



ABOVE: Cauliflowers (Photo: Peter Maloney)

The Esperance Growers' Markets; more than fresh, local produce

Some eight hours drive from Perth WA, in a region that is internationally renowned for its wetland environments, Esperance is a vibrant rural community realising the full benefits of having its own growers market.

Introduction

Growers' markets provide small landholders with an outlet to sell their locally produced and value-added products and provide a direct link to consumers who can access fresh, locally produced products. Growers' markets (otherwise referred to as farmers' markets) have been rapidly growing in popularity since the early 2000's. But aside from the fresh food, there are a range of benefits that come from a growers' market.

Through information provided by Rose Riley, founding EGM coordinator, small business owner, EGM stallholder and Esperance Regional Forum Chairperson, this case study:

- Traces the evolution of the Esperance Growers Markets (EGM),
- Provides an insight into how the markets are managed and operated now,
- Presents the opportunities and challenges for the EGM, and
- Suggests potential future activities and actions by EGM.

Focus area

The Shire of Esperance is located on Western Australia's southeast coast, about 725 kilometres from Perth by road. With a population of just over 14,000, the Shire has one of the lowest population densities to be found anywhere. The environmental and agricultural aspects of the Shire are a significant part of its heritage, values and identity.

Agriculture is the predominant land use with broad acre agriculture specifically contributing significantly to the region's economy and being the largest employment industry (GEDC, 2016).

In more recent years, there is an increasing trend for small landholdings (properties under 100 hectares). The Shire now has proportionally more individual small landholders than broad acre farmers. These small landholdings are generally located within a 30 to 50 kilometre radius of the town of Esperance and within the lower reaches of the catchments of the world renowned and highly valued environmental assets of Lake Warden and Lake Gore.



ABOVE: Some of the locally grown produce available (Photo: Dorothy Henderson)

Evolution

In Esperance, the impetus for the development of a local growers' market was a very successful, one-off local food market which was held during Esperance's Festival of the Wind in 2011. Rose remarks that "it was so good we had to get a regular one going". During initial discussions, the concept of a regular growers' market in Esperance was met with some scepticism. However, through the dedication and passion of Rose Riley and Dorothy Henderson along with the support of the local Esperance IGA supermarket (formerly Duncs Supa IGA) and a range of growers, the inaugural EGM event was held in December 2011. The IGA supported the event by providing a venue and covering the insurance. Regular markets were held on Sundays with up to 45 stallholders supporting the initiative. Markets were held every 3 weeks, with more in summer and less in winter. Attendance by consumers was supportive of this format. After running for 18 months, a culmination of factors including; volunteer burnout, lack of appropriate level of organisation, and the host venue ownership changing hands, the markets were closed.

While Rose Riley admits that it was difficult to make the decision to close the markets, the process of recognising these issues was an important step; she reflects that "the

need to get the vehicle right for the management and sustainability of the markets was crucial".

While the EGM stalls were not open, Rose comments that "there was something of a groundswell in local-food happening". The rising popularity of growers markets continued across Australia. As of September 2016, there were over 170 markets recognised by the Australian Farmers' Markets Association, of which 20 were located within Western Australia (AFMA, 2016). This trend was supported locally and during 2015, demand for the EGM to be revived grew from the growers themselves, spearheaded by Yvette Mansted and Anne O'Neill.

During Autumn 2015, a small group formed with growers Yvette Mansted and Anne O'Neill, Esperance Regional Forum (ERF) representatives and market founders (Dorothy Henderson and Rose Riley), Amy Vickers from Nulsen Progress Association and Tiff Brown from RoadWise, Esperance. Together, this group formed a plan to investigate a venue for the markets, insurance and grant options. By December 2015, they had secured catalytic funding of \$1,300 from RoadWise for marketing and running costs. They also formed partnerships with the Nulsen Primary School to use the school on Saturday mornings (with the school covering the insurance requirements) and the Esperance Regional Forum who hosted the EGM as a project.

KEY MESSAGES

1. The EGM are driven by the Esperance small landholder growers and a dedicated and passionate volunteer committee who are supported by the Esperance Regional Forum.
2. Growers want and need consistency, regularity and longevity from the EGM. This supports their business and land use objectives. The planning and management has been put into place to allow EGM to provide for this.
3. There are a raft of benefits available which are being realised by the Esperance community as a result of the EGM. These are broadly economic, social, health and environmental in nature.

Current management

The EGM resumed operation in January 2016 and has been running once per fortnight from 9.00am to 11.00am on the grounds of the Nulsen Primary School ever since. The stalls are open from 9.00am to 11.00am, no matter the weather conditions. There are approximately 20 to 30 stalls at each market day with approximately 300 to 500 consumers in attendance. On occasions when special events are hosted at the markets, the number of consumers has been observed to swell to 600 to 700.

Governance and management:

One of the key issues resulting in the markets initially closing was the EGM entity itself. While there was a great degree of skill and passion in coordinating the markets, as a group the EGM was not a registered body which was restricting its ability to grow (ie: inability to access funding). The EGM are now run as a project of the Esperance Regional Forum (ERF) which is a not for profit incorporated association operating under a constitution with a volunteer board of management.

ERF's mission is to work with the community and landholders to sustain Esperance's natural assets and provide a forum and support for the adoption of natural resource management in Esperance. It was deemed that the EGM project was in keeping with the ERF's sustainability and resource management ideals. Through this structure, staff support is provided for the financial and administrative requirements of the EGM. As part of effective project management processes, ERF has established a list of objectives to ensure the smooth running of the EGM. These are:

- To encourage sustainably sourced produce from the local region,
- To market Esperance produce locally, and
- To market a regional identity for the produce of the Esperance Region.

With ERF as the parent body, the EGM has a dedicated committee of volunteers who meet on a monthly basis to discuss the detailed workings of the markets. The EGM committee have a dedicated volunteer coordinator and all EGM activities are reported back to the ERF board as required.

Rose Riley comments that while the EGM and its committee are supported by the ERF, it is the growers (stallholders) and the EGM committee that are the drivers, and she comments that "it is its own force of nature".

The community-led organic growth of the markets has been necessary for change (ie: the adoption of local-food), however ensuring the management of the markets is effective is crucial for all parties. To this end, some

basic requirements of growers have been established and implemented:

- Esperance Growers Markets Guidelines,
- Esperance Growers Markets Application and Registration Form,
- A small fee from stallholders which contributes to running costs and promotions,
- Stallholders must comply with Shire of Esperance, Health and Environment Department requirements for the operation of a temporary food stall (Application to Operate a Temporary Food Premise),
- All stallholders require their own stall product/public liability insurance (as of Oct 1st 2016), and
- Bookings are to be made with the coordinator.

The EGM are not currently a member of the Australian Farmers' Markets Association (AFMA) but are a recognised farmers' market.

Growers

The level of support for the EGM from local growers, both initially and now, is strong. Currently there are 30 growers who regularly participate in the EGM. Produce available at the markets includes:

- Local honey and beeswax,
- Locally made soy and beeswax candles,
- Seasonal vegetables, fruits and herbs,
- Manure and locally produced soil and compost,
- Vegetable seedlings, potted fruit trees and garden plants including succulents,
- Locally grown cut flowers,
- Permaculture advisor, Geoff Tonkin,
- Yirri Grove olive oil, sauces, dukkah, breads and olives,



ABOVE: Brad McMeikan from Daly Downs
(Photo: Dorothy Henderson)

- Don McKenzie olive oil,
- Beeswax food wraps,
- Preserves ie: jams and chutneys,
- Bird feeders, seed bombs and ancillary garden products,
- Natural product retailing ie: organic/natural skincare, sustainable garden products and homewares,
- Fundraising groups ie: school parent and citizen associations (P&Cs),
- Home-made foods such as soups, baked cakes, slices, quiches, breads and savoury pastries which are available to eat at the markets and take home, and
- Hot beverages.

The growers are the stallholders and with family and friends helping out, growers are supported greatly as they develop and build their enterprises and businesses. Rose Riley anecdotally comments that there has been individual growth in both production (volume and quality) and business growth in many of the stallholders. “There is a story behind every stallholder” says Rose, “particularly Yirri Grove” (Note: see complementary case study, Yirri Grove; olives and value-adding to produce an income from a small property).

Rose comments that it is recognised that the “growers want consistent and regular markets and that the EGM has longevity”.

Suggest image here (ie: recognised small landholder on their patch or at the markets).

Venue

The EGM are held on the grounds of the Nulsen Primary School. The Nulsen Progress Association and the school community have been very supportive of bringing the markets into their community to assist with dissolving negative wider community perceptions and assisting in building the social cohesion of Esperance as a whole.

Marketing and Communications

Marketing tools utilised include:

- A dedicated Facebook page which as of September 2016, is approaching 1,000 likes,
- Banners at the entrance to town on the weekend of the markets,
- Advertising in local print media for bigger events,
- Local radio advertising via community events segment,
- Esperance ABC Radio for feature stories,



ABOVE: Two local residents Victoria Brown and Lara McIntyre purchasing local produce at the markets (Photo: Dorothy Henderson)



ABOVE: One of the many stalls at the Esperance Growers Market (Photo: Dorothy Henderson)



ABOVE: All ages are involved in the stalls at the Esperance Growers Market (Photo: Dorothy Henderson)

- Word of mouth,
- Shire of Esperance newsletter, and
- Through individual grower/ stallholder advertising and marketing.

While Rose Riley does not consider that the EGM is a brand within itself (no formal logo or branding), she recognises that “the markets means different things to different people” and that EGM has a “good referral network and that in terms of a brand, EGM is linked to the local-food movement”.

Rose maintains that two-way communication between the EGM committee and the growers/ stallholders is very important to maintain the integrity and reputation of the EGM. Rose admits that it is the collaborative approach which has resulted in the successes of the markets thus far.

The EGM market guidelines and registration processes are also important to maintain the integrity of the markets for the benefit of the growers and the consumers.

Consumers

One of the factors that ensures the effectiveness and success of a particular market is addressing the particular nature of that area. For an isolated rural community such as Esperance, whereby fresh produce in the major supermarkets is sourced from Perth, the local-food movement is of particular benefit in consideration of freshness and sustainability issues (ie: food-miles).

Prior to the EGM there was very little opportunity for local people to buy locally grown food and where they could, generally great travel was required. The markets provide a venue for Esperance consumers (and visitors) to be able to access these products in the one location.

The EGM provides a community event and in being held on a Saturday morning (when sports are played in town), it also offers an opportunity for outer lying community members to participate when they travel in.

Monitoring and evaluating success

The progress and effectiveness of the EGM is evaluated informally through:

- Facebook likes and numbers of interactions,
- The amount and quality of the produce being available at the markets on a regular basis,
- Growth in grower businesses being observed, and
- Numbers of stall holders and consumers attending.

Opportunities

Farmers’ markets provide many unique benefits that give them a strong competitive advantage and distinct

identity over other mainstream food retailers. This factor is critical to ensure benefits continue and accrue for the growers, consumers, wider community, economy and environment of Esperance.

Economic and business benefits

Through the EGM, small landholder growers in the Esperance area are provided with a ready-made, low cost marketplace to sell their produce direct to consumers. Profit margins can be greater through reduced freight costs and ability to set pricing (bearing in mind farmers are generally price takers, not price setters). Diversification of income is an attraction for small landholders and direct access to consumers provides for on-site cost effective market research for product, brand and business development.

Rose Riley sees the EGM as an opportunity for small landholders to transition their food production from hobby to business. The business incubation aspects and networking with other small landholders and small businesses in their various stages of development is a very positive outcome of the EGM and for the whole Esperance community.

From a consumer’s point of view, the pricing of local produce can be better in that the middlemen costs are absent.

Ideas and opportunities for community projects such as community gardens, events and value-added businesses can continue to flow from the EGM supporting wider community economic benefits. Generally, growers’ markets can complement existing and neighbouring business by generating consumer traffic and providing competition in the market place.

Environmental benefits

The EGM has a strong environmental perspective to bring wider environmental issues in to the mainstream and allow for customers and growers to see how their individual, everyday actions can play a part in overall environmental sustainability objectives.

There are opportunities for reduced packaging and ‘food mile’ transportation through the markets which represents and supports the “think global, act local” ethic.

Again, the networking amongst grower provides opportunities for small landholder knowledge growth and transfer on natural resource management issues which is why an alliance with ERF represents a good partnership for growers, consumers, the wider community and the Esperance environments.



Health benefits

The concept of bringing the community together around a fresh and local-food movement provides for the education and acceptance of the importance that fresh local produce makes, to not only an individual's health, but also the health of the wider community.

Rose Riley comments that "there have been many local stories told of improvements to people's health from healthier eating adopted as a result of accessing their groceries from the EGM".

Grower's markets can assist in teaching children about food origin and food nutrition, particularly in this case where there is a close association with the Nulsen Primary School.

Social benefits

As a community event, the EGM offers the opportunity for interaction between consumers and producers and increasing consumer satisfaction knowing they can support 'local'.

The EGM are very inclusive and engage a variety of people from within Esperance, as well as visitors. It provides a relaxed environment to support inclusion and interactions and Rose Riley confirms that "there is a mix of all ages of people who really enjoy the social aspect of the markets".

The EGM also support the maintenance of important social ties, linking rural and urban populations. Through the creation of a unique and regular calendar event, there are obvious opportunities to increase town pride and support tourism.

The synergy with the Nulsen Primary School environment has been greatly beneficial to the wider community. A newly built permaculture garden at the school around the time of the reopening of the EGM is now the centre piece around which the markets stalls are arranged.

The garden caretaker, Geoff Tonkin, is the local permaculture teacher who kindly volunteers and stays after the markets to provide guided tours and advice to interested market goers.

Challenges

With a project that supports small landholder growers, but provides so much more, there are challenges to ensure that this revitalised version of the EGM is sustainable. Particular challenges are:

- Provision of electricity to all stalls and vans during the markets,
- Space and shade being limited,
- The venue is not suitable for livestock,
- Venue is out of town which has reduced potential benefits of passer traffic to neighbouring businesses,
- Growers are mostly small home businesses rather than small-medium enterprises,
- Providing the flexibility to allow for organic growth of the EGM whilst ensuring the governance is at a level to ensure the sustainability and longevity of the markets, and
- From a catchment health management point of view, ensuring small landholders are aware of their land management obligations and how their actions on their properties have a direct impact on the health of not only their land, but the whole catchment is challenging. (NOTE: The ERF has a number of projects and are the vehicle for coordinating catchment wide projects and the EGM provides a network for sharing of natural resource management experiences and knowledge. All Growers are encouraged to read: A guide to soil sampling for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance and A guide to property planning for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance for further information).

The future for EGM

To enhance the EGM further, Rose suggests that the following options could be considered:

- Economic modelling to more fully assess the social, economic and environmental benefits of the EGM,
- Improved monitoring and evaluation of EGM ie: gathering more data about growers and consumers,
- Utilising and building on the strengths of the ERF to ensure regional environmental and economic sustainability,
- Looking into how to engage support for growers to build their sustainability practices, knowledge and capacity to produce,
- Growers market becomes its own entity rather than under another group's banner,
- Potential for a paid coordinator although opinion on this is divided,
- Enhancing and building partnerships to help coordinate and run events, build capacity as well as working in with and learning from other successful local agricultural groups in the region,
- Small business support and the role the EGM may have in this to support its grower members,
- Regulatory matters (ie: quality assurance), and
- Brand development and marketing of EGM.

Rose Riley now reflects on the EGM as an initial founding coordinator and feels that the markets are their "own entity that belongs to everyone".

Acknowledgements

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References

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Other resources in this series:

- A guide to property planning for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance.
- Yirri Grove; olives and value-adding to produce an income from a small property.
- A guide to soil sampling for small landholders in the Shire of Esperance.

