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Award-winning farmer Simon D'Aubrey and neighbouring community farmer John Gumede discuss sugarcane awaiting transport to the Amatikulu mill.



Award winner champions people and nature

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Despite the massive challenges facing South Africa's sugarcane farmers, Kwanalu's Young Farmer of the Year for 2019 remains true to his vision of improved land use, and an ethical and supportive relationship with his staff and neighbouring community.



Checking the health of the organic lemon trees

KwaZulu-Natal's 2019 Kwanalu Young Farmer of the Year Simon D'Aubrey is quintessentially a new generation farmer.

He is young, well-travelled and educated, and feels deeply about the part he can play in promoting socio-economic justice in farming while shouldering the responsibility he believes he holds to promote best practice in agricultural production.

Daily, he questions his role in making sure he is able to balance running a viable and ethical agri-business, while paying a fair wage and supporting the villagers and communities bordering his Zululand property.

Equally, since taking over the Arcadia Estate in the rolling hills of Entumeni, west of Eshowe, D'Aubrey has made remarkable progress in aligning his operation with the industry's sustainable farming benchmarking system, SUSFARMS. Just one aspect of the evidence is the return of wetlands, riverine forests and species of animals and birds that are endemic to the region.

And while the young farmer may have returned five years ago to the farm that has remained in his mother's family for three generations, he and his American-born wife Emily and their two children have walked a tough road to get where they are today.

"The plan was that I would return home from the States where I was working. My uncle, who was farming the land at that

time, would be my mentor with the idea that a management company would be formed to allow me, over time, to acquire a stake in the business. But it didn't work out like that. Just three years into the mentorship period my uncle said he and my aunt wanted to sell up and retire to Ballito. We had a big decision to make," D'Aubrey said.

The couple used their Christmas break visiting Emily's family in the United States to think through their options.

"I remember arriving back in South Africa from the snow and cold in the US to a blistering January in Zululand. I can't say we were optimistic, we had no doubt the challenge ahead was huge. I had spoken to many people, rehashed the budget several times to make sure it worked, and then the support of the community and my neighbours was just incredible during that time. We had managed to raise the sale price through the help of family and a loan from the Land Bank. The sugar price was really good. The rainfall had been above average. The worst drought in living memory had come and gone, I thought it would be easy."

But, it was 2016: the slide to the lowest world sugar price in more than a decade was looming, and the arrival of thousands of tons of cheap sugar into South African ports on the back of an inadequate import tariff was under way. As if that weren't enough, the South African government then instituted its Health Promotion Levy on sugary drinks, precipitating a crisis in the sector.

It is these very circumstances that bring into relief the extraordinary commitment and dedication by this young family, who have taken a farm in need of fresh energy and turned it into a model more than worthy of the Kwanalu accolade.

Before taking over the operation, D'Aubrey, who has a B-Tech degree in agriculture and a degree in property development, with honours in construction management, worked on some major development projects in KwaZulu-Natal.

"The years that I worked in the industry really served me well as I learned how to manage big projects that required an eye for detail and precision. I also learned to work with teams," he said.

While describing himself as "not your typical farmer" and someone who questions every day whether he is doing enough for his community and his land, D'Aubrey is bringing new thinking to the operation.

"We have fantastic soils and an average of 1 200ml of rain a year in a good season – during the drought we averaged 700ml a year. So I am working on diversifying our income stream away from sugarcane to alternate crops such as organic lemons, avocados and hemp – although sugarcane will remain the primary crop for the next decade while we wait for

the alternatives to show true promise. I also run an indigenous tree nursery with my brother, a landscaper in Durban. At the moment 90% of the farm is planted to sugarcane with 8% dedicated to timber and 1% to contracting and bottled water, firewood and cash crops on fallow land.”

While he waits for his license to produce hemp on a commercial scale, D’Aubrey has planted up a test site to establish the feasibility of the crop in the prevailing conditions and has a plan to grow his avocado orchard to 50ha over the next five years.

“My philosophy is to be kind to the land, honour my employees and be open to change. I am trying to work with our eco-systems and in time, to improve them. My aim is to use fewer harmful insecticides and weedicides and to remove the alien vegetation. I am planting indigenous trees and all replant cane fields are currently being pulled back 5m from the water courses. The wetlands in the valley areas are under rehabilitation. I believe that the new generation of farmers will have to be innovative to maintain yields and be able to provide food to a market that is very aware of what it eats, where it comes from and how it is grown and processed,” he said.

And while this is the theme running through D’Aubrey’s conversation as he points out the different aspects of his fields, the depth and quality of the soils, while checking the leaves on the organic lemon trees for disease and explains why some fields are fallow after the discovery of the sugarcane longhorn stem borer – a relatively new pest in South Africa’s sugar crop – it’s in conversation with the neighbouring smallholder farmers that his attitude to transformation and socio-economic investment becomes apparent.

Small-scale sugarcane farmer John Gumede stops weeding his field of madumbi or yam plants to greet D’Aubrey. The two immediately start discussing the matter of some harvested sugarcane waiting to be loaded and transported to the mill on a nearby loading zone.

“I was born here,” Gumede said. “My father and grandfather were also born here. The vegetables we grow put the daily food on our table and the sugarcane brings in extra income, which is very important to us. *Lo mlimi osemusha usebenza kanye nathi, uyasisiza* (this young farmer is supporting us). We really appreciate his help.”

In return, D’Aubrey said he focuses on his role in transforming the farming sector by helping to prepare and maintain the sugarcane fields, while during the harvest he assists with hauling and in the off-crop, he ploughs and cuts the grass for eight smallholder farmers.

“I also assist with water supply in the drier months and firewood. I maintain the road, which we share, and provide advice on farming techniques.”

D’Aubrey serves as vice-chairman of the Eshowe/Entumeni Farmers’ Association, is the vice-chairman of the district pest and disease committee, and represents the farmers’ association at SA Canegrower meetings.

