



# Country Noosa

PROMOTING A SUSTAINABLE RURAL FUTURE



Rural Enterprise Project

## CONCEPT PAPER

# History of Agriculture

Authors: Brian O'Connor and John News

## Introduction

The following concept paper outlines the historical agricultural activity of the Noosa region, from the mid 1880s to the 21st century. The paper seeks to provide context for current and future agricultural work in the region and, hopefully, will contribute to consideration of evolving and rapidly-changing sustainable farming practices.

Historically, Noosa Shire's economy was founded on agriculture, with timber, beef cattle and dairying comprising major industries in the area, followed by significant fruit and vegetable production. Only a few of the big cattle runs of early years remain.

Among the vegetable and pasture crops grown in the past were potatoes, maize, hay, bananas, sugar cane and green beans. Other significant fruit and vegetable growing has included tomatoes, melons, papaws, passionfruit and zucchini.

More recent history has seen less traditional avenues of agriculture emerge, with ginger, horticulture, macadamias and nurseries thriving across the region. In addition smaller, niche farms producing salad greens, herbs, garlic, native foods and tree nuts now supply the local markets and restaurant industry. Regenerative farming and permaculture practices are popular among a new breed of growers and producers in the region.

Historical fragmentation of the rural areas has created a large number of smaller properties, which effectively rule out some uses but facilitate others. Various produce, such as ginger, strawberries, hydroponic vegetables and cut flowers can be grown quite profitably on small lots. The emerging focus is intensive cultivation of smaller areas sustaining high-value crops and produce.

Today, contemporary Noosa is a diverse community that maintains some historical industries and land uses, while exploring new ones. Agriculture and forestry are going through a phase of reinvention, with farm forestry, 'bush tucker', horticulture (based on high value and local native crops/plants) and organic farming all increasing in popularity.

## Indigenous food gathering practices

The Indigenous people of the Noosa region are the Gubbi Gubbi (also called Kabi Kabi) people, who have a long history of custodianship of the land in and around the Noosa region. Traditionally they engaged in land management practices involving a cycle of visitation to areas where fruits, berries and vegetables growing naturally were available to eat. Possessed of an extensive and intimate knowledge of their landscape and its resources, they have practiced sustainable land management principles over thousands of years.

During fruiting season, turkeys and pigeons were plentiful. The months of August and September provided turkey eggs, while December to March was the bunya nut season. People sometimes then moved to the coast to feast on fish. Apart from fish, they gathered shellfish, lobster, pipis and crabs along the coast; and freshwater mussels and yabbies in freshwater streams. Bush honey and bunya nuts were especially prized.

The most common fruits and vegetables gathered included quandong, raspberries, yellow berries, yams, native fern roots and cabbage tree palms.

The abundant forests provided a variety of marsupials, lizards, snakes and echidnas. Brush turkeys were hunted and trapped. Waterfowl were caught and their eggs gathered, as were insect larvae and lerp.

Men and women shared the task of obtaining and supplying food and fashioning utensils.

Women were adept at climbing trees and helping men capture small tree-dwelling animals, birds and their eggs. Women and men shared the work of gathering shellfish and fishing. The use of nets was common in Kabi country.

The burning of country by Aborigines was practiced for centuries, noted by early settlers and explorers as a way to restrict and limit growth of thick bush and forest in favour of open grassy areas with large trees.

Discontinuation of, and disruption to, these Indigenous land management practices and cultural principles followed European settlement. This, coupled with substantially different European land management practices, led to a rapid change to the natural environment and to the ability of Indigenous peoples to maintain their hunter-gatherer way of life.

## **History of European settlement**

Although parts of Noosa Shire had been traversed and claimed by Europeans before 1870, it was not until the wealth of gold (at Gympie) and timber (in the scrub country) was realised that the area was settled more closely. Gold was discovered at Gympie in 1867 and the subsequent development of the goldfield demanded transport access.

After the establishment of Tewanin township, surveyed in 1871, a road link was made to Gympie. Tewanin is an anglicised version of the Indigenous name for the area, Dauwadhum, meaning 'place of dead logs'. Two Cobb and Co. routes were established between Brisbane and Gympie: a dry weather one through Tuchekoi and Traveston, and a longer wet weather route through Tewanin. People and materials associated with the Gympie goldfields came by sea to Tewanin.

Sawmilling was established at Tewanin in the 1870s and a fishing industry supplied fish to the Gympie miners. By the end of the 19th century the two big sawmills at Elanda Point, on the shores of Lake Cootharaba and at Tewanin, had closed down.

Cooran was established in 1889 following construction of the railway from Gympie. It served as the terminus for a coach route linking to Yandina until the Yandina–Cooran rail link opened in 1891. The arrival of the railway helped the district develop as an agricultural and timber centre. Shops were built along King Street and the town was an important centre for loading local goods, freight, timber, and produce onto the train.

Following completion of the North Coast Railway between Gympie and Brisbane in July 1891, Cooroy was established as a station in 1893. It became the main rail centre for access to Tewantin. Timber-getting was a major industry in the early days, with 40 bullock teams hauling to the railway yards and later to the two Cooroy sawmills erected in 1908. Before the railway, teams hauled cedar from Black Mountain to Tewantin where it was shipped to Brisbane.

In 1906 Pomona became established on the rail line to give new settlers in the scrub lands better access to rail facilities. The first industry at Pomona was timber-getting, then bananas and dairying.

Land around Cooroy was opened up for selection in 1907. The new settlers milled their own timber and cleared the land for dairying, fruit growing, and sugar cane. In the early 1890s cane was grown near Cooroy Mountain and a small mill was erected there. Cream was brought to the railway by horseback and sent to factories in Gympie and Caboolture until a factory was built at Cooroy in 1915. The establishment of the Noosa Shire Council in 1910 confirmed the State Government's confidence in the maturity of the new towns in the area and the timber and dairying industries.

## **Early agricultural pioneers**

While escapees from the Moreton Bay penal settlement were known to have lived with the Indigenous tribes of the Noosa region in the first half of the 1800s (notably David Bracewell or Bracefell), the first European settlers within the Noosa Shire were the Skyring family in 1853.

Zachariah and Daniel Skyring took up four runs: Whildka Whildka (later known as Tuchekoi) bounded on the north by the creek that became known as Skyring Creek; Canando and Yandina to the south along the Maroochy River and bounded on the west by the Coast Range; and Pooreema, east of Whildka Whildka and across to the coast. The runs of between 8,000 and 12,000 hectares were stocked with cattle, but the dense scrub made mustering a problem and limited the capacity of the runs to about 600 cattle each. By 1858, the Skyrings had allowed their tenure on these runs to lapse and they were taken over by John Delaney Bergin. Subsequently, Daniel Skyring later purchased land around what is still known today as Skyring Creek.

Lieutenant John Bligh took up part of the Pooreema run, called 'Caroora' in 1860. The other part of the Pooreema run, Coutharaba (sic), was taken up by Walter Hay. The north-west section of the shire was included in Traveston run, which was taken up by Robert Glissons in 1857.

Bligh and Hay, who pioneered Noosa Heads and Tewantin as a port for transport of timber, located the route from Gympie to Tewantin. Hay did this informally for the state government in 1873 and it is retained to this day as Old Tewantin Road. Establishment of this route enabled further settlement and the eventual development of villages.

The Lands Acts of the late 1860s opened the way to closer settlement by resumption of land from pastoral holdings. The first application lodged with the lands office at Gympie was from C.S. Russell on 16 March 1869 for 2,000 hectares of second-class pastoral land on Kin Kin Creek. The lease was transferred four years later to Cootharaba sawmiller James McGhie.

Much of the land was taken up purely for its timber and then let go, but the scrub lands proved valuable after the timber had been cut.

In seeking to open up Queensland to wider settlement and productive agriculture, the state government passed the *Cooperative Communities Land Settlement Act 1893*, which led to the occupation of land at Noosa by two resident cooperatives – the Woolloongabba Exemplar Group, which began communal farming on about 4000 hectares (9700 acres) beside Lake Weyba (on land now known as Doonan), and the Protestant Unity Group, which was the last of 12 community settlements to be proclaimed by the then Queensland Governor, Sir Henry Norman.

The Woolloongabba Exemplars were people who had been made homeless by the 1893 Brisbane flood. In 1894, the Exemplars consisted of about 200 people led by a deeply religious land surveyor, George Chale Watson. Their dream was a socialist utopia where everything would be owned collectively, and each would work for the common good. The Exemplars soon developed outlets at Gympie and Brisbane for fish and had hopes of being ship-owners. Farming proved difficult, with numbers reduced to five men and their families when they disbanded a few years later. The government dispersed the worked land equitably.

The Protestant Unity Group was proclaimed on 18 July 1894, 35 members listed on the proclamation. They were of English, Scottish Irish and German descent, all protestant.

The Protestant Unity Group achieved more than any other communal group in Queensland, in terms of area cleared for the number of members, and also for the best use of establishment funds supplied by the government. Their 2320 hectares (5800 acres) in the Parish of Tuchekoi, was located west of present day Pomona, which did not exist. Members leased land from the government at an annual rental of 13 cents an acre, with a view to owning a parcel after eight years, whereupon each member could acquire not more than 64 hectares (160 acres) freehold title.

The group differed from other communal settlements in Queensland in that each member was given four hectares (10 acres) to farm for their own benefit, in addition to a communal farm worked by all the men. The first settlement for the group was in an area now known as Jampot Creek Road. The group built a rough road to the railway line at a point that came to be known as Pinbarren Siding.

As with the Exemplars, some left the group and built houses on allotments at Skyring Creek. A large portion of cleared land was planted to sugar cane, but also to tobacco, maize and oats. There were hopes of a sugar cane mill at Cooran when, in 1906, the Noosa mill refused to accept for crushing cane from north of Yandina. The farmers diversified into dairying and vegetable growing instead.

What is known as the Ellis and Grant land selections were subdivided to become the Pomona township, but not after a dispute with the state railway authorities over the name of the new settlement. Locals wanted to call it Cooroora, after the mountain. Pomona, the name of the Roman goddess of food and plenty was a compromise.

In other attempts at closer settlement, timber merchants McGhie, Luya, and Company attempted to establish a village settlement at Lake Cootharaba by letting land cheaply to

families for farming. Most of the settlers soon returned to Tewantin, reporting that the land was unfit for farming, being either too wet or too sandy.

Dr. Lang, who was involved in bringing settlers to Moreton Bay, called attention to the suitability of the land at Cootharaba for sugar and cotton, but few of the later settlers took his advice. One who did was George St John Carter, who had timber interests in the area. He experimented with sugar cane crops on his selection, portion 181 Parish of Noosa, near Cooloothin, and won a first prize and silver medal at the first Gympie exhibition.

The early families of the region also included the Sivyver family, who arrived in Sydney in 1839 from England. Initially employed with the railway departments in Maryborough the family descendants soon became successful sugar cane farmers in Mackay. Spencer Sivyver and the family settled permanently on a 63-hectare property in Tinbeerwah in 1902 where the family began dairy farming. Fourteen-year-old Stanley Sivyver also began a job in the timber industry, which would later lead him to establish a sawmill on a nearby property. The old timber mill is now submerged beneath Lake Macdonald.

Following the death of Spencer, Wally Sivyver purchased part of the property from his mother and would continue dairying while becoming a successful pig farmer, winning many competitions with his prized pigs. Stanley also received a part of the property, which he developed into a small crop farm where he would grow corn, watermelons, beans, and pineapples. The family continued to be involved in the milling, dairy and small crop agricultural industries until the 1950s.

### **Focus on Kin Kin** (by John News)

The Kin Kin region was first visited by timber getters between 1868-1900, who removed the best stands of majestic native rain forest timber comprising of Cedar, Kauri, and Mahogany. Logs were floated down Kin Kin creek through the bar to be dragged across the lake and processed at Tewantin mills.

In 1902 the Kin Kin valley was released as selection lots. The first to take up this release was J. Turnbull who chose land on Kin Kin range to the south. He was followed by Sorensen, Hanson and Sheperton among others, including the Nash brothers. They proceeded to clear, burn regrowth and scrub timber as per government conditions of release at the time. Timber forests were replanted with grasses including Paspalum, Rhodes and Clover. By 1904 a road was completed over the range from Cooran.

Cattle were transported by rail, firstly from Ipswich then from the Richmond district of northern NSW. In the early stages in the establishment of a cattle industry, red water fever played havoc, with whole herds being wiped out overnight. This led to the necessity of breeding stock with tick resistant animals.

The township of Kin Kin in 1918 consisted of a shop/post office, the butcher, the school of arts and the butter factory, which was completed in 1914. Cream was produced at the factory then transported to Gympie via Cooran for further processing.

By 1920, banana production was in full swing and a timber mill had been established producing 6000 packing cases a week for the bananas. About 100 Indian labourers were employed to grow the crop. The banana industry began to struggle under the pressure of Bunchy top and Panama disease. These are problems introduced then that we are still dealing with today. Many of the labours relocated to north of Coffs Harbour, another a well-known banana-growing area. During this time, a very respected Indian official died and was cremated on one tonne of butter fat in Pomona. Thousands of people attended.

By the late 1920's there were 120 farms. This included 35 banana growers, 58 dairies, and a number of other meat, pineapple and sugar cane producers.

By the middle of the century, there were fewer farms because large scale banana production had ceased. At this time, dairy and beef cattle were still the major income producing industries. Continuing on through the 1970's Kin Kin was predominantly a small crop, dairy, beef cattle community. Beans, macadamias, ginger, garlic, mangos and pineapples were also grown. The deregulation of the milk industry in 2000 saw the writing on the wall for the dairy industry in Kin Kin.

With improved farming practises there are boutique farms producing quality products today. There is grazing, mixed farming, horticulture, coffee, Goats for milk and cheese, Alpaca for fleece and organic greens grown in the region. A successful farming future in Kin Kin relies on the responsible use of fertilisers, chemical, erosion control and an enforceable catchment management plan.

# Industry snapshots

## Logging and timber-getting

Around 1870 the township of Cooran began as a coach stop on the road from Tewantin to Gympie. This road was formed after a sawmill was established at Mill Point, to supply the Gympie goldfields. The sawmill operated from 1871 to 1892 and supported a thriving community.

Initially timber logs were rafted down Kin Kin Creek to the lake and held in a yard by a double line of piles forming a breakwater. During later sawmilling operations, timber was taken from as far away as Mount Coondoo and hauled to a tram terminus. By the early 1870s loads of timber were sent along Cootharaba Road to Gympie.

Transporting the timber was the most problematic aspect of early operations at Mill Point. Bullock teams became bogged in the saturated, sandy soils and Cootharaba Road had swampy sections, steep pinches, and 11 kilometres of scrub along Kin Kin and Tinana Creeks. The difficulties of Cootharaba Road were resolved with the establishment of an outlet by sea via a depot at Tewantin.

Flat-bottomed paddle-wheel boats, known as droghers, (the *Black Swan*, *Countess of Belmore* and *Elanda*), towed punts of sawn timber through lakes Cootharaba and Cooroibah to Tewantin. There the timber was loaded onto the steamer *S.S. Culgoa* and taken to Brisbane three times a fortnight.

In 1885, sawmillers Dath Henderson and Co. owned 2,046 hectares stretching west from Mt Cooroy, including the current town site. The railway station became the district's focal point upon its completion in 1891, dispatching log timber and produce and receiving goods and mail.

J.L. Boden established the first store in the railway yard. The Queensland Government repurchased the area in 1907 and surveyed the land into agricultural farms and town lots. The timber and dairy industries supported the town. Following closure of the Butter Factory in 1975, land use gradually changed from farming to rural residential. The closure of the sawmill in 2000 ended an era for Cooroy.

The industry was revitalised in the 1990s. Incentives offered by the Queensland Government encouraged many rural land owners to plant timber on their otherwise unproductive properties. Eucalypt species in particular dominated in areas around Cooran and Pomona, with fewer numbers of cabinet timber species planted. In lowlands where soils are less conducive to hardwood, softwoods such as pines prevailed. Non-native species such as bamboo, Paulwenias, or Pongamia were planted also, although these required management to prevent weed spread.

The 1999 South-East Queensland Forest Agreement led to the closure of the two mills at Cooroy as the supply of timber from Crown land no longer warranted their operation.

In October 2017, Noosa Council instigated a plan that will result in 2,400 hectares of land within Yurol and Ringtail State Forests transitioning to National Park status over 10 years. More than half the area was covered by long-term plantation harvest rights held by HQ Plantations. The proposed change from State Forest to protected area tenure will result in permanent protection

of this important corridor between the Cooloola and Tewantin national parks. It provides valuable habitat for a range of threatened species, including the koala.

### **Alfredson's joinery factory**

At Cooran, The former Alfredson's joinery, pre-cut house workshop and sawmill complex at 28 King Street is evidence of the long history of timber-based industry in Noosa Shire. The business was also involved in efforts to address the post-World War II housing shortage. Pre-cut 'Queenslander' houses were manufactured at the premises and transported by rail and road throughout the state, helping perpetuate this distinctive style of housing.

Mervyn William Henry Alfredson, born in Nambour in 1912, started his apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker with Page Furnishers in Pomona, and completed it in Gympie. He then returned to Cooran, where his father, Thorvald P. Alfredson, was the Cooran railway station master. In May 1933, Mervyn Alfredson purchased 37.7 perches (0.09ha) of land opposite the railway station from Alice McIlwraith and set up a woodworking shop.

The workshop supplied the Australian Army with tent floors, tent pegs and other items.

In July 1944, the Widgee sawmill, near Gympie, was purchased to supply timber to Alfredson's operation, and M.W. Alfredson & Company was also formed that year.

Now listed on the Queensland Heritage Register, Alfredson's Pre-Cut House Workshop and Alfredson's Sawmill provides intact evidence of a timber-based family business that was operated, expanded and adapted between 1933 and 1990.

## **Dairy**

Commercial dairying started in the late 1890s and became the major industry in Noosa Shire. Milking machines were introduced on the larger farms from 1911. Children provided the substantial labour for milking cows and feeding pigs and calves, and herding cattle. The main breeds of dairy cattle in the shire were Jersey and Friesian.

Grazing in the Noosa Shire had been based mainly on introduced grasses and legumes. With the large-scale clearing of softwoods and eucalypts between 1906 and 1924, thousands of hectares were sown to Paspalum and Rhodes grass. These introduced grasses proved to be the mainstay of the grazing industries (initially mainly dairying) for some 50 years.

Gympie's first co-operative butter factory began operations in 1898, but it suspended operations in 1899 and was taken over by the Silverwood Dairy Company. In 1906 a new cooperative, the Wide Bay Co-operative Dairy Company, started with 175 suppliers and purchased the factory and its 'Golden Nugget' brand. Cream runs were introduced to service suppliers from outlying districts, while isolated suppliers sent their cream as best they could, often by packhorse to pick-up points or rail sidings. Cream from the Kin Kin area was sent to Cooran by packhorse and then by rail to Gympie.



Butter factories opened at Kin Kin in 1914, Cooroy in 1915 and Pomona in 1919 – the Silverwood Assoc. Company at Kin Kin, the Wide Bay Co-operative Dairy Assoc. at Cooroy and the Caboolture Co-operative Dairy Assoc. at Pomona. Before that, farmers railed their cans of cream in louvered vans from Cooroy, Pomona, and Cooran railway stations.

The Kin Kin factory closed in 1937 following improvements in methods of transportation. After 1937, Kin Kin cream was sent to the Caboolture Co-operative Dairy Assoc. Pomona factory.

The dairy industry in Noosa Shire peaked in the 1940s and 1950s but declined rapidly from the mid-1960s. The industry was based on butter production. The production of cream for butter had become uneconomical with the disappearance of export markets, increasing costs, and competition from margarine. Substitute products eventually transformed the markets, and the Pomona and Cooroy butter factories closed in the 1970 and 1975 respectively. For some years after that, whole milk from Noosa Shire was sent to a distribution centre at Gympie. By 1980 the number of dairies in Noosa had dropped to 43, with less than 4,000 head. By 1992 there were 19 dairies. Finally, the deregulation of the industry in 2000 resulted in all major dairy farming operations disappearing from the area.

By the seventies with the continuing cost/price squeeze more and more farmers left dairying. Much of this land went into beef production.

## **Cattle**

Cattle were first run in the area now Noosa Shire in the mid 1800s. While dairy farms became popular, there has consistently been grazing of beef cattle at a smaller scale. These cattle grazed on the same introduced grasses and legumes as the dairy cattle.

Beef cattle grazing decreased as dairy farming had picked up in the 1960s, by which point roughly 200 beef cattle producers were operating in the Noosa region in 1966. This number had halved by 1992.

In the 1970s, a high proportion of the land improved for cattle was developed by absentee owners under the guidance of farm consultants. The slump in beef market prices in 1973–74 subsequently made expenditure on pasture renovation, topdressing, and oversowing uneconomical.

In 1979, there were 13,471 beef cattle in the shire, representing only 0.13 percent of Queensland's total. Factors contributing to the decline in numbers included a degeneration of wallum pastures, overstocking during the initial establishment period, waterlogging of inadequately drained areas during a series of wet seasons in the early 1970s, and insufficient maintenance fertiliser applied, due mainly to large increases in the cost of superphosphate.

Also, the original developers encountered severe cattle tick infestations due primarily to inefficient dipping facilities. The improvement of these facilities, the adoption of strategic dipping programs, and the infusion of the drought-resistant *Bos Indicus* breed of cattle reduced the problems associated with the cattle tick.

In recent times there has been an upswing in beef cattle production, albeit from a low base. The small numbers necessitate a small scale slaughterhouse in the Sunshine Coast and Noosa hinterland area.

## **Bananas**

The impetus for growing bananas came when the Gympie and District Fruitgrowers Association was formed in 1916. Cooroy farmers railed 1,375 cases of bananas in early October 1917. A fast fruit train service was extended to Gympie in 1921, which saw an increase to just short of 15,000 cases in 1925.

Kin Kin was one of the prolific producing areas, followed soon after by Cooran and Pinbarren.

Bunchy top disease affecting big suppliers in northern New South Wales caused a short-lived boom. New growers entered the market through the World War One Soldier Settlement Scheme and were able to prosper quickly using lots as small as two hectares of fertile soils. Growth of the banana industry coincided with a population boom. The number of people in Noosa Shire doubled between 1920 and 1927, and increased a further 30.7 percent by 1933.

In 1928, a banana experimental station was established at Kin Kin East to conduct experiments in steeping (dipping in different solutions for given periods), spacing, depth of planting, trimming, fertilising, and baiting banana beetle borers. The beetle borer was discovered in the Cooroy district in 1916, apparently transported there in infected plant material from the Redlands area. The station closed in the 1930s.

From 1930 onwards the industry declined almost as fast as it had risen. The main reasons were rust thrips infestation, the worldwide economic recession, and the recovery of the Tweed banana areas from bunchy top disease.

By 1935 very few bananas were produced from the Noosa area. In 1966 there was still some 79 hectares of land committed to bananas, which had decreased to 11 hectares by the 1990s.

## **Pasture seed production**

Because of Noosa Shire's pioneering involvement in development of tropical legumes and grasses, it was a logical sequence that some producers would specialise in seed production of these new pasture plants to satisfy market demand.

Terranora Tropical Pasture Seeds began operations in northern NSW in October 1962 and quickly established a foothold in the Noosa Shire, with producers growing seed on a share basis.

The company joined with Anderson's Seeds, and expanded operations to provide two headers in the field, and a crop drying plant at Pomona. All seed cleaning was carried out in their facilities at Duranbah, New South Wales. The well-known Yates company also entered the pasture seed business, in conjunction with the Poulsen family at Carters Ridge, and set up a comprehensive seed cleaning plant on the property. This became fully owned by the Poulsens at a later date.

The period from the mid-1960s to 1970 was one of peak production. More than 20 growers were involved locally.

Of the full range of pasture species and cultivars grown over those years, Kazungula setaria, Greenleaf desmodium, and Archer axillaris persisted in production, followed in later years by Narok setaria, Samford Rhodes, and Safari clover.

By the late 1970s, there were eight producers growing one or more pasture cultivars for seed in the shire (three producing certified seed of Narok, or Samford). Virtually all this seed was contract harvested by one grower who has an auto-header and seed drying and cleaning facilities.

## **Further reading**

More information on the agricultural history of the area can be found at the Noosa Shire Museum at Pomona, or visit the website <http://www.noosamuseum.org.au/>.