

## INTERVIEW WITH RHONDA ALEXANDER

5 June 2000

(Tape 15\_BC\_DV)

**It's Tape 15 for camera. We're still in the middle of Tape 7, I think it is, for DAT. It's Trish FitzSimons recording, Erica Addis on camera, 5 June and we're interviewing Rhonda Alexander in June Jackson's lounge room.**

Okay, so Rhonda, what do you see as the most important environmental issues facing the Channel Country and what kind of local activities are you involved in to address those needs?

R At the moment I think it would be chemicals and woody weeds. Probably woody weeds to start with because there are a lot of woody weeds coming down the channels and because cattle ... there's far more movement of cattle and sheep, and also of road trains, shifting stock around, that they can actually get the seed and bring it into this area very easily, and without us knowing. And then, apart from clogging up the rivers and that, and the country, when you want to export cattle or sheep out of the country you can't get them out because of the ... bur has a bur on it about this size and you've got to get a stock inspector in to go right through it. So with the Channel Country at the moment, I would say woody weeds is probably one of the biggest problems. Chemicals is another one because a lot of them want to spray these sort of things and if you've got cattle or sheep that are organically grown, you cannot have chemicals of any sort around them for the export trade. And then the other thing, possibly, is the management of your stock, that you don't have too many stock on that you eat out the property, or eat out the country. Introduction of exotic grasses, things like that which will actually take over from the native grasses is another thing that's going to be a problem. And if you get into the Cooper which will come up no doubt, with Sandy Kidd, is the harnessing of water and at the moment we're now looking at a draft paper for water management in the Georgina and Diamantina catchment and we haven't finished that yet. We're just looking at it at the moment, because we don't have a problem with the water, whereas in the Cooper they actually have licences for the water and

they want to grow cotton in the area, and cotton brings with it chemicals and other insects, stuff like that.

I So tell me the range of organisations, you listed them off before, that you've been involved with.

R Well, there's the ICPA which is Isolated Children's Parents Association, which is probably one of the most important ones of all because that's the education of our children and I've been with ... well I started our branch up 25 years ago and I'm President at the moment, and that's for geographically isolated children. It's getting them an education that is equivalent to children in the city. No better, just equivalent to what they've got. I'm Secretary of our Landcare group which covers 142,000 square kilometres. I'm Vice-President of our Georgina-Diamantina Catchment which comes into the Lake Eyre Basin. In other words, we sort of have to look after the Lake Eyre itself and that basin is one-sixth of Australia. There was a time when they were going to try and lock it up as National Heritage and we fought like anything not to, so what we do now is we're monitoring the rivers, we're looking after the woody weeds, doing everything like that so that we can go back to the government and say 'Look, we are doing this. We are looking after our land and we're going to go on doing it'. So we're really fighting for that at the moment. I'm Secretary of the Historical Society, Secretary of the Camp Draft. What else is there?

No, no, I'm not in the Golf Club. And President of the PCAP for this western area, Priority Country Area Program.

I Somebody has put to me the idea that often in rural areas it's the women that particularly take the running on environmental questions, and certainly on the small farm I grew up on, it was my mother that was much stronger on that stuff than my father. Do you think that's a general thing here or are you working as much with men as with women on these environmental questions?

R I would say that I'm working with more men but the women would be as strong, if not stronger, and the coordinator for the whole Lake Eyre Basin is a woman.

I Who's that and where's she based?

R She's Kate Andrews from Longreach. But on a whole, no, I think on a whole women are probably the stronger ones but it could be because they may have a little more time. Like my husband couldn't come in today for the meeting because he's working. So the women are taking up where the men can't actually go, even though they want to. So it becomes a partner thing.

I Now it's interesting. You're the manager of land. Well, your husband's the manager and clearly you're incredibly involved in the management. I guess two questions I'd have about that. One is, put very bluntly, what drives you to look after somebody else's land? You know, like I guess the land belongs to the shareholders of NAPCO.

R It's got nothing to do with NAPCO. I just like the land. Full stop. It just has something about it. You know, you can go outside, even just to empty the pot of tea outside on the trees. At Marion, where I empty the tea out you look over the river and up to the hills, and it's beautiful. You just stand there and look at it. And that's just ... I see that every day, five times a day, just when I do the meals. No, it's just the land. It has nothing to do with NAPCO. But then I do go back to NAPCO and say 'Right, we've got to do this, this and this' and it mostly works.

I And is the fact that you're not on a wage individually for that, because that's obviously vital work, actually, for the shareholders of NAPCO, is looking after this resource – and I'm not suggesting that's why you're doing it. I hear what you're saying. But is the fact of not being on a wage for doing that work, does that rankle?

R No. No. What does rankle is that I'm not treated as a partner with my husband. I'd rather be paid ... I would rather my husband and I were paid as a team. We're not. My husband is paid as the manager and he's expected to

do everything with the books, the managing and that. The wife looks after the mundane things such as the house and the garden and things like that. So, yes. No I'd rather see it as a teamwork thing.

I It's not the first time I've heard this opinion put. Is there any kind of movement to try and edge the companies in this direction or do you feel ... like, together with other wives from the company, for instance, is there any push that it should be like a management team?

R Yes. NAPCO wives are all shoving – hard. I don't think we're getting too far at the moment but because I know there are other companies that have already moved that way and it does seem to be a happier environment.

I So which are the companies that have started to do that?

R AA Company is the one that I know of in particular. And Kidmans are sort of looking at it. But, yeah, there are other big properties. I think [Hightsbury??] did look at it too but I'm not really sure because I haven't had much to do with them lately. But I know AA, the manager and his wife are employed as a team and, yes, NAPCO wives are shoving very hard but we're not getting too far, I don't think.

I Would it ever be the case that a man be employed as a manager if he was not married, with his wife?

R Yes.

I Single men are employed?

## **SIDE B**

R Yes. And sometimes it works. I don't think it's always to the good of the homestead area but then that's a priority, I think, NAPCO and some companies have got to look at, is what do they want. Do they want the profits which come off the land and a single manager can certainly do that, no problems at all, because he does have his head stockman, he has his men

and everything like that. But, bring it to the other side, which is the homestead area. Does that go down the hill so that you've got rundown areas, homestead areas, whatever you want, which, yeah, I don't think it's to the best of the company, or even to the rural area, full stop.

I Is there anything – I know you need to get away – is there anything I haven't asked you about that you feel passionate about for a general audience to understand about what drives women of the Channel Country? Or you? You know, that's probably too big a question. You. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that seems really central to your life and what drives you?

R The country. The life. Community. Your children. Ummm, and I guess I just can't sit down and see things happen. I've got to get in there and sort it out. But I'm not what you'd call a person who rushes there and says 'We've got to do this'. I like to listen to everyone else's opinion and sort it all out like that.

I You're a good committee worker?

R Probably. I seem to be there a bit. And, no, I think it's just the life, full stop. I just love the life because I like stock work even. I used to do a lot of stock work but then once I had my third child I sort of felt 'Oh, okay, I'd better come home and teach him', whereas with the older two, I used to take them and teach them in the vehicle or sit them in the laundry and teach them there, or take them with me down the creek, wherever I was going. So they were a part of me, more so than my younger one, in that they had a wider vision of what was going on, whereas the younger one ... I don't know whether it was old age or laziness or what, but anyway he sort of had more formal education at home and I don't think it's done any better for him. In other words, I'm not in agreeance with putting kids in a classroom completely. I think they need to get out and be practical and look after themselves. So that's my way of saying ... teaching kids is get them into the practical side of the world and then they can actually see the environment as well. And they can hear Mum and Dad talking about 'Oh, the country's getting a bit dry, isn't it? We'd better get those cattle out of this paddock', things like that. Whereas, if

they're in the classroom, they're not actually seeing it and I think that's where they're losing out, and I would say that's what I did with my younger child. He's lost out on the practical side. He's had the formal education.

I Last question. Floods, droughts, dust storms. Tell me the biggest stories, like the biggest issues you've had to deal with of crises and events from this climate and environment.

R There isn't any, I guess. I suppose ... a little boy died in my arms eight years ago and there was just my son and myself there. My husband was away. There was no men on the station. From a motorbike accident. The Flying Doctor wouldn't come down because he was dead, or had died while they were en route, and they said no it wasn't their job any more. That would probably be the biggest thing that changed my life around, in that just to get in there and get something done. And the other time, I guess, was ... I've never, ever worried about my children in the fact that if they got sick or anything like that, because I always thought 'Oh, well, I can cope with it'. And they didn't get sick much. So isolation wasn't a big issue there, with my children when they were babies. I think that was probably the biggest one, in the fact that I was by myself, but I've kicked myself into gear and I've got going again, and I keep thinking to myself 'Well, what would he have liked me to do? What can I do for him because he's not here any more?' So I get on with that, and the other thing is my husband crashed his plane two years ago. So that threw me into a bit of a flat spin, and he got out and he said ... I was fixing him up on the floor and he said 'Well, do this. Have you packed my bag yet?' and I thought 'Oh, yeah, righto. You're okay. You're going to live' and that was it. So, yes. And looking after the men. You can strangle them one day and kick them up the bum the next day and then if they get sick, well you look after them.

Oh, and we lost Bobby Moses. How long ago was that? He was a white man that was incredible. He was an alcoholic, the worst alcoholic you could ever imagine. He absolutely adored my kids and would do anything for us. He got on the grog and he went to a man and said 'There's a million dollars in there. Would you look after that?' He had nothing in his hand and that

person that he went to couldn't see that he needed help, and he perished, and we've never found him. And, yes, that's probably the saddest.

I He was murdered?

R No, he wasn't murdered. He perished. Because he wandered off in the DTs. But he did go to someone and say something that was extraordinary and the person that he said it to didn't realise that he was in the DTs and that he needed help, and that person didn't advise anyone, with the result that Bobby Moses just went off into the country and just perished, and we've never found him to this day. So that's probably the saddest thing.

I And so this was one of the workers on Marion?

R Yes.

I So as the manager's wife, you probably, although you couldn't have done anything, took it to heart in some way?

R Mmmm. It was sad because we haven't found him yet. We haven't actually put him to rest, you know. Those are the sort of things. Those are the sad things. With Matt, Matt's the little boy that died. He's the sort of a person, that it's something that's got me going.

I This is not ... you were with Liz and ... this is not Liz's Matt?

R Yes.

I Matt died in your arms?

R Yes. And my younger son, David, he was the one that brought him home and he was an absolute incredible child, my son. He sat with Matt the whole time. But that to me is a challenge to do something for Matt. And then there's ... and my husband was just 'I'll strangle you now', because he sort of crashed the plane and then he started telling me what to do. So, no, I suppose those are the three things, apart from my little grandkid and kids getting married and giving you grey hairs. All those things but I think they're all pretty normal.

I Well you'd better get back and cook for them there men. That was fantastic. Thank you very much.

R By the clock, oh yeah.

I Okay. So just tell me your schedule from now till you go to sleep, Rhonda. What are you going to do?

R I'm going to drive home, which is about three-quarters of an hour and, hopefully, the stew's okay. Thicken the stew. Put the vegetables on for, what, nine of us, and make a pudding for them. And then after tea, wash up.

I What sort of pud?

R Don't know yet. I've got to get home and do it. And probably get something ready for breakfast and then I'll probably go to bed about 10 o'clock because I'll do a few things in the house and that's about it for tonight. And then tomorrow morning it'll probably be ... I'm not sure whether it'll be 6 o'clock breakfast or half past six breakfast, and lunches enough for the boys.

I So your husband will tell you what time he needs breakfast to suit the work program?

R Yes. And that's okay. Like, we can start at half past five some mornings. Half past six is our general time but he'll just come in and say 'We'll need breakfast at so and so time and all the boys want lunches today' or 'All the boys will be home for lunch today', things like that. And then out of the blue he'll say 'And you'd better cut some lunch for me too'.

I Okay.

**END OF TAPE**