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A pioneer of live export

City boy with the bug for the bush

BY KEN WILCOCK

FOR some people personal ambition and career interests take them on an unwavering pathway through life but for others the journey is far less certain and results in many twists and turns as that mysterious force known as 'something in the blood' exerts its influence.

For John Kaus the bug for the bush was already in his veins from his grandmother's side of the family and her ownership of a rural property in Victoria.

However being born in Brisbane and going to school at Churchie in the 1960s, John didn't become aware of his liking for the bush until he started visiting the homes of some of his classmates who boarded during term. These school holiday ventures took him to Blackall and Warwick where a young Peter Wyatt from Rokeby was his best mate at the time.

A two-year course at Emerald Pastoral College followed in 1972-73. At age 19, John and his brother Roger set out to jointly run the family property in Victoria.

The arrangement, however, was short-lived. The manager was reinstated,

Roger returned to Queensland and John departed for New Zealand where he worked in woolsheds.

Next came a stint in WA's wheat belt driving tractors in 12-hour shifts. Back in Queensland if jackarooing ever had an idyllic aspect, John found it at Marble Island off the Queensland coast near Shoalwater Bay.

Operators Duke Island Pastoral Company ran Santa cattle there against a backdrop of fine beaches and great fishing.

In 1976 John turned his hand to the agency sector with a move to Elders. After a whirlwind 12 months, he went back to have a second go at running the family property. This time he stayed for about four years.

In 1981 he leased the property out for a year to travel around Europe. He went back the next year and sold the place, keeping just 90 acres to maintain a family linkage of over 150 years.

The trip to Europe was a ship/jet deal which sailed from Fremantle carrying cattle, sheep and horses and about 200 passengers. It was John's first insight into the business of shipping livestock.

Back in Australia in 1982 John returned to the agency game briefly with Dalgety's at Texas. Some real estate and small business interests occupied the next couple of years until he felt the need for something different; live

export beckoned.

He was offered a job with Dalgety International who were shipping sheep out of WA. But before taking up the role, Bob Gillespie suggested he should go to Darwin for six weeks to get some understanding of what was involved.

Bob arranged a role for John with Carabao Exports then owned by David George and Ian Britten-Jones. John's first shipment was a load of buffalo and Brahman heifers to Kuching in Sarawak.

Something about that voyage and the nature of the business clicked and John decided to stay in Darwin and turned down the sheep job in WA. That was in 1985.

John spent the next four years working the boats to destinations including the Philippines, Sabah, Brunei, Sarawak, West Malaysia, Indonesia and occasionally Thailand.

His close contact with importers and traders led John into the marketing side of the business and when David George sold Carabao Exports to the Brunei government in 1989, John was tasked with opening a regional office and given the choice of Brunei or Manila.

It was an easy choice and John operated from Manila for the next four years during which time the size of the business doubled.

Contributing to this growth was the Land Bank



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program in the Philippines, which resulted in the importation of around 35,000 breeding cattle.

John said, "We were the first ones on the ground there and went all through the provinces to meet the co-operatives. We won a lot of deals straight up because no one else was doing it."

The early 1990s also saw the start of big increases in feeder cattle into both Indonesia and the Philippines.

Then in 1994, while attending Beef 94, John was shocked to learn that a decision had been made to downsize Carabao Exports to service just Brunei.

Returning to Manila, he decided to stay and form a business of his own.

SEALS (South East Asian Livestock Services) was formed and for the next two years operated as an agent for John Montague's Quality Livestock business selling into Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines.

In 1996 John got his own export licence. He rang his old boss from Carabao days Sid Parker with a simple plan, you buy them and I'll sell them. SEALS began trading in its own right, one ship a month at first and business started to grow from there.

Not content with just one major event in his life in 1996, John took on the responsibilities of married life the same year.

He and Violeta (Violy to all who know her) met in the Philippines in the late 1980s. Their three children April, Michelle and Scott were born in the Philippines and

spent their early years there until schooling necessitated a move back to Brisbane.

Another great relationship that started around that time was with North Queensland shipping magnate Sid Faithfull.

SEALS used smaller vessels the Molunat and Norvantes until they went out of service. Still in service is the Nine Eagle which replaced the Norvantes. John was never inclined to get into bigger ships as the smaller ships were ideal for SEALS' core business in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

This aspect of the business and the fact that he lived in the marketplace worked to considerable advantage when the Asian currency crisis came along in 1997-98.

SEALS was able to continue supplying into the Philippine market by dealing with importers who paid in cash in the local currency, Peso.

John said, "I would collect the cash go to the bank and change it into A\$ and send it back to Australia. Couldn't do that if you didn't live there. All the ships were sitting at anchor in Darwin and elsewhere and we had this little blue ship carrying

1200 head chugging backwards and forwards to the Philippines. That was good business and we kept going."

In 2010 John in partnership with Sid Parker, Steven Gross (later Dean Ryan) and Sam Collings bought Karumba Livestock Exports from Sid Faithfull.

Twenty-one years on from taking out that export licence, John is selling off part

of his ownership of SEALS. Singapore-based Yarra Corporation already owned a sourcing and exporting division in Australia as well as feedlot and abattoir facilities in China.

Outwardly SEALS is unchanged. But effectively the new part owners have provided SEALS with an important advantage in the form of in-house market access to the emerging Chinese market.

John is looking forward to stepping back a bit but at the moment he is still doing most of the marketing. He sees some good things ahead with Vietnam and also with some of the developments going on in Brunei and Sarawak.



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John Kaus first became involved in live export from Australia in 1985 and went on to establish his own export company, SEALS.