



Anika Molesworth was moved to support climate change action following the Millennium Drought.

DR ANIKA MOLESWORTH

FORCE OF NATURE

Anika Molesworth combines her love of nature and farming with a passion for giving voice to a new generation of concerned farmers.

STORY BRON WILLIS PHOTOS PENNIE HALL

The dust is swirling in Broken Hill as a shiny, new Tesla rolls smoothly into town. A few heads turn – electric vehicles are a rarity in remote Australia. But the car's driver was never one to shy away from a different path. Thirty-four-year-old Anika Molesworth farms her family's 4,000ha property just out of town and is better known more for her environmental work than for what she drives.

"I've never been a car person," she says. "But my husband Corey [Stenhouse] is a rev-head." The couple had been waiting for the right time to invest \$75,000 in the clean-fuel alternative and decided in 2021 to bite the bullet. "Corey did it from a performance perspective. I did it from an environmental one."

The Tesla is certainly not a farm car but it copes with the cattle grid and creek crossing on the farm's driveway well. Anika looks forward to Australia's political landscape embracing electric vehicles better in the future, so that high-clearance electric vehicles with traybacks become commonplace. For the moment she is happy to keep the Tesla for town trips – and enjoy her preferred mode of getting around on foot when her farm work allows it.

Anika Molesworth still remembers when she first walked the paddocks. It was 2000, she was 12 and her parents had just bought the property. Her excitement was palpable. "Each morning I would be up at daybreak," she says. "I was so excited. I would be out there in the field, just walking. I remember as a child how wild and vast the place felt. It seemed to go on forever. I fell in love with it."

Anika is a farmer, scientist, storyteller, commentator and author, who now lives with Corey on the farm. Her book *Our Sunburnt Country* was published in September 2021

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Anika in the early days at Broken Hill, NSW, with her brothers Oliver (left) and Lachlan; Anika now lives on the family farm; raising awareness of climate change impact during a 2019 Homeward Bound trip to Antarctica with 100 women working in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine.



and she has appeared on numerous television current affairs programs.

In 2015, Anika was named the Kondinin Group and ABC Rural Young Farmer of the Year. Two years later, she was a NSW finalist for Young Australian of the Year and received the NSW Young Achiever Award for Environment and Sustainability. In 2019, the *Australian Financial Review* named her a woman of influence.

Every morning and evening Anika and her German wire-haired pointer Baxter walk the farm, the red dirt and big skies of far-western NSW seeping into their pores. “Walking through the landscape is my foundation,” she says. “Seeing the birds, smelling the fragrance – it reinforces why I’ve chosen to do the work that I’ve set out for myself.” That work entails managing the landscape – balancing farming with regeneration. And hand-in-hand with farming is her calling: to spread the message about the dire need for climate action, both for and by farmers. “Climate change and food security is just ... it’s an issue that I can’t walk by,” she says.

Anika’s father, Simon Molesworth, remembers that the young Anika had strong affinity for the landscape and animals. “From the smallest child, she had a love for nature,” he says. And so, when the family arrived at

the farm, Anika was delighted to find herself enveloped by it. She watched the birds dart from bush to bush and began a lifelong habit of drawing and painting birds.

Within 2 years, however, Anika’s family had begun to experience the Millennium Drought. Vegetation stopped growing, birds stopped calling and the family sold most of their sheep. Farmers began to pack up and leave. Even the wildlife left.

“It was starting to break my heart, going out in the paddock and seeing it so dry, seeing the dust storms roll in,” Anika says. “And that concern, that unknowing of what was actually going on, too. I remember driving and seeing these marches of emus and kangaroos – thousands of them just walking alongside the roads and through the paddocks, moving south. I remember thinking, ‘Wow, what’s happening?’”

Dust storms became a regular event, sending Anika and her parents racing around the house shutting windows and doors. “It’s overwhelming,” she says. “You see the horizon turn orange, and you feel the wind whipping up, and it’s just creeping towards you. And then this thing completely engulfs you.”

Meanwhile, Anika was completing her high school studies in Melbourne, returning to the farm with the family on school breaks and every chance she could get. High school wasn’t an easy time for



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Anika, however. “She really didn’t enjoy the classroom environment,” Corey says. “She’d much prefer to be outside with her hands in the soil. Mainstream schooling pushed a narrative that focused on a career path as a lawyer or doctor. Other paths, including farming, weren’t really represented in the image of success – and that didn’t sit well with her.”

Anika was developing a voracious appetite for learning and asking questions, building on the work ethic and social justice ethos instilled in her at home. The influence of Anika’s family was strong: Simon Molesworth, a barrister, was a founder of the Environmental Defenders Office and her mother Lindy, a botanist and geologist, was active in environmental issues in the local community.

To make sense of what she was seeing, Anika began reading voraciously. The information she found scared her. Soaring temperatures, bushfires and the diminishing ability of the land to support a farming income troubled Anika so much that she began searching for others who might share her concern. What started as a Facebook group, Climate Wise Agriculture, soon became a knowledge-sharing platform that shared stories of how farmers are impacted by climate change.

“Some people think climate change is something for the next generation to worry about, or farmers

in developing countries,” she says. “But it’s actually hurting Australian farmers now. It’s not imminent. It is here already.” These warnings could have turned Anika’s dreams to other, easier pathways. But her heart was set on farming.

“When I was younger, if you had asked me what my dream was, I would have said, ‘I want to be on the biggest property in the Northern Territory or Queensland, with endless horizons, where cattle outnumber people 10,000 to one’. I love the isolation and the quietness of it.” Anika and Corey, along with Anika’s parents, run Damara sheep, chosen for their ability to handle low water and feed. Corey works a full-time job as a mechanic in Broken Hill.

When Anika finished school, she spent a year as a jillaroo in Queensland and teacher’s aid in Ghana before deciding to make farming her career and the family farm her home. She embarked on an agricultural degree, working from the kitchen table of the farm, while the rest of the family stayed in Melbourne to allow her younger brother to complete his schooling there.

“From the moment Anika decided to ‘hold the fort’ at the farm, her affinity with the land was so strong that she couldn’t contemplate doing her degree by any means other than remotely,” Simon says. “This meant living largely alone on the farm, but that didn’t faze her.”



Anika’s affinity for the land and the animals it supports, including a pet goat, is undiminished by years of challenging times on the farm.

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Simon watched his daughter grow into someone who was willing to work for what she believed in. “Everything she’s ever done has been focused on the environment – and making this world a better place,” he says. Fifteen years later, Anika holds not just a Bachelor’s degree, but a Master’s degree and PhD in various sustainable agriculture disciplines. But she says her daily walks around the farm became the best way to process what she was learning. “I was spending my days out in the paddock, actually seeing in real life, seeing things such as the animal health and wellbeing I had been learning each day,” she says. “I was able to apply what I was learning just by walking outside.”

Anika soon discovered an ability for communicating the science of farming and climate change. After her Young Farmer of the Year Award, “people were suddenly putting their microphones in my face”. Her smile and infectious optimism that change is possible was perhaps as appealing as her powerful critique of the status quo.

Lynne Strong, founder of not-for-profit group Action for Agriculture, met Anika in 2014 when Anika applied for the organisation’s Young Farming Champions program. “It was clear from the start that Anika brought something different to the program,” she says. “When we first met her, she had a quiet, small voice, but our facilitators saw she had an inspiring story to tell. We quickly recognised we needed to amplify her voice. She’s become a confident communicator and trusted voice and she’s evidence that the world wants to hear from young people who have positive stories to tell.”

In 2015, Anika co-founded Farmers for Climate Action, a group that positions farmers as a key part of the climate change solution. She represented this group at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, with a mission to wake people up to their power to find an alternative future. It’s a hefty task, which Corey says comes at great personal cost. “Anika is so compassionate that she can’t disassociate herself from those things, even if it causes her a lot of stress,” he says.

Corey and Anika married on the farm in March 2021 after 14 years together. “We hung a thousand fairy lights in the old woolshed,” she says. They have family for support and when they really need a break, they turn to nature. “We switch off the phones, pack the swag and head to a national park to go camping and bushwalking,” Corey says. “Nothing brings more joy than a crackling camp fire, a nice drink and disconnecting from daily life.”

These days, Anika has let go of her one-time dream of a vast NT property. She knows she has a job to do and won’t walk away. “When I started talking about climate change, I learned quickly that it was a divisive topic here in Australia,” she says. “But there has been a big shift since then. Nowadays most of the farmers I talk to are on board. They want to see more being done. In a different life, I’d love to just be hanging out here in peace with my sheep and my dog. But I can’t be a silent witness to climate change, so I’m determined to speak out and see the changes made that are needed.”



Anika’s lived experience of the impact of a changing environment has made her more determined to lend her voice to the campaign for action.