

# FDI Feature Interview

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## Dr Ben Cole – Wide Open Agriculture

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### Key Points

- The Western Australian Wheatbelt provides opportunities for innovative and diversified regenerative farming that can have positive impacts on both the environment and on rural communities.
- Wide Open Agriculture Ltd is a food and agriculture company, which aims to regenerate ecosystems and communities in Western Australia's Wheatbelt.
- The “Four Returns” concept employed by Wide Open Agriculture Ltd aims to deliver returns in the areas of inspiration, social capital, natural capital and financial capital, creating a sustainable future for rural communities.
- Differentiated produce delivered by regenerative farmers in the Western Australian Wheatbelt will target domestic and export markets.

### Introduction

Globally, agriculture is facing the immense challenge of feeding a world population that is estimated to grow to over 10 billion people in the next 35 years. This represents an estimated [70 per cent increase](#) in global food requirements. Primary producers will be required to supply food that is nutritious, clean and produced according to ethical and environmentally sustainable standards, while they are competing for increasingly scarce resources, such as fertile soil and clean water.

Wide Open Agriculture Ltd is a new company, which aims to revitalise the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. The company is focused on identifying inspiring opportunities to deliver social, environmental and financial returns to Wheatbelt communities. It also endeavours to lead research to identify new and untapped food and agriculture markets. Ultimately, it will develop a dynamic and engaged team, which will include staff members and partners from industry, local farmers, government and NGOs.

FDI has taken the opportunity to interview Dr Ben Cole of Wide Open Agriculture, to discuss the formation of the company, its underlying philosophy and its aims for the future and the future of the Western Australian Wheatbelt.

## Interview

### **FDI – What is the theory behind Wide Open Agriculture and how does it work in practical application?**

**Dr Cole** – The theory that is built into the DNA of Wide Open Agriculture (WOA) is the idea of creating a business that allows for large-scale landscape re-generation. To do that we have applied a framework called Four Returns (4R). The 4Rs are as follows:

- Return of inspiration, giving people hope and a sense of purpose;
- Return of social capital, bringing back jobs, business activity, education and security;
- Return of natural capital, restoring biodiversity, soil and water quality; and
- Return of financial capital, realising long-term, sustainable profits.

The concept of 4R was introduced to me by the Dutch organisation, [Commonland](#). *Commonland* had spent a long time thinking about achieving large-scale landscape restoration and distilling the information it had gathered. The outcome is not just good for ecosystems. It is also good for the people working and living in the landscape and this concept is fundamental to the 4R framework. The framework also applies a three zone ([the natural zone, combined zone and the economic zone](#)) approach over a period of 20 years. The three zones become part of a holistic agricultural plan. The economic zone is used to develop and refine biological cropping practices for cereal production, as well as raising livestock. The combined zone is planted with native shrubs that can act as a feedstock for livestock. The natural zone is where natural vegetation is established and protected.

WOA emerged as a result of discussions with the future Chairman of WOA, Mr Anthony Maslin, who approached me to ask whether or not the 4R model would work if applied to the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. My honest answer at the time was that I did not really know, because I did not understand the 4R concept. I was familiar with the traditional three returns, referring to the triple bottom line. An investment has to be financially sound and able to produce a positive cash flow, it has to create jobs and benefit the community by enabling enterprises and, from an environmental viewpoint, it has to do good things for the ecosystems that surround and support the business. The fourth return, termed the “return of inspiration” was new to me, but I now understand that this was something I had been looking for – that society must benefit from the investment in a creative way.

After contemplating the idea for some time, my family and I determined it would be worthwhile to “have a go” and to build a business, based on farming and agriculture, that strives to deliver on the 4R model. We have been doing that now for three years. Certainly, it is not easy and it comes with many challenges. It is something, I believe, that is needed to start a transition in the Wheatbelt towards a new direction. It can also show, globally, that there is a different way of producing and delivering food to consumers that can do good things for the planet and its people.

### **FDI – How did WOA evolve in the West Australian Wheatbelt region?**

**Dr Cole** – It really evolved from Anthony Maslin (WOA Chairman) and I wishing to establish and build a 4R company, but not knowing how or where to start. To gain an understanding of how to proceed, we took the time to look at what had happened in the Wheatbelt in the past. What we found was a small, but very strong, body of farmers already practicing regenerative agriculture.

The first return, which we saw as being most crucial in the Wheatbelt, was addressing the loss of population. Young people were leaving town for school and university, but not returning, resulting in a decline in communities. We looked at all of the Government programmes and offerings from non-government agencies, to try to identify what else could be done. We determined that none of those were really about job creation. Through our cornerstone investment with *Commonland*, we began thinking about intensive horticulture through protective cropping. Intensive horticulture requires a workforce and, by its nature, means that a lot of people are needed for a lot of jobs.

To develop this project, we have been trialling “smart” protected shade-house technology that responds to climate conditions to generate optimum growing conditions. This has shown us that we can create jobs in a shade-house project, as opposed to a broadacre farm. We now employ five people for each half-hectare of shade-house, where, on a normal farm, five people would work on an area of 5,000 ha. Our shade-house constitutes a huge multiplier effect for employment. We are creating jobs and we can grow amazing fruit and vegetables in the Wheatbelt, where, traditionally, cereal crops and livestock have been grown. This is a first for the region, as it has not been done before, and the results satisfy our social return against the 4R principles.

In addition to the protected shade-house venture, WOA operates a regenerative farmland management and the *Food for Reasons* food brand. WOA’s vertically integrated, consumer driven, business aligns to emerging trends in which consumers are demanding to know exactly how their food is produced - on what land, by which farmer and what chemicals and other inputs have been used.

**FDI – What issues have you needed to address to get your message and products out to the farming community?**

**Dr Cole** – Immediately, we saw the need for openness with the farming community and to explain the reasons why we are following the 4R framework. This included describing and demonstrating what we are doing, what we are learning and, finally, how to address those aspects that have been challenging. In the practical sense, we did this by getting our hands dirty and doing some farming. The idea was to show that we understood how hard it is to be in primary production in the Wheatbelt and the challenges this presents, such as isolation and difficulties in sourcing labour. By engaging with their networks and through field days, we try to show farmers that we have “earned our stripes” and this approach is proving to be successful. The introduction of the protected shade-house technology was the result.

To communicate these ideas to the wider community, we produce vegetables in our trial shade-house, which we then distribute in “seasonal veggie boxes”. These have been received very well. We distribute to five surrounding towns, as well as customers in Fremantle and Scarborough. The vegetables are produced in the Wheatbelt, for the Wheatbelt; this approach has enabled the community to see that we are here, committed to the region, and that we are doing something positive.

**FDI – What types of practical land-management interventions are being undertaken by farmers in your network?**

**Dr Cole** – Regenerative farmers across the Wheatbelt are employing a range of practices and techniques to restore and improve agricultural land. This includes establishing perennial grasses for stock feed and to improve soil quality; the planting of cover-crops to manage soil erosion, soil fertility, soil quality, water, weeds, pests, diseases, biodiversity and wildlife; and enhancing soils with low levels of chemical or biological additives.

At our WOA shade-house, we have applied a total agro-ecological system. This means that we use natural systems to benefit and accelerate plant production; we farm as close to nature as we can. Work at the shade-house includes: crop rotations to reduce soil erosion and increase crop yields; establishing bee hives for pollination; and the planting of forage shrubs to attract native pollinators. We have also conducted work around our water catchment, to stop water run-off into the valley floors because that is where salinity issues start. We see this as an important practical measure to stop the saline encroachment onto neighbouring properties. The outcome we are aiming for, is an integrated agro-ecological system in our shade-house.

On our site in Buntine, we have done a lot of planting of fodder shrubs and we now have 98 ha in fodder shrub production. This project is about getting deep-rooted perennials back into the environment.

**FDI – Do you see opportunities for expansion to the wider network of NRMs that are also suffering from denuded and damaged Wheatbelt landscapes?**

**Dr Cole** – We have established close relationships with Natural Resource Management (NRM) Agencies across the Wheatbelt. Our WOA properties have impacted positively on several NRMs and catchment groups. We have found the NRMs to be incredibly supportive, as they appreciate the need to align profitable business approaches with their objectives. This has resulted in very good interactions with both Landcare and NRMs, such as the South-west Catchment Council, the Peel-Harvey Catchment Council and Wheatbelt NRM.

What we have found is that, in conjunction with our cornerstone investor *Commonland*, the groups have been very effective in identifying how they can collaborate to bring the NRMs, the WA State Government and the academic institutions together. We conducted a very successful forum that brought 200 people from different sectors together to talk and exchange ideas. I observed a genuine consensus that we all need to come a little closer and improve our coordination, as we pursue positive change. Constructive discussion and good communication will help us promote and extend regenerative agriculture and to revitalise regional communities. This collaborative approach is critically important and it must extend over the long-term. By integrating and working together, positive things will happen, in contrast to the effects of operating in isolated compartments.

**FDI – WOA has not been operating for long and noting that regenerating landscapes is a long process, 20 years, are you able to identify any changes that would indicate successes in the short-term?**

**Dr Cole** – I have seen it already in the work that regenerative farmers have been doing for over 15 years. You can identify clear differences in their soil and landscapes and also sense an enthusiasm about the way they are farming. As an example of how things are changing, I have noticed that the small, sporadic, rainfall that has recently been occurring during the summer, causes pastures to come to life very quickly. There are, literally, little islands of green in fields of grey and brown. You can also see changes where farmers have planted interconnecting shrub rows; more birdlife and insects are evident. By just looking at their soils, you can see that these appear more friable and aerobic; as opposed to being hard and compacted, which would indicate poor health.

From farmers I have found that there is a general sense of engagement. There is also a desire to talk about how well their farms are going when regenerative practices are introduced and a recognition that they are contributing to positive changes. Our meetings bring about some interesting conversations, which further lead to community and social cohesion; people start to think and talk about their farming practices within a wider network.

From the WOA perspective and as a conclusion to our discussion, we are a for-profit entity aimed at achieving results using the 4R framework, through achieving measurable positive outcomes for each of the financial, social, natural and inspirational returns. To do that, we have developed a very thorough monitoring database, which allows us to identify the indicators that show we are making a change. For the natural return, the indicators we have chosen to measure are soil health, water quality and biodiversity. These are tangible indicators. For instance, for soil health we are looking at carbon stocks, biological content and organic matter. Of course, changes will take time, up to 20 years, so for now we can only measure short-term rather than long-term trends.

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**About the Interviewee:** Dr Ben Cole is an experienced manager, founder and entrepreneur in social and environmentally responsible companies. He has over 20 years of experience in business development fields. Ben has been a project manager for public and private funds up to \$30m with multi-national agencies.

Prior to joining the United Nations as a senior project manager (2011 to 2014), Ben founded a business in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2007. Ben identified the market gap and built the business into a large employer of people with disadvantaged backgrounds. It recorded increases in both revenue and profitability during his ownership of the business. The business and IP were sold to a Vietnamese national in 2014.

Ben holds a PhD in environmental engineering and has published in peer reviewed scientific journals.

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*Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International. The views of the interviewee are his personal view as author of the book and are not of his current and past employers.*

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