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ARE WE THERE YET?

wheat were needed, this could be grown on, say, 2-3 million hectares rather than the 11 million hectares or so required to meet both the export and domestic demand.

It is difficult to perceive how agriculture can be sustainable in the context of an export economy. Advocates of organic agriculture (here, definitions become hazy, but often they mean agriculture which eschews the use of man-made chemicals in fertilisers and pesticides) maintain they can achieve sustainable production. But the most natural organic systems, such as the slash and burn land use of the tropics, collapse when pressure on the forest resource becomes so great that there is insufficient time, between crops, for soil fertility to rebuild. And these systems are largely closed ones – there is little export from them.

So, next time we stop at the supermarket, it would be sobering to consider another scenario. The food is no longer coming – perhaps the farmers can't or won't produce or the trucks have stopped running – to Canberra.

In several days we will be fighting for the last few cans of dog food, in a week starving, and in several weeks, dying.

The ardent environmentalist in the city watching television (imported, probably for the equivalent of several tonnes of wheat) and deploring scenes of wheat farmers ripping up their fields, should realise he is part of the great equation; without those farmers mining that soil he would be dead, the television unbought.

And the farmers should not be too self-righteous as they talk of how they feed the cities. A peek into the deep freeze of many reveals not only the farm-butchered meat but the Sarah Lee cheesecake and the crinkle-cut potato chips from New Zealand.

The farmers are enmeshed in the same structural complexity as the city dwellers, dependent on many intermeshing cogs.

As I stand on organic farms and listen to the 80hp tractors start up, and watch the semi-trailer loads of chicken manure arrive, I muse, 'this is sustainable?'

But any direction in agriculture which encourages a less exploitative attitude, a greater sense of land stewardship, has to be applauded. If, in the process, produce is freer of man-made chemicals, what a bonus this is and to many, worth the premium prices being achieved for organic food.

Another factor leading to unsustainable agriculture is the relative low price the wealthier countries pay for food. In 1984, Australians spent on average 20.8 per cent of their income on food; the United States (13 per cent) and Britain (17.1 per cent) paid less. People in the Soviet Union shelled out 36.6 per cent and India a whopping 55.9 per cent of their income on food.

Maybe we could increase the price of food to reflect more accurately the environmental cost of its production – a sort of land-degradation levy. But the cost of this would fall more heavily on the poorer sectors of society in Australia. In 1984 people in the lowest-income decile paid 23.4 per cent of their income for food, those in the highest decile only 17.7 per cent. It would be a bold government indeed that would increase the price of food.

There is basically something unbalanced in a society where we pay so little, relatively, for something so essential for survival. Certainly, this means we can buy so easily the

OR HAVE WE GONE PAST IT?

things we value for our lifestyle, but at what cost, in terms of sustainability?

Self-sufficiency in food production means a large measure of independence for a few people. But, short of emptying the cities and setting up a global peasantry, it appears not to be an option. Perhaps cities such as Canberra, with much open space (Canberra has some 4000ha) could contribute significantly to its food requirements if its backyards and parklands and nature strips were converted to fruit and vegetable cropping; but not a high-population-density city.

For years I taught self-sufficiency agriculture and land use with the development of my own little farm as an example. Although I'm good at it – modest too, it has taken all those years, and spare city-derived income, to attain any measure of tenuous self-sufficiency.

So when I watch television documentaries of starry-eyed back-to-the-land idealists walking off into a rosy sunset, with forests of food trees springing up behind them, I wonder about my own ineptitude.

One can get really hungry, waiting for the dam to fill and the fish to grow and the nut trees to start bearing.

Again, though, we should applaud any approach which protects the soil resource, and this should be in self-sufficiency

agriculture. Conscious efforts to reduce man-made chemical inputs into farming, to adopt conservation techniques, to increase the soil's organic matter, to lessen the frequency of cropping, can show the way. If some of these mean lower productivities, that may be a small price to pay for care of the environment.

But if the pressure of people in the cities continues to rise, declining productivity, does not equate with increasing demand. Certainly, there is still plenty of slack in the system: witness the unwanted wool in Australia, the frequent food surpluses in the European Community, (witness, also, the people starving because their countries cannot pay for the food available) due largely to man's technology. But it's no accident that modern agriculture has developed so that an hour of a US maize farmer's labour can produce enough food energy to sustain 380 adults for a day, whereas the figure for a traditional Chinese peasant is about four adults for a day.

Substitution of capital and machinery for labour, modern agricultural technology and, especially, the fossil-fuel subsidy, are keys to modern farm productivity. But one wonders how, if the world's agriculture were returned to the more environmentally benign Chinese peasant system, the world's proliferating population could continue to be fed.

What price, then, sustainability? Probably more than society is willing to pay. Its proclivity to procreation, its dependence on food fetched from afar and the mineral mining implicit in this, the

fossil-fuel subsidy, all operate against sustainability. And the predictions of Malthus, and the latter-day doomsayers such as Paul Ehrlich and David Suzuki, not yet having been fulfilled, can be rejected to make acceptance of the status quo more comfortable.

In the meantime, cities such as Canberra, where people take for granted the full food shelves in the supermarkets every morning, attract tertiary industry that creates nothing, produces nothing, tangible in a society which, because of its complexity, requires lawyers and agents, stockbrokers to shuffle money around, firms to set up shelf companies to minimise clients' tax bills, hard-nosed economists to us the world will never run out of oil, accountants to prepare tax returns complicated by rules and regulations devised by an ever more complex bureaucracy, advertisers to promote products that no one really needs.

What price, sustainability? The cost of research, particularly into recycling technology and alternative energy sources, is one price. But the changing of society, its attributes and values and expectations – that must be, eventually, the ultimate price. And if that price is too high? Well, at least we can talk about it, acknowledge what should be done, and continue to squander the lifestyle which, despite our cleverness with the technological fix, may yet prove unsustainable.

When he wrote this article thirty years ago, published in the *Canberra Times* on 13 September 1990, Paul Dann was a research agronomist with the NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. He now resides at Narbethong House in Braidwood.



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