
What Place for Future Grazers?

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Introducing Barney Foran

'I have had the pleasure of working with Barney for 20 years having, in 1989, enticed him out of The Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Alice Springs to lead a new semi-arid lands research team based in Alexandra, Central Otago.

Barney has degrees in agricultural economics and ecology which have led to a very diverse research career spanning rangeland ecology, agricultural systems, environmental science and long-term analysis of Australia's physical economy. Following his early 1990s years researching hill and high country pastoral systems in New Zealand, Barney returned to Australia to led a very innovative Resource Futures Group within CSIRO and produced some of the most far-reaching analysis of Australia's resource limitations ever produced. It focused on human carrying capacity, fish futures and water dilemmas. These studies attracted major national media attention and generated very spirited debate in Aussie boardrooms and Parliament alike!

Barney's great strength is his ability to draw together very large, complex data sets and sift out the trends that matter for society and our economies. He has had a long and passionate interest in farming; the systems, the families and the businesses that wrest our tucker from the land. Barney is a very talented presenter of his research – a talent that extends to poetry, acting and music in his community and family life.

Barney is currently a research fellow at Australia National University's Fenner School of Environment and Society and the Institute of Land, Water and Society at Charles Sturt University. At present he is working on integrated solutions to Australia's energy security and greenhouse gas mitigation – a tough field given the nations dependence on coal fired generation.'

Dr. Morgan Williams

Wellington

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‘Tomorrow’s meat enterprises will focus on product quality first, backed up by measured and low environmental impacts, austere production chains, avoidance of most chemicals and heavy metals, and making farmed landscapes waterwise, biodiverse and beautiful.’



Paul Keating, an Australian treasurer and prime minister for a term, challenged his irritable voters as to how they would maintain prosperity ‘at the arse-end of the world’; a fundamental question that most of us Anzacs avoid answering. Australia’s miners underwrote the real estate and property bubble that fuelled consumption and provided most citizens with a flatscreen television, but little of moment to watch. After catching the same wave, New Zealanders too are now close to shore and pondering the next enduring wave, now that South America can do most things nearly as well but with lower costs. ‘Not my business,’ many New Zealand farmers might say, but the far-sighted will know that quality products always sell to a discerning consumer. Increasingly, that consumer will need proof and they’ll need a good story.

Soon, proof will be everywhere! By the end of the year 2010, a research group at Sydney University will be able to put numbers on the environmental assets underpinning every major production chain in world trade today. The approach is mostly directed towards the shifty accounting behind world trade in greenhouse gas emissions, but also embraces land accounting, biodiversity threats, water use, employment, and many other social issues. An early prototype of this analysis suggested that consumers in North America and the European Union were together responsible for the majority of the threats facing global biodiversity or the web of life. This finding was not popular with learned reviewers from the developed world who prefer to blame tree-fellers in tropical rainforests rather than the eventual consumers of the products, the mall shoppers in Tokyo, New York and Paris.

An Australian version of this global analysis, Balancing Act, raised the blood pressure of industry lobbyists and excited a few litigation lawyers when commodities and their brand names were uncovered as grim reapers of environmental assets. Broad-brush environmental accounting like this easily harms brands and commodities but also poses questions of earthy and practical concern. ‘What is the most sustainable drink?’, asked the CEO in the rarefied atmosphere of a Melbourne boardroom. Our analysis showed that ‘beer is best,’ having only moderate land impacts from barley and hops, but below economy-wide averages on greenhouse gas content and most other indicators. By comparison, soft drinks, milk and wine have high water impacts, the latter particularly from its irrigated content, a key issue in Australia’s enduring water crisis. The same question could be asked with regard to the most sustainable type of meat production, which should put a shot across the bows of every red meat enterprise. Environmentally-attuned decisions by domestic consumers



and looming trade wars will challenge producers of lamb, beef and venison in the next decade.

Most New Zealand meat producers have already tasted this sort of treatment when news headlines attribute one half of domestic greenhouse gas emissions to agricultural production. On the other side of the ditch, Australians blame coalminers, electricity producers, and aluminium smelters for their emissions plight, but fail to acknowledge that their everyday purchasing decisions are responsible for the chain of product demand. Inevitably, traditionally-produced red meat may be labelled with ‘red spot’ and ‘climate unfriendly’ stickers as consumers change dietary composition and do more than merely install improved light bulbs.

So how will New Zealand grazing enterprises counter these mounting threats to their livelihoods? One thing to be sure is that many of us, worldwide, will still look forward to their twice-weekly delight of a red-meat meal. Two things will determine how much we eat and what price we’re prepared to pay. The first is that it’s tasty, safe and that its production chain is environmentally benign. The second is that, like a good wine, it comes with a story of history, people, local landscapes, and regional enterprise where profits are retained near the home paddock.

A recent study from Professor Henry Buller at Exeter University provides a lesson for the future of red meat. Meat reared on more natural or biodiverse pastures ‘tastes better and is nutritionally superior’ to conventional methods of production. The superiority of the taste test prompted calls for ‘place-based labelling’ to mimic the Appellation d’Origin

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► *Contrôlée* certification used for French wines and other local produce. The key element was attributed to the effect of the plant species on rumen processes which gave more nutritional 'goods' - so improving taste, vitamin content, shelf life, and other attributes sought by the select consumer. There is also emerging evidence that what our sheep and cattle eat also affects how much methane they produce – so what is good for us can also be better for our planet.

The red-meat producer for the twenty-first century needs to embrace three strategic principles. The first is to focus on the full paddock-to-plate chain and produce a sought-after product that attracts superior prices, no matter what the economy or the season is doing. The shorter the distance between paddock and markets will also be increasingly important, until we wean our ships off fossil fuels, as is the continuity of supply if restaurants and local butchers are to laud the branded product. The second principle is obvious - that your system should not send you broke. Our adherence to flat-earth economics - where volume and inputs dominate to the detriment of product quality, stock health, pasture resilience and managerial anxiety - are now a thing of the past. Lowering the blood pressure of both the grazing system and its manager becomes a must in a system given

to the best product grass can produce. Judicious trimming of lifestyle expectation may be required, along with debt reduction, less energy and chemicals, and developing flocks and herds that do the work themselves.

The third principle is to develop the product story based on the astute use of environmental assets and a managerial oversight of the full production chain. Part of the story involves grasping the real numbers behind environmental certification. Within a decade, meat will be marketed on the basis of its total greenhouse gas emissions per kilogram of product as well as water quality, biodiversity assets, cultural values and so on. The commodity 'meat' will still be sold on a best-price basis, but the thoughtful manager needs to distance themselves from the raw commodity trade where South America has the edge. New Zealand meat producers need to craft a new space if they are to endure.

The average meat producer may not be in business in twenty years if ecological reality bites and becomes embodied in everyday consumer decisions. Tomorrow's meat enterprises will focus on product quality first, backed up by measured and low environmental impacts, austere production chains, avoidance of most chemicals and heavy metals, and making farmed landscapes waterwise, biodiverse, and beautiful. ■

