

Commentary: changing places

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There have been huge changes in the ways in which New Zealand's countryside and rural towns are used and understood. To give just a few examples, increasing numbers of urban people are no longer prepared to see rural irrigation schemes proceed uncontested when 80 per cent of New Zealand's allocated water already goes to agriculture. Fonterra, despite its dominance of the dairy industry's milk supply, considers it in its interest to encourage its shareholders to adhere to high standards of stream protection and landscaping. The national sheep flock continues to shrink, and many sheep farmers seem resigned to seeing wool as merely an unprofitable by-line of sheep meat production. But others, notably in the South Island high country, are gaining from a marketing revolution in merino adventure clothing or diversifying into a combination of jobs including those associated with wine production, multi-sport events, lifestyle real estate development, tourism and hospitality.

Recently the Director-General of MAF has claimed that 'Increasingly, our stakeholders may be urban based and/or more strongly focused on environmental, social or cultural outcomes than on the financial success of land-based primary industries'. In a country whose past and future prosperity is inextricably linked to 'a biological economy based on introduced plants and animals', this is an interesting assertion. But it reflects a dramatic shift that is already well underway from a rural economy and its associated settlements rooted in productivism and bulk commodity production towards a multi-functional countryside. This is fashioned in part from traditional and new forms of agricultural and horticultural production but also from an ongoing engagement with nature conservation, new land uses and consumer desires and expectations (whether those consumers be situated with New Zealand or beyond it).

Rural productivism

New Zealand is the world's largest dairy and sheep meat exporter and the agribusiness that lies behind such attainments has long been seen as its rightfully dominant rural land user. This was a legacy of a century long stable regime of external trade relations that underpinned agricultural development until the 1970s. The guaranteed UK market resulted in a pattern of land-use intensification that was aimed at continuous increases in production and land use productivity. As the doyen of the country's agricultural scientists, Bruce Levy, said in his book *Grasslands of New Zealand* (3rd edition, 1970), 'the glorious truth' [was that] 'more and better grass, more and

more stock [is] the country's surest and soundest economic goal'. Others however noted that this was not necessarily, or sufficiently, the way to go.

The foremost British agricultural scientist of his day, Sir John Russell, observed in his diary when he visited in the 1920s that 'The producers were not at all concerned with marketing problems but always asked me how much more could be got out of the land'. As a result stock numbers continued to climb dramatically, in line with Levy's glorious truth, long after increments to the area of sown grassland necessarily slowed as the maximum extent of such improvements was reached. Even so it was necessary to hold much of the land converted to grasses not with high quality sward, as Levy believed, but with selected reforestation of erosion prone areas. Only in the last two decades has the intensification of stocking declined nationally, entirely due to the fall in sheep numbers, and despite substantial regional and local increases in those districts undergoing conversions to dairying.

Dairying is the country's top export earner, doubling its revenues in real terms in the last ten years. Prices have fallen sharply from their peak of a year ago. In this regard, Russell's observation about marketing is telling, when 80 years later MAF talks of 'the large scale investments necessary to hold and expand market positions globally'. Today, export dollars have not only to be earned from ever changing consumer preferences in a wide range of markets, but there is increasingly potential for environmental barriers to trade. Agricultural, horticultural, viticultural and silvicultural products must of necessity be sourced from disease free plants and animals and they must be safe to use, and of high quality. But what constitutes 'high quality' depends very much upon how value is ascribed in the competitive markets of today and tomorrow.

The new countryside

The changing consideration of value is a product of understanding the countryside not primarily as a site of rural productivism, but as a set of spaces in which as MAF puts it 'our industries, environment and broader society face a complex set of challenges to reap future opportunities'. These opportunities lie not only in trade, that is in creating and satisfying international consumer demands, but also in responding to domestic consumer and producer expectations with a diverse array of new profitable activities in rural spaces, including country towns, which of necessity have to re-make themselves. Then the protection of native forests, wetlands and cultural heritage sites for purposes of recreation is driven by the same dynamics as the Walking Access policy, which is designed to meet public concern about the availability of access to the coast, rivers and lakes. Such activities, and the protection of habitat for indigenous flora and fauna,

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contribute to New Zealanders' heritage, senses of identity and cultural values.

Ironically, these attributes have produced very different landscape outcomes on the fringes of cities and large towns, where public demand for housing has been ascribed a higher cultural value in terms of Resource Management Act processes than the protection of areas of high quality rural production land. This is despite the fact that little of the national soil resource is of inherently good quality, with much of that which is being found on the river plains: the very location of most urban centres. Elsewhere however there have been furious contests over proposed landscape and other environmental changes arising from urban demands for power generation, particularly from wind turbines, but also new hydro generation dams. There have also been increasing pressures to internalise the impacts of production. Where externalities are negative and costly, as with impacts on water, there is often resistance; where they are positive and profitable, as with forestry and carbon sequestration, ownership of the externalities is keenly sought.

But the underlying conclusion in these cases is the same: the earlier primacy of production driven, pastoral-based rural development is now a thing of the past. It is not just Maori as well as Pakeha who have claims to the countryside, but urban as well as rural dwellers, consumers as well as producers and, in increasingly meaningful ways, people offshore as well as those onshore. Value in international markets is more and more seen to reside in qualities such as transparency, traceability, nature conservation, and the welfare of human communities and animals. Overseas consumers and the supermarkets from which they buy wish to know from where a product is sourced, that it has been produced cleanly and ethically, and that its carbon footprint is minimal. From one perspective these are costs, but from that of realising value, they represent potentially enormous opportunities. One well quoted example is Icebreaker which, in taking the South Island high country to the world through its merino-based branding, has built up a rapidly expanding business centred on allowing consumers to see inside the company, through its website, all the way back down the supply chain.

Changing places

As the world's most remote primary producer, New Zealand remains reliant on the food and forestry industries for two thirds of the value of its merchandise exports. But its place in the world has undergone considerable change since the 1970s, as new markets and new ways of thinking about and creating markets have had to be cultivated. The stake of consumers overseas is now much more widely (but not as yet sufficiently) recognised as central to the future of agri-, horti-, viti- and silvicultural producers. The role of consumers domestically in contests over appropriate

uses of land has become increasingly apparent. Inevitably this means that New Zealand's rural areas have also been undergoing considerable change. Some have seen rapid landscape simplification with the spread of irrigation and dairying; some have become more visually complex as land marginal for production has been appropriated for countryside recreation or amenity residence. In seeking to survive and prosper in a world alert to issues of sustainability, climate change and ethical production, places in all senses and at all scales will keep changing.

Acknowledgments

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Eric Pawson is an acknowledged expert on land-use issues in New Zealand. The Journal of Forestry asked him to provide an overview of the changes that are taking place in our countryside. We thank him for this excellent summary.