

The geographies of local food: Exploring the ethos of farmers' markets in New Zealand

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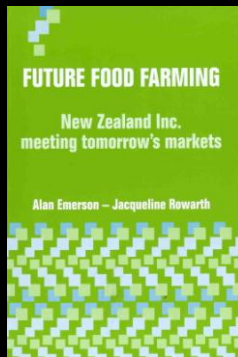
The stimulus for this paper was the publication of a text on New Zealand food in November, 2009, and the subsequent promotional activities associated with the Agricultural Marketing and Research Development Trust.

The coincidence was the simultaneous arrival of some new materials on sustainability along with my inspection of the NZ Curriculum and Achievement Standards Framework.

The new text was a compilation of essays about the future of New Zealand food.

The book has a significant chapter on sustainability.

What is remarkable in this chapter is the emphasis on bio-physical processes in food production and the almost complete absence of food production capacities other than these.



My own reflections and writings on sustainable food production came from rather a different perspective, best represented in some survey work in markets and a subsequent piece of work undertaken with two colleagues in Canada and published in 2009.



Our written work looked at farmers' markets in New Zealand, exploring the ways that food production, exchange and consumption was theorised in academy and the views of the producers and consumers as represented in a large number of newspaper articles.

Seeing Farmers' Markets: Theoretical and Media Perspectives on New Sites of Exchange in New Zealand

LEX CHALMERS, ALIN E. JOSEPH and JOHN SMITHERS

In this paper we explore the extent to which a reciprocal relationship exists between contemporary theorisation about farmers' markets in geography and the rapidly expanding public discourse surrounding these sites of exchange in New Zealand. Activities branded as farmers' markets are seen widely as local phenomena of systemic significance for the understanding of evolving geographies of production, consumption and exchange. As something 'new' on the landscape, farmers' markets also attract attention in the media. An electronic database of significant print media contributions over the period 1995 to 2007 provides the empirical basis for an assessment of the extent to which theorisation and the public discourse address common themes. Our analysis indicates that while the economic and social constructions in both the research literature and the media database share common themes, strong contrasts in ways of 'seeing' farmers' markets are apparent. We note the predilection in the print media to present the nature and purpose of farmers' markets through the personal experiences and 'stories' of participants. There is a tendency to focus on the appeal of markets to the consumers who form the readership base. The theorised alterity of the farmers' market, either in terms of production methods or motivations for consumption, is not reflected strongly in media reports, and this raises questions about 'over-theorisation' in the academic literature. Our aim is to promote reflection in both the editorial offices of the media and in the academy by documenting the nature of these contrasting views.

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We noted some contrasts between academic literature and the community view of what farmers' markets "were about".

The formal literature began by conceptualising farmers market production as alternative, represented in the distinctive word, **alterity**.

Our colleagues argued the economics of short supply chains, reduced food miles/carbon costs and the capture of the local food dollar.

In terms of the systems of exchange, the academic literature noted the characteristics of markets by location and time, and the power of social relations in exchange.

With reference to food consumption, 'locavours' were recognised, slow food and reflexive consumption were often mentioned.

In short, embedded within the academic discourse was a claim for difference, for **alterity**, and both oblique and direct references to more sustainable food supply.

In the analysis of the public discourse, judged largely from media commentaries, the views of the academy were seldom recognised.

The views expressed were highly functionalist (rules of the market, the distinctive nature of the food products and how to use them). Sustainable food production conversations were rare.

Reflecting on what we saw in our work of Farmers' Markets, and what we saw in the Emerson and Rowarth text was not made any easier late last year in the time of

- the Copenhagen meeting on global changes
- discussions about Achievement Standards featuring the use of renewable resources

The final few slides in this presentation are a reflection on how knowledge of the farmers' market can encourage us to reflect on sustainability issues in geographical education.

Achievement Standards in Geography address issues of sustainability in 1.3: Demonstrate a geographic understanding of sustainable resource use. The following text provides the key explanatory terms;

- (i) A geographic understanding refers to an understanding of how people interact with natural and cultural environments when they use resources, and the consequences,
- (ii) Resource use refers obtaining resources (natural or cultural) and using them to make a product,
- (iii) Sustainable resource use refers to obtaining and using resources in such a way as to minimise environmental, social and economic harm, and ensuring future generations have access to the resources as well.

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Currently, many schools use dairy farming as the model for sustainable resource use.

Our own conference featured a dairying field trip, and it was much appreciated for its teaching potential, and (incidentally) the view it gave of dairy farming being a more reflexive process than we might first imagine.

The teaching approaches often focus on the production systems, the environmental consequences of issues like dairy waste.

This has sometimes been characterised as the ecological modernisation (Evans, et al., 2002) approach to food production, where no attention is devoted to the social factors associated with food farming.

While sustainability is mentioned, the focus is on getting the core material in front of students for external assessment.

How possible is it to really deliver on the critical matter of sustainable resource use that "refers to obtaining and using resources in such a way as to minimise environmental, social and economic harm, and ensuring future generations have access to the resources as well".

In working towards a practical approach to teaching about renewable or sustainable use of resources, my view is that understanding the ethos of producers like those of the farmers markets can help us in the Decade for Education about Sustainable Development.

I think we should continue to use dairy farming as a content area, but I ask if it possible to ask the more seriously the questions about the sustainability of contemporary food production.

My view is that texts like Emerson and Rowarth can provide a basis for learning but also subsequent deconstruction in our classrooms at both secondary and tertiary level.

I am aware this view may be contentious.