

Drinking to success – wine for wetlands



Banrock Station's wetland before (1993) and after restoration (2005). M. Harper, I. Vardaro

If the adage 'you are what you eat – and drink' applies to wine, then the value that one wine brand places on conservation can help you bring visible benefits to the environment with every sip.

Banrock Station winery was established in 1994 with the aim of rehabilitating an area of wetland along the River Murray system in South Australia which had been degraded by decades of overgrazing.

Located about two and a half hours north of Adelaide, the viticulture operation embraced cultivation in the most sustainable way possible, by concentrating on water conservation in what has been a notoriously over-managed river system. From there its efforts have grown, with great success internationally.

A key aspect of the company's marketing is that it makes a donation to an environmental conservation project for every bottle of wine sold. To date the company has invested almost \$6 million in more than 100 environmental projects in 13 countries where its wine is sold. These include:

protection of the toki, or Japanese crested ibis, now found only in small numbers in Shaaxi Province, China; polar bear research by the Norwegian Polar Institute; and habitat restoration and a fish-stocking project in Ontario, Canada, called 'Bring back the salmon'. Thirty per cent of total donations remain in Australia while 70 per cent are spent on overseas environmental projects.

As a result of its 'sustainable practice' policy, Banrock Station, which is part of the

Constellation Wines group, now claims to be one of the world's most powerful wine brands based on figures taken from an annual study of the world's top wine and spirits companies.¹

Pivotal to this success has been a consistent wine quality along with efficient and conservative water use in the vineyard, and a 1000-hectare showpiece wetland which was listed as a 'Wetland of international importance' by the Ramsar Convention in 2002. That year, Banrock Station also won a Ramsar award for one of the world's best examples of 'Wetland wise use'.

The Banrock Station vineyards have ISO 14001 certification for their environmental management system but are not wholly organic.

'It is possible to have organic cultivation on any individual vineyard but since we have a grower base that takes in about 700 irrigators to source our product, it's not possible for us to be certified organic,' Banrock Manager Tony Sharley explains.

In 2007 Banrock Station wetland was deliberately dried out to try to mimic the seasonal cycle of drying out and flooding which had been present before 1925, when the wetland was made artificially perpetually full. The soil responded with deep cracking allowing oxygen back in and nutrients to be restored.

However, due to water shortages in the Murray River, the wetland remained dry for 18 months – a year longer than planned – until Banrock was granted a refill volume of 617 megalitres when the government fulfilled a responsibility to guard the wetland's Ramsar protected status.

Each year now, more than 100 000 people visit the Banrock Station Wine and Wetland Centre, opened in 1999, to experience the interpretative trails and boardwalks, as well as enjoy a tippie of the product. Both in Australia and overseas, this public support for Banrock Station's initiatives underlines how by doing environmental good, companies may also do well.

● **Christine Williams**



More information:
Banrock Station, www.banrockstation.com

¹ In 2008 Banrock was ranked 13th most powerful wine and spirit brand in the world by a UK valuation firm, Intangible Business.