

Searching for agriculture's place in a changing society

by Moira Campbell

For a variety of reasons, including simple geography and technological development, Canadians (and people worldwide) are becoming distanced from the land and their basic food supply; they are becoming distanced from the people who produce their food and the culture of food production.

When members of the public do meet with those in agriculture, it is often in an adversarial context, with concerns about farm animal welfare and the ecological sustainability of current agricultural practices.

When practitioners of agriculture meet members of the public, it is often in an equally adversarial setting, with frustration rising to the surface at the seeming lack of understanding about the threatened existence of rural communities and farming in Canada in general.

Ethical questions

It is within this context that I undertook to travel across Nova Scotia interviewing farmers about ethical issues in agriculture.

The objective of the three-year project is to build bridges/open channels between the practitioners of agriculture (farmers, scientists, policy makers) and academic philosophers, through interviews, seminars, workshops. A series of conferences throughout Nova Scotia will be held in the third year and it is hoped that links can be forged with people across North America who are also studying the ethical dimensions of agriculture.

The original impetus for the project came from Dr. Les Haley, principal of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. In his additional capacity as an educator and administrator with the Biology and Education departments at Dalhousie, he became aware of, and concerned about, science students' lack of exposure to and opportunity to discuss the ethical directions of their field of study.

When asking graduating students in the Education departments which course they enjoyed the most, many of them said the philosophy of education, as it gave them a chance to talk about their own thoughts.

In the area of agriculture, as with others such as medicine and engineering, Dr. Haley felt that students, as well as other practitioners, are increasingly faced with issues and policy decisions that cannot be resolved through a purely scientific approach.

There is a real need to address the moral dimension of issues in agriculture, particularly the future of rural communities. This project is a beginning to the process of closing the ever-widening gap between practitioners of agriculture (most notably, farmers) and members of the public.

World without borders

To date, what has been enunciated, no matter the person's role in society, is the seemingly inevitable yet uncertain prospects of globalization.

There is no longer, as a hog farmer from Prince Edward Island described it, "a social contract" between farmers and the Canadian people. There is no longer a relationship of trust that the Canadian people will buy, at a price "fair to all," the food that Canadian farmers agree to grow in an "acceptable fashion."

If this kind of trust/contract is to emerge, society must come to an agreement on what counts as "a fair price" and what is "acceptable production," as well as "acceptable distribution and consumption practices." How society produces, distributes and consumes food is a reflection of its social values. All members of society consume, yet only some produce; some distribute and some spend their days reflecting on values or ethics (recognizing that some individuals do strive to do all things).

In the wake of the GATT and NAFTA negotiations, Canadians must ask what values do they want to live by? Will increased free trade enable society to value people, animals and the land in a humane and sustainable fashion? What does the word "sustainable" mean?

In interviewing farmers, and other agricultural practitioners, the kinds of question that I ask include, "What are your basic moral/ethical beliefs or values?", "How would you describe your relationship to the land?", "What quality do animals possess that makes us concerned for their well-being?", "Should we, as a society, embrace freer trade and globalization or strive for greater self-sufficiency?"

While this project is concentrating, at the present time, on asking farmers these questions, I think that they are questions that all people should be asking themselves. In this way, perhaps, the process of rebuilding a trust, based on mutual understanding, can begin between farmers and the Canadian public.

Moira Campbell will be interviewing farmers as part of a three-year post-doctoral fellowship position which also involves teaching a course on the environment, agriculture and ethics at Dalhousie University and the Nova Scotia Agricultural College. While the project is centered in Nova Scotia, it is hoped that it will provide a model for other provinces. If anyone has any comments, suggestions, or enquiries, they may contact her at 902-893 6644 ext. 1174.

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