn to be on the land. But more so. I had cuts and little insect bites when I got back because I was wading through this long grass in shorts and don't even think about it. We got to a paddock that was full of cattle and what we didn't realise was it also there were cows and bulls in there and we were about to enter into this paddock without thinking, "Oh look, there's some cattle, let's just go have a look" and sort of noticed a little bit of an aggressive stance from one of the bulls and I'm quite glad we shut the gate quite quickly. There's all of this knowledge that we accumulated with time that on that first day, we had no idea, we were just rose-tinted glasses. We walked the paths, we noticed that there was wild growth everywhere. There was BlackBerry... The farm was quite overrun, which we only knew with hindsight years later. But we just, I dunno, we just thought there was space and a quietness about the countryside and this farm that would allow us to decompress. I was very, very tightly wound when I was in Sydney and you can feel it in your body. You can like you hold the tension in your shoulders, your gut is constantly knotted and churning. And on that first day, and possibly I think for a week afterwards, we just started breathing and it was, invigorating. But we also didn't know what we were doing in that first week. All we were... We were tourists essentially on the farm. All we would be doing was looking at the landscape and

looking at the space without understanding all of the frameworks and structures that existed over top of it and underneath it. And that was when we started to understand that, that's when it became a little bit scary and harder and really confronting once we understood the frameworks that exist around the piece of land.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:10:32] And how big was that piece of land? What was the plan? What were you going to do? You were leasing it. I know. I know that.

Nicola Harvey: [00:10:38] Yeah. So, it was a 160 hectares, 130 of those hectares were effective. So that's... That's what could be farmed. The rest was fenced off into a forestry, a native bush block. And my father was running what we call dairy grazing herds for other farmers. And so his offer was we would have a section of the farm. Initially, it was only about ten hectares plus a shed. And the proposal was we would buy young calves from other dairy farms around the region and we would rear them, we would look after them, we would feed the milk daily, we would make sure that they were well and healthy and housed and warm. And then once they got to 100 kilograms, we would sell them on to a bigger farm. And we did that season after season for the first two and a half, three years. It was a grind. We had a lovely time, the first season. There was four months of work, seven days a week. We had a couple of hundred calves and it was great, it was successful. It was lovely being around these animals. We learned a lot about animal health, we learned a lot about the business, and then we did it all over again the next season and it got harder and harder, every single season after because we increased our numbers. We had more of the farm to run and we also were confronted with some illness amongst our calves and some of them died. And so we had all of these things happen within that first two-year period that constantly challenged our ideals and our ideas about what we thought farming would be like when we came here. And the romantic vision very quickly, very quickly disappeared.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:12:31] I'm guessing that there was no shortage of advice to be given. I mean, you know, there's all these farm... Commercial farming is going on all around you and everyone is willing to give you the advice about how to approach this first of all, what kind of advice were you

being given as to help you set up and get going?

Nicola Harvey: [00:12:54] Well, I mean, you're right. We had a lot of advice in those first few months, primarily from my father, who had offered to be our mentor. My uncle, also a career farmer, but on a larger scale. He went into corporate farming. He would offer bits of information and tidbits and he'd drop off resource books and things occasionally. The manager at the farm supplies shop became a constant source of information. We had friends of my fathers drop by and just have a chat and offer bits of knowledge and intel as we were rearing cars. So there was not a lack of info coming our way. And for those first few months, we absorbed it all and we took all of it on board because we thought this was how things are done.

Nicola Harvey: [00:13:46] So we just assumed that the information being passed on by primarily older men, which was just how it is. And so we followed that advice by the book. And then when things started to go a little bit wrong, when we lost a few calves, we had more access to veterinarian advice. We started pursuing our own research, we started looking for answers elsewhere and we realised that the advice we'd been given in the first few months was of a particular type and from a particular tradition which has roots down in New Zealand and done quite well for a lot of people. It is described as conventional style of farming that slots very nicely into a system that is focussed on an export market that is dominated by the dairy sector and we... We're just cogs in that big wheel. And that's fine for some people, it works well for them. But for us it just started to feel very out of step with A.) Our ambitions, B.) The values that we were trying to work out. And like we talked about earlier, this romantic vision that we had of like what life would be when we came onto a farm and onto the land. So slowly we stopped taking the advice. We still listened, that we trialled some other things that Pat was learning by watching hours and hours of YouTube videos that I was starting to gather all this information by reading widely. I have information from elsewhere that Australia, the US, things coming out of the UK and we started to find out about different forms and styles of farming and land management that sound a little bit more closer to what our ambitions were.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:15:41] And how did that differ from what you were

doing, what you were being advised to do, or what the majority of farmers in New Zealand, and probably I know for a fact globally are doing?

Nicola Harvey: [00:15:54] So the style of farming in New Zealand that is celebrated is probably best described as conventional farming. New Zealanders pride themselves on being the most efficient producers of dairy and red meat in the world and to a certain extent, yes, that's true. There is efficiencies within the farm system that have been created by pursuing a science-based approach to farming and depending on where you are in the country, that typically relies on grass-fed systems. So if you're a dairy or a red meat farmer, your animals aren't housed in barns, they're all in paddocks, they're constantly out in the elements, they're predominantly grass-fed or so that the brand goes, and that's 365 days a year. But it's very different from the UK. But adding on top of all of that is a layer of processing and production on the land that allows them to keep this system of grass-fed animals going.

Nicola Harvey: [00:17:06] So paddocks are constantly resowed and with new grasses. And with that resowing comes a lot of tractor work, comes, a lot of seed purchases, a lot of fertiliser, pesticides, herbicides. It's a constant cycle that puts an imprint on the land that makes it incredibly productive. They grow a lot of grass. That grass is very rich and high in protein, so it helps with milk production and it fattens cattle effectively. And in some parts of the country, cattle are also fed winter crops. So again, it's a constant cycle of churning up the land of sowing, of fertilising, herbicides, pesticides, and on it goes. And it's just it's a very heavy burden to put on the land, and it's done from the bottom of the South Island through to the top of the north, not uniformly, but it is the conventional way of doing things. And that just started to rub us the wrong way. We were watching our paddock faces rush off the know, sorry, do that again. We were watching the soil just rush off our paddock faces and big rainstorms and the soil was disappearing in front of our eyes and we thought, "This doesn't feel right." We're watching that soil head straight down the hills and into the waterways that flank our farm and the research that I was doing was looking at sediment loss and nutrient losses off the farms and wondering what impact that was having on the waterways. So we did simple things that was

different, I suppose, to conventional farmers. And the primary one was we just refused to sow crops and sow new grass, we wanted to find out if we could farm in a grass-fed system without constantly churning the land up.

And in that one decision we started to find other ways of managing the land that was very much focussed on roots in place, plants where they should be, not constantly churning the soil and the style of farming that we gravitated towards had gained traction internationally, and it was described as Regenerative Agriculture and we found so much literature about it and so... So much of what we were reading. We found that it aligned with our value system, but also we found that once we implemented some of those things on the farm, the farm just responded suddenly and it was very, very quick. Within a season we stopped using synthetic fertilisers and we stopped cropping and we stopped sowing new grass. And the farm changed, insects, bird life, we had new grass species and in the paddocks that we'd never seen before. And so this diversity of life started to bubble up behind the farm gate and it was just wonderous. And that idea of we had in Sydney, being on the land and being on the farm, being somehow closer to nature. We didn't really find that in the first year or so because we were constantly imposing ourselves on the land. And then when we started to implement some of the regenerative learnings, we felt closer to nature. We saw nature come to life behind the farm gate. And there is a lot of criticism in New Zealand towards Regenerative Agriculture and the principles that are at the foundation of it. And we were laughed at for not using synthetic fertilisers. We were told we would probably fail, cattle would starve in winter and we have proven all the naysayers wrong. But it is interesting when an alternative pushes up against conventional farming. How much the industry will fight it. And so, yeah, we knew we needed to find a few allies that were more closely aligned to our way of doing things. And that took a while.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:21:16] Hmm. I mean, I've heard it said that one of the biggest textbook exports of conventional farming is the soil from the properties that are farming that I mean, if it rains and there's no cover, off goes the soil. And it's so interesting to hear you use the word science-based because that's often probably the best marketing term one could possibly use.

It kind of just feels like saying Hail Mary before you do anything. You know, once you've said science-based or in medicine, we say evidence-based, everything else is accepted as the truth. But things turned around from that point. I'm just intrigued about how the community around you, you've mentioned, you know, you naysayers, but I'm just intrigued what the objections were. Was it just different?

Nicola Harvey: [00:22:14] ...There are still objections. There are many. So I think the most vocal objectors to this idea of Regenerative Agriculture stemmed from those who had a vested interest in ensuring that New Zealand's productivity did not drop. So to put it into context, New Zealand's economy is propped up by agriculture. There's no way around that. We rely on a huge portion of the GDP coming from export earnings and there was a fear from some big industry players that if Regenerative Agriculture would, which we know can result in a drop in yields, really took flight in New Zealand, that our productivity would go down and that for many there was a fear that the GDP contribution would also drop. So one of the biggest criticisms of Regenerative Agriculture when the term was first used in New Zealand widely, was that it would destroy our economy. I mean, these are some, you know, some grossly wild claims about the impact of a style of farming. But there was a real sense of fear that if you start doing things differently on big farming systems, you will start seeing a drop in productivity and a drop in yield. And there was a lot of fear that that meant that the economy would stop wobbling. And then you have vested interests in the farming sector around the use of fertilisers, the use of seeds, the use of inputs in general and Regenerative Agriculture tends to not rely so heavily on all of those inputs. And therefore they were associated companies who foresaw a drop in revenue because farmers potentially would stop using their products.

Nicola Harvey: [00:24:16] So there was a lot of fear-mongering that went on, especially for the first year or so. And then some of the biggest criticisms were from spokespeople with scientific backgrounds who were critical of the drop in fertiliser use, saying that the soil quality would reduce and that we would just be mining the minerals in the soil if we weren't using fertilisers.

And so again, it promotes this sense of fear that if you pursue Regenerative Agriculture, you're going to do a disservice to the land and the farm, and your business as a farmer will start faltering. We haven't found that to be true at all. In actual fact, our cattle are doing far better in terms of growth metrics than at any other point. And in our farming career, when we were using all of the fertilisers and we had winter crops on and we were doing things in a more conventional way. So it was there was a lot of fear-mongering and I think that sort of scared a few people off admitting or at least trialling some of the regenerative techniques that we found incredibly helpful. But once we started meeting other farmers in our own region and nationally, we started hearing stories about the fact that many of them were trialling these things out the back paddock and not talking about it for fear of criticism from their neighbour or welfare of criticism from someone down the road who they, you know, played rugby with or whatever the social connection was.

There's so much trepidation that exists in New Zealand as a cultural symptom of not wanting to be seen to be different, not wanting to be seen to fail, not wanting to be out of step with the general mass. And that really, I think, is an interesting cultural phenomenon that exists in farming especially. And I think it's shifting slowly. There are more and more farmers who, through regulatory pressure or they have seen the first wave of regenerative farmers come out and talk publicly about the successes and they realise as they're heading into ever hotter summers and more volatile weather patterns and conditions that they need to change their farming system in order to create a lot more flexibility and a lot more resilience within the farm. And some of the regenerative techniques that we've trialled and that have been shared among farmers in New Zealand gives them the tools to do that, to be more resilient as the weather conditions change. You know, as you said, those big rain patterns, this sweeping topsoil straight off the face and when you try and grow plants on that same paddock a year later, you're not going to have the nutrients there because they've been swept away into the water. So it's starting to shift and that's doing. But I do think that a lot of farmers are still doing it quietly, waiting to prove their own point. Yeah.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:27:30] How long into your journey let's say you left

Sydney at one point, you spent a year or two following the conventional farming path and then had an epiphany and moved on into the regenerative. How many years are we talking now in this timeline?

Nicola Harvey: [00:27:47] So this is our fifth year.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:27:49] ...So probably the last two or three years of reach in the last two or three years of reaching... The last two or three years. It's so interesting to hear you because I think I said this to you when we were before we arranged this to talk was that I'm often so fascinated by the similarities in land management, Holistic land management and Holistic health care. And here you have this science-based/evidence-based, and you've got all these key opinion leaders and product champions telling you without using the inputs, I'm just... You know, you won't succeed. I would think as a farmer it would be so liberating to free yourself up from the need for fertiliser, pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, seeds. These inputs must cost a lot of money every year.

Nicola Harvey: [00:28:46] They do, and especially the last 18 months, with the global instability and the war in the Ukraine, these input costs have gone up enormously, especially this fertiliser cost, and that has absolutely accelerated. I think the experimentation on farms with farmers looking for an alternative and finding some of those solutions and regenerative teachings. But it is interesting when you think about your initial question, which there is an assumption that it should be liberating not to have to use these, but if you have come into farming through legacy, into a farming family that has a farm that has been 150 years of the same family, and you are born to the profession and you go off to university or you go into an apprenticeship and you learn the trade and the craft of farming through either your parents or your grandparents or through a university system that is based in conventional farming systems.

Nicola Harvey: [00:29:58] This is what you know, this is what you are told is the correct way of farming in New Zealand for the conditions for the soil type. If you want to make the maximum amount of profit off, maximum amount of yield on your land. It's very hard to run against convention and run against traditions when even if you think perhaps it's worth

experimenting or trying something different because in your gut it feels like you're not quite doing as you should on the land. When your grandfather and your father and your mother have all done it that way for a long time and they are telling you this is the way that we do it. And your sales reps are saying this is what you need to do in order to continue to post that profit at the end of each year so that you can service the mortgage. There is a lot of debt hanging over New Zealand farms and that... The threat of the bank is present and frightening for a lot of farmers. So any change to that well-trodden path presents a financial risk that for some people is just unmanageable and a little bit too frightening to deviate off the path if it means a drop in profit at the end of the season. And it takes some big, you know, global tremors, such as the price of synthetic fertiliser going through the roof because of the conflict in the Ukraine, for people to stop and say we cannot afford to farm this way anymore. And so then you start looking for alternatives. But it's a huge burden to put on the shoulders of what is often one person, an individual who is the farmer making all these decisions. And often they're doing it alone at the kitchen table or with the support of perhaps just a partner or a parent. And these small businesses and that's essentially what they are, are incredibly difficult to run with a set amount of risk put on the shoulders of one person.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:32:04] Hmm. I'm often when people make change, be it in their own personal life or professionally, it comes on the back of a trauma, a major trauma or a major challenge. And I guess that's what well, that's what took you from the city onto the farm and then what took you from the conventional way of doing it to the regenerative way of doing it? Do people I mean, and I guess this is resistance. Have you found on the land that getting together, like people in the city have book clubs, you know, and they get together and discuss a book and, you know, regularly share their view on one book? I wonder whether there's a place there for a farm club, you know, for people to sit around, you know, once a month and get conventional farmers and regenerative farmers together without judgement and just have a chat. Does that happen?

Nicola Harvey: [00:33:01] And there is... And yes, it does. And we joined a group very, very much, as you just describes about two years ago, made up of farmers who were curious about regenerative practices. And the group

would meet online virtually because we were spread over half of the country and the convenor organiser would set up webinars with experts from all over the world, sharing information and intel about region. And then every six weeks or 6 to 8 weeks, we would meet in person and do a farm visit and learn a little bit more about some of the changes that other people and other farmers were implementing on their specific property.

Nicola Harvey: [00:33:53] There was a lot of information sharing and it was fantastic. We haven't participated for a couple of months for a variety of reasons, primarily because it became quite dairy focussed and we are a beef operation and so we just hit the point where we didn't need to know any more about dairy farming when we needed to pursue some other research on our own. But it absolutely exists. The challenge, though is that outside of the farm groups, there's also communities that are incredibly important and they exist around primary school networks and rugby clubs and rural community life is very tightly knit and if one finds themselves within a community who are not all that interested in and farming change, not interested in Regenerative Agriculture or against some of the environmental regulatory changes that are happening in New Zealand and some in Australia deeply wedded into a conservative viewpoint, then you can find yourself incredibly isolated and very much out of step with your community. And we live geographically in an area that is politically very conservative. And so we have struggled to find like-minded people next door to us. Lots of lovely people, great people. But, you know, a true and real connection with a sense of common purpose has been difficult to find here. It is true, perhaps the world over that traditionally farming and rural communities have been conservative. And I think there is a cultural shift happening because suddenly the rural landscape is becoming a contested site with folks like me who are moving out of the city and into rural landscapes, bringing their values and their ideas with them. And so there's a lot of tension that exists around whose traditions and whose cultural values are dominating in some parts of rural New Zealand and other parts of the world, actually.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:36:19] Mm-hmm. You mentioned you brought... you mentioned the word environment. And I know you become an activist. And it's an interesting thing now that so many

people are focussed on the environment and see farming as part of the problem, and yet it could also be part of the solution. And you've chosen cattle farming on top of that, which is copping a lot of flak, you know. How have you reconciled this environmental focus, and is farming the problem or the solution or is it both?

Nicola Harvey: [00:36:58] That's a big question. And isn't it interesting that farming as a term is used as a catch-all because what constitutes farming and even cattle farming in various parts of the world is in is very, very different. So farming cattle in parts of Australia also includes the feedlot process Farming cattle in America is rangeland and prairie grazing and also feedlot system. In the UK it's tiny plots of land with small numbers of cattle. It's such a fraught question that you ask, but I will try and answer it nonetheless...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:37:39] And remind our listeners about the feedlot. I mean we know a lot of my listeners will not. But just give us what feedlots are so we can put that into perspective.

Nicola Harvey: [00:37:47] Yeah. So there are various ways in which cattle are farmed for the red meat trade in New Zealand we tend to fatten all of our cattle on grass in paddocks on large farms for their entire life. Their life is still relatively short in the grand scheme of things. It's two years, two and a half years for most animals and then they are sent to a processor and they are... They become part of the red meat trade in a large portion of Australia because of climatic conditions and soil quality and how and when grass is available, the presence of droughts. There's a number of different mitigating factors. Cattle and breeding herds are often on big stations raised on grass or fodder as of various grain descriptions. And then at a certain point in their life, the young animals are sent to feedlots.

Nicola Harvey: [00:38:57] Feedlots are a quick and efficient way of fattening cattle on supplied food, which is primarily a mix of grains and silage and hay. It might be canola, oats, a mix of various high protein food sources that the cattle are acclimatised to over a certain period of time, weeks and months, and then their portions are increased day in, day out, and they get to the end of their life at around 24 months and they are sent

off to the processor. That is typically how red meat is finished in Australia. And so the vast majority of meat sold in supermarkets comes through the feedlot system. It is a confronting vision, to visit those big feedlots. Tens of thousands of cattle are housed in pens and fed grains daily. It is how Australia is kept... red meat and in fact how most of the world is kept in red meat.

And it sits uncomfortably with a lot of people, including me, as a cattle farmer. I would not, I just would not send cattle into a feedlot system that is saying that's as you know, I strongly suggest people read my book because I've made decisions on my farming career that now don't sit well with me because we have to constantly weigh up all of these ethical and financial conundrums and try and balance the scales. So feedlots work in Australia because there is demand for red meat and the presence of that volume and number of cattle that satisfies that demand on the grasslands in the rangelands of Australia puts too much of a burden on the land. And so we're constantly having to grapple with how do we satisfy the demands of consumers or do we not satisfy the demand and we try and shift consumers away from red meat products towards something else? And then what is the burden on the land if and this has been mentioned many times. More people are eating a plant-based diet, for example. More people are eating legumes. More people are eating a range of vegetables. What is the burden on the land if that is the solution? And these are all the questions that as a cattle farmer in New Zealand, I've asked myself, because when I went into farming, it was around the time where, as you mentioned, farming was pinpointed as a major contributor, not just to environmental impacts but to Climate Change because of the amount of methane and carbon dioxide that's emitted from the farm systems.

Nicola Harvey: [00:41:56] So I had to grapple with all of this and try and figure out whether cattle farming was contributing unduly to environmental degradation and to Climate Change. And so it's a big juicy topic to get into, and it is a really difficult conversation to have with people to try and find a common ground where we can say, I am happy with how my food is ending up on the dinner table because I know it is not degrading the environment or contributing to Climate Change or coming through a system where the animals are treated very poorly.

And I cannot think of, you know, a dinner offering where you can say unequivocally that you're happy with all three on any given day. Because the way that the food system works is we're constantly having to weigh up all of these conflicting values and it's a tough one. I mean, I now consider myself an environmental activist. My activism comes through the way that I farm here, but also through my role as a writer and a journalist and a producer of sharing other people's stories, of trying to find common ground for frank and honest conversations that don't come with anger and accusation, which often happens in the food space at the moment where people would prefer to eat a plant-based diet and not eat animals because they don't want to be eating from a feedlot system or they don't want to eat from an intensified system or whatever the argument is.

But my role and my role as an activist is to say, well, we've got to have these nuanced conversations and you've got to see multiple sides of the story in order to make a decision that doesn't place an undue burden on just one thing, that might be the environment or might be a community, or it might be the water system or whatever it is, it's about trying to find a balance. I know, I'm saying I feel like I'm answering in a very esoteric way, but I am happy to say I am a cattle farmer now because having cattle on this land here where I live means that I can use them to enhance the environment. And I do that because I use them to capture their manure and their urine, which is a natural fertiliser. And it means I don't have to use synthetic fertilisers. And the way that we manage the stock around the property means that we can create this beautiful, lush grass system that in the end puts nutrient-dense, delicious food on the table of locals in New Zealand. Because we don't export our meat, we don't rear them or fatten them to a weight, that means that they head off into the export market and we're doing it in a way that is creating a lush environment on our farm. And I can feel good about that and I can share some of those teachings and those learnings with community members who are welcome on our farm and who have a vested interest in seeing the farms thrive.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:45:25] This is what I love about your book, Nicola, is because these are issues that I think we all are grappling with. But you've put yourself at the coalface. I mean, you have literally put yourself at the coalface and taken it. But beyond just an intellectual discussion

and actually made your whole life around it. And I think that's what I find so compelling about your book and your story. So, you know, this is I mean, I have just music to my ears because Regenerative Agriculture is something we've talked a lot about on this program. In fact, our whole summer series has been revisiting some of the legends in this space. So this is absolutely music to my ears, but also the fact that you're so at the coalface here of doing it and you've been on a very steep learning curve over the last five or six years, which is an incredibly short period of time in the scheme of things. Veganism has been an interesting emerging space, and this plant-based meat, I mean, when one looks at the label of these products, I think it's fair to say that well-meaning people have become the foot soldiers for the ultra-processed food industry and unwittingly so they, you know, definitely well-meaning. I have no doubt that when you look at the ingredients, it's quite shocking to see. And it takes ultra food processing to another limit, to another level. Also, another area of interest is things we have to learn from our First Nations people and lessons about how they approach the land is a really interesting part too. How has that impacted on your approach as well?

Nicola Harvey: [00:47:20] It has. We're in a part of the country where the land here is within 9230 above waters, which their tribal area and we, the farm flanks, a waterway which is managed by Hapu that has a meadow just down the road. So Hapu is a kinship group within the tribe, and they have embarked on a very ambitious restoration project to restore the wetlands. Alongside the farm. And because of that, we've had a lot to do with the group that is restoring it. And we have come to understand what their aspirations are for the land that we farm on. And that has sparked another process and a journey of discovery for both Pat and I to understand their ambitions and to understand what our role is within that. And it fits very seamlessly into the regenerative conversation, yet often gets passed over, I think because it's about understanding a different set of knowledge and the different tradition and how land is valued by the Maori Hapu on the road is very different to how we see the land and how especially conventional farming has managed the land. And I think the one, the one strategy for want of a better word that really resonates with me... We've talked often with the Hapu about is this idea of "Moko pono" thinking. So thinking for

your grandchildren. So you make business decisions based on what your grandchildren will benefit from. That idea of the 100-year plan, that idea that we are stewards of the land here now. But that doesn't mean we own it. Nor do we have a right to reap all of the profits or to draw everything we can from it now in this time.

Nicola Harvey: [00:49:30] And I think slowing that process down and understanding that the decisions we make from an environmental from a Climate Change and, yes, from a business and profit point of view, the decisions we make now must be for the benefit of our grandchildren. And it is a very long stretch of time to think through. But if you when you come to work closer to nature, you understand how long these processes are anyway, you know, changes that we made 24 months ago, we're only starting to see the benefits of now. And that's, you know, that's a far longer cycle than most people living in the city get to appreciate and their work lives. And then when you stretch that out even further and start thinking across 100 years, it really changes the dynamic around what it is that we're doing here on this land. And it also is incredibly freeing because this constant need to own and to control and to impose ourselves on land felt, just out of step for me when we first arrived and learning perhaps a Maori perspective or understanding more about to Maori, which is a world view and understanding that we are just slightly putting our footprints on the land now and the next generation will do the same. In the next generation, we'll do the same. That idea that you can never truly own land is incredibly freeing, and I think that is a concept that can be used and applied in other parts of our life very easily. It's not just specific to farming and to managing the environment.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:51:24] Yeah, I mean, I totally agree. I mean, I have... we do this acknowledgement to country at the beginning of every show and I and I actually have said the reason I do that is not only to pay my respects, but we've got so much to learn about connection and respect and connection with the land and connection with each other and respect for all those things. It's also interesting that one of our guests that I've had on Charlie Massy, he's a legend. We talk about enabling versus domineering nature, but he talks about the human social cycle as arguably being the

biggest challenge here because it includes how farmers think, how consumers think. What can we do as people living in the urban environment to be part of this process? What advice would you give us in the urban environment, having been in both what can we do?

Nicola Harvey: [00:52:24] I mean, again, it's probably a lesson that has... That I've had to learn the last couple of years in trying to understand what the Tao Maori viewpoint would be and managing the land. And it just comes down to actually listening to others' point of view and to not imposing your will or your opinion on others when it's not warranted, and there is a tendency to have very strong opinions. In this day and age, everyone loves to be right and to win the argument on Twitter. But we will struggle to make any substantial change if we don't actually appreciate that there are different ways of living on this planet and of managing land and of creating food systems. And the best advice that I would have for anyone living in the environment is your viewpoint is not the only viewpoint. You have to understand the context in which you are going into when you are imposing your opinion about food and how it should be made or produced, and to take the time to listen to alternative viewpoints, even if they are. Vastly different from your worldview. They might be conservative in nature or political viewpoint or whatever it is. And I think that very much applies to some of the conversations that exist around veganism and plant-based diets. I can appreciate the sense of urgency that some people feel that we desperately need to shift the dial on the food system, but we also need to understand the nuance and how food systems actually come into being, because there are communities that rely on the income that are generated. There is land that is better suited for livestock than it is for the vast broadacre crops of soy and corn. There is a beautiful grey area that we can explore if we just take a breath and we listen to someone else's point of view. And if we understand that the knowledge hierarchy that exists in the world is no longer dominated by just one Western thought that there are multiple viewpoints that we can consider and we can be richer and probably a lot happier and more informed if we just listen to others.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:55:05] Well, that's a great note for us to finish on, Nicola, because it's been a pleasure to listen to you today and it's been a pleasure to read your book. And I couldn't

recommend it highly enough. It really covers so many issues that we all need to engage with. So thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story and your wisdom with us.

Nicola Harvey: [00:55:24] Thanks for the opportunity. I enjoyed it.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:55:25] One of the things that fascinates me about Holistic land management is the similarities between it and Holistic health care. And the word Holistic conjures up all sorts of images for people. But it's a word that I've been very connected with for over 40 years, my professional career. And while people may think of it as being some new-age philosophy, it actually just happens to be the way the human body works and it just happens to be the way the planet works. And if you are listening to this. So those both those things are relevant, then I think a Holistic approach is what we all need to be engaged with. It's so interesting to hear Nicola talk about science-based approach of conventional land management. Doesn't that sound familiar? And evidence-based approach is the way health care is delivered in we hope. And as we've made the point on this podcast many times, there is a great difficulty in establishing the difference between evidence-based marketing and evidence-based medicine. And a new term that I'm embracing is evidence-informed. I think that's a lot more nuanced, a lot more accurate, evidence-informed. And when we hear about science-based approach, I wonder also whether it's science-based marketing that is an exercise because the same things apply. There is no shortage of research, I'm sure, within the farming community to show all sorts of amazing benefits by the latest and greatest fertiliser, herbicide, fungicide, pesticide. I'm sure if you were doing an egg science course at a university, you would be studying the science of all of these things and emerge from it like many doctors do when they study evidence-based marketing or sorry, evidence-based medicine, but evidence-informed medicine, they emerge thinking, Well, I've studied the science, and the science is clear. It's all in refereed journals. And we know that the point of evidence-based marketing is that the chemical food and pharmaceutical industry literally flood those journals and those practitioners' minds with the evidence or the science. And so much of that is underpinned by a will, a desire, almost a religious desire to dominate nature and extract the most from the earth that we possibly can.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:58:04] And in fact, it's and instead of it dominating nature, this is why the work of so many of the people that we've talked to or you may have listened to in the summer, particularly people like Allan Savoury... they're all [Allan Savory](#), [Joel Salatin](#), [Charlie Massy](#), [Charlie Arnott](#) these people and so many more. [Terry McCosker](#) are all about enabling nature and this is the lesson that Nicola has learnt. And as I said, the point about Nicola's journey is that she has given she's actually at the coalface. She wasn't just somebody in the city that thought "Wouldn't it be nice if I did this?" She actually did it and followed the conventional science-based approach. Found that to be wanting and then embraced a Regenerative Agricultural approach. And the word regenerative is so much more powerful than sustainable because if land degradation is the big issue, and I believe it is the big issue, I'm not the only one, of course. Then how we regenerate rather than sustain is really important, and that's why we shouldn't blame the resource, in this case meat or dairy. We should blame the way that is grown and what is good for the animal is generally good for the planet, is generally good for the food that it produces and it is good for our health. So what's good for the animal is good for us and it's good for the planet. So in my opinion, that's a win win win. And I could keep adding wins to that all day long because soil regeneration is what really farming is about, it is about nurturing and regenerating the land, not just for this generation, but for future generations. And that is perhaps our biggest challenge. So I thought it was a great discussion. It's a great book. I really enjoyed reading it. It's an easy read. It's a stimulating read. It's an important read. And we'll of course have links to the articles, website and the book itself. So I hope this finds you well. Until next time. This is [Dr Ron Ehrlich](#). Be well.

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