Australian
Rural Leadership
Foundation

COURSE 25
FINAL REPORT

BY

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My name is Aaron Irving. I am the current Executive Chair of the Australian National Aquaculture Council Inc (NAC) and the Chief Executive for the Australian Pearl Producers Association (PPA); having moved to Western Australia from New Zealand in November 2014 to take up this role at the PPA. Prior to moving to Australia in 2014, I held a Senior Policy Advisor role for the Deepwater Group, which is the peak representative body for the New Zealand Deepwater/EEZ Fisheries Industry.

With legal experience (I have hold a law degree from Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), and a legal internship with UNICEF); I provided support to the CEO of Deepwater Group (NZ Deepwater/EEZ Fisheries) and the New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), in order to ensure the maximum, yet sustainable economic yield from New Zealand fisheries resources. As the Executive officer for the PPA and the NAC I am responsible for representing the interests of the pearling and Aquaculture Industries at various fora and implementing these interests in a number of different formats.

However, notwithstanding these current roles, I am also involved in other supporting areas of the both the Australian Aquaculture and Pearling Industries by serving on a number of advisory committees, in addition to being the aquaculture member for the AMSA Fishing Industry Advisory Committee; I am also a member of the FRDC Aquatic Animal Health and Biosecurity Sub-program Advisory Committee, the FRDC Western Australian Research Advisory Committee, the Australian Marine Park Advisory Committee for the North Western Marine Parks and the Department of Agriculture Sub-Committee for Aquatic Animal Health (SCAAH). Recently I was also on the Expert Panel for the Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade Blue Economy Challenge and recently served as the Industry Lead on the steering committee that effectuated the new Blue Economy Commonwealth Research Corporation (CRC). I am also on a number of steering committees and as well as observing some inter-governmental committees such as the Australian Fisheries Management Forum (AFMF) Aquaculture Committee.

I am very interested in the interface between development and resource management, and to this end am an advocate of a middle way. A middle way that acknowledges the entanglement of interests that surrounds the use of natural resources, and that negotiates that polemic by chartering a central course.

I am passionate about sustainable aquaculture and fisheries, the aquatic environment and the interface between the two; and understanding of course that the strategies we utilize to interact with our aquatic environment and our community lays the foundations for successful and profitable seafood industries.

It is this interest in the sustainable use of our planet's natural resources and in the human pre-disposition to develop is one of the reasons why I applied to FRDC to be a participant at the ARLP, having completed the NSILP a number of years before, I wanted to learn more from my peers in different primary sectors outside fisheries and

aquaculture. I was delighted when FRDC supported my application and doubly so when I received the call from the ARLP that I had been accepted as a participant.

The Australian Rural Leadership Program is a long course and so provides participants with numerous opportunities to find yourself in memorable situations that are either challenging, fabulous or fabulously challenging.

My ARLP experience started at the ARLP interview, where I found myself painting myself to the interview panel as sorry applicant, only to be quite surprised that I was actually accepted months later.

The course actually started on the aeroplane to Darwin for me where I met some of the WA located participants. Darwin was where we all met for the first time and were inducted so to speak, before we began the experiential learning components of the course which itself is designed to be a little like an onion, which the methodology comprising a series of layers:

- Layer 1: Looking at oneself, one's default behaviours and the perception of us and our behaviours by others in a small group context (we explored this layer in the Kimberley);
- Layer 2: Focussed on ourselves as a member of a family/ community and how we need to better understand ourselves in the context of the members of our community (we explored this layer in Toowoomba);
- Layer 3: Focussed on ourselves in a regional context, where we explored questions that we can ask in a regional context but also the questions asked by others (we explored this layer in Tasmania);
- Layer 4: Focussed on ourselves and how we interact in an international context, we explored questions and perceptions and tested them in different contexts with which more the most part we were not acquainted (we explored this layer in Indonesia); &
- Layer 5: This is the graduation component, which I understand is about leadership in a National context (we explore this final layer in Canberra). However, this final layer is also about transition.

For me the program was full of highlights both in the 'curriculum' and outside it and so having to arrive at just a few does not provide the program with enough credit.

For me, one highlight was an opportunity to have some time reflect on my own during the Kimberley session. It occurred to me how I never stop – and so having the time to do so in the most serene of contexts was almost spiritual. It is not often that we get the chance to reflect on the 'small' things (the important things):

- I have come to realise that one of my biggest problems is myself. That I take on too many obligations and by definition are not able to be totally present in all of them. What is more my focus is reduced and narrowed to outcomes

rather than actors and actions. Since this day I am fighting to simplify. And slowly it is happening.

- The ARLP program also saw us being introduced to issues from an Indigenous Australian context. As a rural New Zealander, I have always been aware of the ancient and continuous culture enjoyed by Indigenous Australians, but I have never really had the opportunity to truly engage and learn. How incredible it was to be taken through aspects of Indigenous Australian culture history from a number of levels. I loved our welcome to country ceremony in the Kimberley it was honest, real and touching. Talking about the 'contact' of cultures in a historical context was sobering and understanding the contemporary journey from my peers within our cohort was challenging – and made me realise just how little I know. A simple presentation on genetic population dynamics to look at health and genetic robusticity of transported early Tasmanians unearthed a perspective from our indigenous Australian peers that was both confronting and something I will never forget. It is important to listen. To actively listen which an ear that wants to understand and not judge. It is the judgment that that separates. As leaders we really need to break down things that separate. In maori there is an adage that I have always loved (but never fully understood) "Hütia te rito o te harakeke, kei hea te kömako e kö? Kï mai ki a au, 'He aha te mea nui i te ao?' Māku e kï atu, 'He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata" (If the heart of the flax bush is pulled out, where will the Bellbird sing? If you ask me what is most important in this world, I will reply, 'People, people, people'). If we listen and understand, perhaps we can do what is needed to ensure the bellbird has a place to sing – because of all birds, the bellbird has the most beautiful song.
- This lesson judgement and lack of understanding and recognition was reinforced again for me in Indonesia catching up with a LGBTQ community that was based ironically a few doors down from a mosque. Over a shared meal we heard their stories. Again, I was confronted by the impact of judgment, and misunderstanding – this idea of 'othering' when confronted with something that is different, not 'us' and not well understood. This meal in Indonesia was a small thing – but in fact it was huge.
- Indonesia was a highlight; it was fast and furious, but I learned so much from it. Although I have been to Indonesia countless times this time, I come aware not only missing the people I met there, but also with my eyes opened wider. There are so many things that I loved there. Talking with the young entrepreneurs who were doing incredible things and who were hungry for an 'Australian' perspective. Having a batik lesson from talented batik artists. So many highlights. But what I enjoyed most were the people. I loved the leadership of the ARLP Indonesian contingent. They were open, inclusive and they lead us on a journey, even when they weren't aware of it. Again, my biggest lesson in Indonesia was tiny, so tiny that the person who taught the lesson was oblivious to it… But to me it was profound and life changing. It was the simple act of one of the ARLP facilitators photobombing one of my photographs early on in our Indonesian component. She was fully covered in

her hijab and a broad smile and she disarmed me of my judgments. I never ever had a conversation with a woman in a hijab and certainly never had one bomb my pictures. Before this, I saw the hijab as a symbol of religious conservatism and on my own extended that symbolism to include being non-approachable. How silly! Again, not looking, not listening.

The program is 15 months long and is 'chokka block' with highlights, memories and eureka moments. I know I am still reflecting on things and I think I always will. But I do know that the program has given me some new tools, some very handy ones, that I will certainly use going forward.

Further to the ARLP program, our cohort (Cohort 25) have been putting together a number of projects. These projects are simply projects that we are able to do through collaboration and the sharing of 'in-kind' resources. I am involved in the 'Schools to Schools' project. This project is about connections and putting together rural children with their urban counterparts and providing opportunities for them to talk with each other in guided conversation using various devices and P2P platforms. My son's class at Fremantle Primary School was to be one of the classes that connects with a rural WA counterpart in Tom Price. However, it turns out that despite being contacted by a teacher in at Tom Price Primary and a number of visits from me, the teacher at Fremantle Primary was unable to make the connection. While initially I was disappointed and saw this a failure, I now see after reflection that a non-connection adds a teacher centred dimension into our project. Again, outcomes are different if I move focus on the product only to include the people. The teacher at Fremantle Primary School has a composite class of 36 year 4 and 5 pupils. He is extremely busy. Perhaps this needed to be incorporated into the process. But that said – given that this project is about connectivity, perhaps the inability to connect is an important consideration as part of the product!

The Kimberley Experience was particularly important for me personally in that I was able to really see who I was in the context of a small group. I received a lot of good positive feedback which was great, but I also received feedback on how I can disengage from the group when things are challenging. This is something I need to be aware of, I also need to be more aware of the journeys of others – and do my best to assist them on that journey – because somewhere along the line I will totally benefit from the assistance of others. That said one bit of feedback that I received was from our group facilitator who described me as the 'heart' of the group. A compliment I will never forget.

One central aspect of the course is to be present and provide yourself the ability to be completely immersed in the program components and reflect. This was a challenge for me, especially the Kimberley when I was not able to take calls or check and write email. It is difficult to give yourself to something completely, I struggle to focus narrowly for maximum benefit – yet it is something that I have learned from this

course. I know that sometimes I just have to stop and be present. I tend to rush, and I tend to rush people.

One of the lessons that has resonated with me is the lesson we had with Graham under a tree in the Kimberley where we reflected on “People, Process & Product” triangle. I noted here that to date I have always focussed on the product in whatever I do – and to a slightly lesser extent ‘process’ – I realised that I seldomly focussed on the people. This change in focus on the actors as the drivers of outcomes will invariably lead to improved process and better products.

For me the biggest lesson I have taken away from my ARLP experience is the knowledge that I need to look, and moreover listen. It’s a small lesson (one might think) but to me its life changing. And I am still working on it.

And while listening and focusing is my most profound take over lesson to date from the program, I have also come away with an unexpected lesson as well. My preconceptions on what a leader is have been smashed! Now I ask myself what is leadership? What is a leader? Who?
This question as to who and what is a leader is both very hard to answer but also very simple. To me a leader is anyone! Anyone with the courage to listen to that little voice deep inside that says, ‘*This is what I know is right!*’ Someone who ignores this voice is quite possibly not living up to their leadership potential. Something I am too often guilty of.

Often doing what you know is right is not convenient. It is wearing overalls with ‘hard work’ written on the name tag or is downright frightening. This is when courage comes in. But I am still learning about support and how to use it, maybe this scaredy cat just needs to draw on his C25 support and ARLP alumni more?

I am resolute in my desire to implement what I have learned (and will continue to learn) during my ARLP journey. I am determined to grow for the betterment of my family, my community, my sector and my geography. I am utterly thankful for all that the ARLP has given me and looking forward to the future when I can be involved in the ARLF and give back. I am so grateful to the FRDC for backing me, and enabling me to have this once in a lifetime experience