

*Remembering Rain*

Synopsis

IN THE FACE OF THE WORST DROUGHT ON RECORD, rural Australians have gambled their dreams on the chance of rain – and cracks are starting to show in more than just the parched earth. *Remembering Rain* introduces us to the people of the bush and offers us a glimpse into their lives, their hopes and their fears as they attempt to weather the crisis.

These are tough times for families on the land. Prices are low, expenses high. After more than three years without useful rain, many are deep in debt and considering cutting their losses and selling up. But who would want to buy in this climate? And what is happening to the communities left behind? Could this be the end of an era? It's a predicament that many are facing with wry humour, pragmatism, and even stubborn optimism. The survivors are fighting to stay on the land they love, but there are difficult decisions to be made.

In *Remembering Rain* we meet the people of central western NSW as they move through the annual cycle of shearing, sheep sales and race meetings, and make plans for what they'll do if the rains come – and what will happen if they don't. The film also provides a broader perspective as it explores the environmental and economic forces that are having such a dramatic effect on the social fabric of these communities. Beautifully photographed, by turns funny and moving, this is an iconic portrait of a land and a character shaped by drought – one that questions the very viability of farming in the driest inhabited continent on earth.



Using Remembering Rain in the Classroom

> *Remembering Rain* is of specific interest and relevance to teachers and students of Agricultural Technology, English, Environmental Science, Geography and Studies in Society. The film contains some low level coarse language and teacher previewing is recommended.

Curriculum links

The documentary is appropriate for all levels of secondary students and relates to the following learning outcomes:

- Explain the impact of past and current practices on agricultural sustainability.
- Discuss the effects of drought on Australian ecosystems.
- Assess the extent to which natural processes and human activities change environments.
- Understand and appreciate the physical, biological and technological world and make responsible and informed decisions in relation to that world.
- Identify how linguistic features such as humour, anecdote or emotive language can engage audiences.

Before watching

Use an atlas or wall map to locate the NSW town of Condobolin, the main town mentioned in the documentary.

Read some of the information about drought on the website of the NSW Department of Primary Industry (see references at the end of this guide). The site provides informative and up-to-date maps of the drought situation that enable users to compare NSW drought conditions over several months.

Discuss the water restrictions that many Australian cities now have in place year round. How do these restrictions affect people's daily lives and activities? What are the different effects of a lack of water in the city and a lack of water in country areas?

Glossary of key terms

An understanding of some of these terms prior to viewing will assist overall comprehension of the documentary:

AGIST – to pay for temporary grazing rights on someone else's land

BRAHMIN – a breed of hump-backed cattle originating in India

BUSH MECHANICS – the use of rough improvisation to fix machinery

CLEARING SALE – to sell livestock and possessions when a farm goes out of business and its owners leave the land

COCKY – a slang term for farmer (usually 'cow cocky')

CONDITION – the fat and healthy appearance of well-fed livestock

CYCLE – a period of time between repeated events, e.g. flood or drought

DROUGHT – a prolonged period of low rainfall

DROUGHT ASSISTANCE – money provided by governments to farmers to help them through periods of drought

MARGINAL LAND – land that is on the verge of being suitable or unsuitable for farming, usually due to sparse vegetation and low rainfall

OFF-FARM INCOME – sources of income apart from farming, e.g. from other jobs or investments

SUPERPHOSPHATE – a type of fertiliser used to help the growth of pasture

SUSTAINABILITY – using farming practices that will sustain the land's future viability

UTE – abbreviation for utility, a type of open-backed truck

WEANER – a calf that has recently stopped feeding from its mother

WEST OF CONDOBOLIN IN NEW SOUTH WALES, EMPTY CLOUDS HANG ABOVE A HOUSE DAM THAT IS ALMOST DRY. PHOTOGRAPH BY LAVINIA RIACHI © NFSA



Chasing Dreams

I see that I've chased your dream for ten years, followed you into hotels, shearing runs, racehorses, cattle buying, wool buying and have you ever once asked me what I might want to do or where I might want to be? (Danni Ward)

Remembering Rain examines the effects of severe drought on the farming community around Condobolin in central NSW. It focuses on two families, the Wards and the Turners, and examines the reasons they have decided to stay on their land despite serious difficulties. With huge debts, no rain for months and low prices for grain and lamb, both families are struggling to survive.

What keeps people going at times like this? Why do they persevere instead of giving up and finding easier jobs? The answers come gradually throughout the film. Mark Ward and his wife Danni, and Alister Turner and his wife Heather, are all chasing their dreams. Yet they are not just dreams of material wealth, of 'getting set up for life'. There are other, more complex reasons for staying on: the joy of ownership, deep feelings for the land, and being part of a close and supportive community.

Urban dwellers will recognise these as lifestyle issues. Maybe we all dream of our own piece of land, of getting away from stress and of becoming valued members of a close-knit group. Whether it is easier to achieve these things in the country or the city



A HAT SERVES AS A MAKESHIFT DRINKING BOWL FOR CONDOBOLIN FARMER MARK WARD'S DOGS; BELOW: SCORCHED EARTH IN OUTBACK QUEENSLAND. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAVINIA RIACHI © NFSA

is debatable. The film certainly raises questions about life choices, and the fears and insecurities they often bring. When the grass is high and a crop strips 1,251 tonnes, the future seems secure, but drought can change all that. As the dream fades, you begin to wonder if you can afford to keep going.

Changed circumstances can affect marriages too. We witness the growing tension between Mark and Danni as conditions deteriorate. They argue more and there are occasions when they are so angry they cannot speak to one another. What seemed to be a shared dream is reinterpreted as one partner sacrificing for the sake of the other.

Mark and Danni are obviously at breaking point. Still, one person's lost dream can be another person's great opportunity. On the map, Danni points out neighbouring properties that are up for sale and Mark weighs up the chances of increasing his landholdings. We are left wondering if farming

is less about chasing dreams than survival of the fittest.

Activity: What makes a successful farmer?

- In small groups or as a whole class, discuss the skills, values and personal qualities needed by farmers. What makes some of them more successful than others? Does *Remembering Rain* suggest it is just a matter of good luck, or that some farmers are better suited than others to cope with the effects of drought?

Risky Business

Any farming west of the western land lease boundary that has a major emphasis on cropping is economic suicide. It's not going to work. You're just going to run out of rain ... Sure you'll get a few wins but you'll get a lot of losses. (Alister Turner)



FARMERS MARK AND DANNI WARD ON THEIR PROPERTY NEAR CONDOBOLIN. PHOTOGRAPH BY LAVINIA RIACHI © NFSA

Farming marginal land has always been risky. It is not reliable country at the best of times and now the boundaries are being pushed further west. As one farmer comments, ‘You go back twenty years, there wouldn’t have been a plough in this country and now there is.’ Although the fertile soil can burst into life once rain comes, it often remains unproductive for years. Some local farmers like to think in terms of climatic cycles and believe it is only a matter of waiting until good times come again. However, not everyone has the money or the patience to do this.

Mark Ward has \$50,000 worth of superphosphate sitting in his shed and is buying hay to feed his cattle. As a small operator who is already deeply in debt, he is at a disadvantage. The banks will not continue to supply loans forever and large farming businesses have more capital to see them through periods of hardship. Mark wonders whether he has already stayed too long.

Hardships	Rewards

Like horseracing, farming can bring financial disaster or great rewards. ‘Yeah, it’s a gamble, farming,’ says Mark. ‘You get all your ground prepared like you prepare your racehorse and you either get the money or you don’t.’ The documentary has us asking whether it is courage or foolishness that keeps these Condoobolin farmers in the district, but there is something in their attitude that wins our admiration.

As they instruct the jockeys or place their bets at the local racecourse, they demonstrate a readiness to take risks, and are prepared to accept the consequences if they lose. They are not looking for government handouts – far from it – and are realistic enough to see the possible costs to themselves and their families.

Activity: Hardships and rewards

In your workbooks, draw a chart like the chart above. After you have watched *Remembering Rain*, list the hardships and rewards that farming can involve. Compare and discuss your list with other class members.

The Australian Character

You hear so much about an Australian character and the Australian character’s still on the land. Australian character’s built on the land. (Mark Ward)

What does *Remembering Rain* tell us about national identity? Although most Australians live in major cities, many

of us continue to think of the 'typical Australian' as somebody who lives on the land. The idea may not be based on strict reality, but it has become part of an Australian legend.

This national image is still promoted in many ways. Television advertising campaigns, particularly for beer and four-wheel drive vehicles, often show outback scenes and colourful rural characters. Our souvenir shops still sell little swagman dolls with corks bobbing around their broad-brimmed hats – despite the fact that most swagmen have long disappeared from the landscape.

The legend was built up – some would say invented – over many decades. In the 19th century, Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson wrote poetry and stories about rural life, struggling farmers and skilled stockmen. Artists like Tom Roberts, Russell Drysdale and Arthur Boyd have also contributed their own

visions of the landscape and people of the bush. In the 1960s, the writer Russel Ward described the typical Australian as 'a bushman, who is, among other things, practical, courageous, taciturn, sceptical and independent, yet loyal to his mates'.¹

The documentary connects these historical images with modern reality. It does so by focusing on the rural community of Condobolin and by allowing farming families to explain their personal relationships with the land. Even though Mark Ward talks about the 'end of an era', his statement that 'Australian character's built on the land' recognizes his own role in keeping the legend alive.

Other elements of the film reveal still more about the Australian character. Some of the anecdotes people tell and the way they express themselves help to fill out the picture. Examine the wry humour in these stories and consider



how Australians use humour as a way of coping with difficult situations. Collect some examples of unique expressions such as Alister Turner's 'You could flog a flea across here and you couldn't lose him it's that bare ...' Does language like this contribute to our image of the typical Australian?

Finally, think of the way women fit into the legend. Is the Australian character essentially male or do women have a role in it too?

Activity: Australian icons

The filmmakers describe *Remembering Rain* as 'an iconic portrait of a land and a character shaped by drought'.

- While you watch the documentary, think about this description. What does the word icon mean? How do the people in the documentary fit the iconic image of the Australian character?
- Mateship, practicality and humour are traditionally regarded as parts of the Australian character. Watch the sequence about shearing at Paddy Quin's and identify some examples of these qualities.

Activity: Australian idiom

There are many examples of unique Australian language in the film. As a whole class, discuss the quotes below and explain what each of them means:

We're in for a **stinker**.
We had a pretty **crook** year in those early eighties.



CONDOBOLIN FARMER PADDY QUIN IN *REMEMBERING RAIN*. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLAN COLLINS. ABOVE: A QUIET MOMENT FOR CONDOBOLIN FARMER DANNI WARD AS SHE WATCHES HER CATTLE BEING TRUCKED OFF HER PROPERTY. PHOTOGRAPH BY MANDY CHANG. BOTH © NFSA



CONDOLIN FARMER ALISTER TURNER LOOKING AT THE SKY. PHOTOGRAPH BY MANDY CHANG © NFSA

I probably had the potential to be a **whinging bloody cocky**.
No flies on Paddy Quin.

It would certainly be a **punt** to buy the sheep now.

Since this drought, they're leaving in **droves**.

If he doesn't **come home** we're all gonna give him a bloody **hiding**.

I don't mind a bit of a **flutter**.

Inevitably they **come a gutser**.

Leaving the Land

I was born on a farm as a kid, grew up as a kid on farm and never ever envisaged that I was going to be anywhere else but on a farm. (Alister Turner)

Perhaps the saddest parts of the documentary are the scenes at the clearance sales. There are certainly bargains to be had, but the sales signify the breaking up of a community and sometimes the separation of families. Most poignant of all, a boy is selling his dog. It seems

to be the drought's final conquest and an admission of total defeat. There is also a sense that the survivors are being driven further into isolation and despair.

On a more hopeful note, we see Peter Andrews 'droughtproofing' his property *Barramul* in the Hunter Valley. There are reflections of Peter in the abundant water and scenes of fresh green grass with horses grazing contentedly. The film appears to suggest that with better techniques and better understanding of the land, farmers can avoid the worst ravages of drought. If they are to have a future, they need to adopt new measures and reduce their reliance on chance.

Activity: Climate change

We're contributing to the drought in the same way that human society's sort of drying out the landscape world-wide. (Alister Turner)

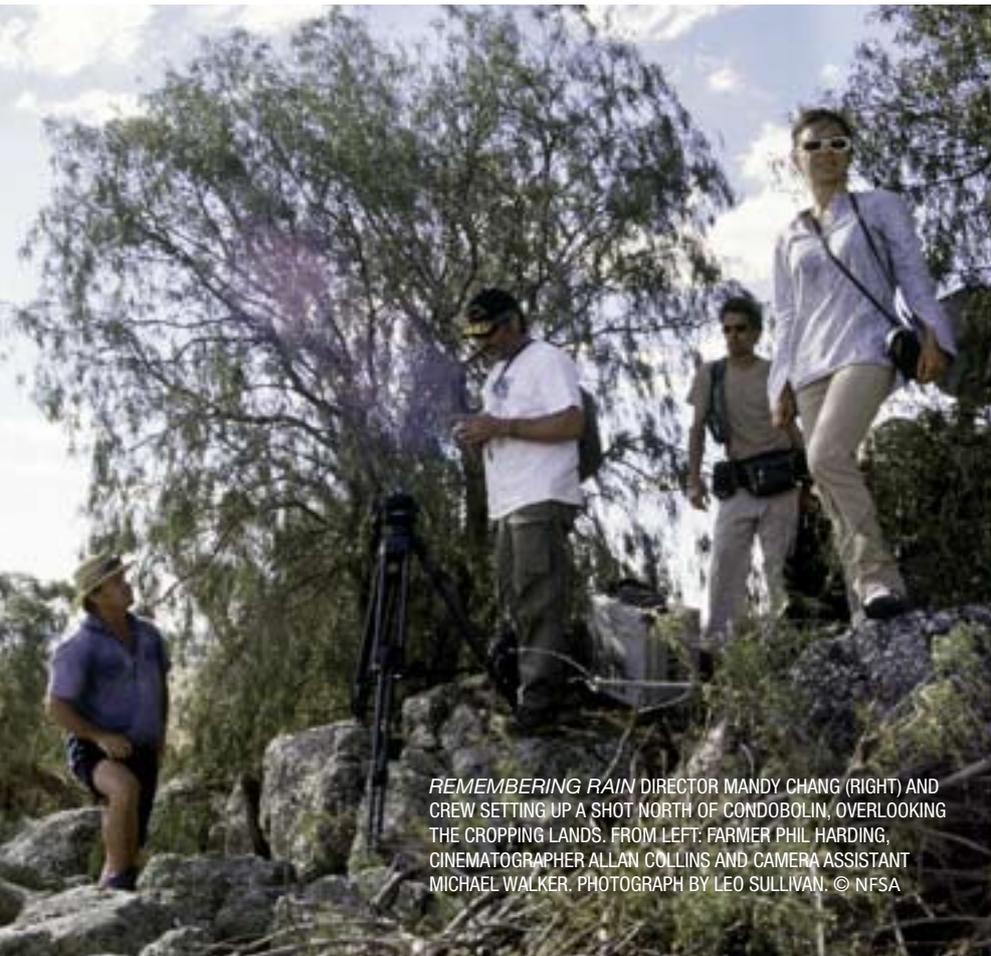
In recent years, we have heard and

read a lot about climate change, global warming and the greenhouse effect. In the above statement, Alister Turner holds human activity responsible for wide-ranging changes to the environment.

- Use the internet and your library to research the topic of climate change. Write a one-page report that:
 - defines the meaning of climate change;
 - explains what scientists believe are the causes of climate change;
 - analyses the way human life might be affected by climate change.

Techniques Used in the Documentary

While you are watching *Remembering Rain*, take careful note of the documentary's techniques and style. The filmmakers allow the farmers of Condobolin to tell their own stories



REMEMBERING RAIN DIRECTOR MANDY CHANG (RIGHT) AND CREW SETTING UP A SHOT NORTH OF CONDOBOLIN, OVERLOOKING THE CROPPING LANDS. FROM LEFT: FARMER PHIL HARDING, CINEMATOGRAPHER ALLAN COLLINS AND CAMERA ASSISTANT MICHAEL WALKER. PHOTOGRAPH BY LEO SULLIVAN. © NFSA

and use skilful editing instead of voice-overs or interviewer's questions to build an interconnected narrative. On-screen captions that identify passing months, particular people and various farms help viewers to obtain a clear sense of time and place. The subtle interpolation of music establishes mood and almost subconsciously engages viewers' emotions.

Consider too, the way close-up shots create a feeling of intimacy and permit viewers to share individuals' experiences or opinions almost as if they were in the same room. Contrast these segments with the long-range camera shots that show the vastness of the parched land and the extent of the drought. While most of the film is shot in daylight, there are also scenes taken at night. Why might the filmmakers have chosen to film some sequences at different times? What effect do these segments have on you as a viewer?

Endnotes:

¹Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Illustrated edition 1978, p.16.

References

Michael McKernan, *Drought: The Red Marauder*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005

Tom Richardson and Asa Wahlquist, 'Long Summer Burns into Farm Hopes', *The Australian*, 7-8 May 2005

NSW Department of Primary Industries: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/drought/

Sydney Water: www.sydneywater.com.au/SW/index.htm

Go to 'Water School' for the Water Saver Challenge game. See also 'Saving Water'.

Remembering Rain

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Director: Mandy Chang

Executive Producer: Penny Robins

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