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RE-ASSESSING AGRICULTURES OBJECTIVE?

As primary producers, it is easy to get so caught up in running the business that some of the big questions, like “Why am I doing what I do?” get overlooked. Being constantly bogged down in operational matters can blind you to both the mistakes of the current operation, as well as to new opportunities. If you can’t “distinguish the wood from the trees,” then perhaps it’s time to stop; step back; and take a long hard look at both what you are doing and what you are achieving.

Farming is essentially about producing agricultural commodities which are sold in a market to supply the demands of consumers. In the market, generally the best quality products receive the best prices and poorer quality or less desirable products get less. Sadly, farming today still reflects the legacy of a production oriented economy i.e. “I’ve gone to all the trouble and expense of growing this product, the least someone can do is buy it off me.” The problem with this is that we now live in a consumer driven economy, where the name of the game is producing what the consumer wants. The world does not owe us a living but it will pay if we produce what they want i.e. consider the prices paid for quality produce in Japanese food outlets.

Now of course, it is neither straightforward nor easy to predict consumer demand. It is also difficult to get the timing right to consistently obtain premium prices. But it is possible to produce commodities that are consistently high in quality and which, all things being equal, will receive a better return at market than the ordinary average “run of the mill” fare.

Consider the following observations about food quality. In the USA, over half the population fail to receive the recommended daily intake of either vitamin A or vitamin B from their food. In the past 50 years, the nutrient density of food in developed countries has declined between 20 – 60% (depending on which nutrient is examined). Iodine deficiency has now become the leading cause of mental retardation in the world. Increasingly, there are problems with pesticide residues, toxins and heavy metal levels in food. Last, but definitely not least, there is an alarming increase of health problems and new, or previously rare or unheard of diseases i.e. Parkinson’s, Autism, Alzheimer’s etc. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to wonder how much of our modern day medical problems are related to the quality of the food we eat?

Have we lost the plot? Have we been hoodwinked into thinking that agriculture cannot survive unless there are massive inputs of fertiliser and chemicals, leading firstly, to who knows what nutrient imbalances and problems in the soil and consequently to who knows what problems in the plants and animals grown on that soil? Surely agriculture is about producing high quality, nutrient rich food which will enhance and facilitate a better quality of life for all who eat it. Farmers should be both good stewards of our soils and environment, as well as guardians of human health. If you don’t stop and really think about what you are doing and growing, then without even realising it, your legacy as farmers could be the converse – growing poor quality food, contributing to a general decline in health. Surely it is far more fulfilling and rewarding, both financially and morally, to produce high quality food, which helps to enhance the life and well being of all mankind.