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First Kiwifruit Interview: Individual and orchard vision

The ability to form and strive for visions of advancement in personal life and farm management is an important element of sustainable agriculture. Farm management systems can be viewed as sustainable to the extent that each contributes (in a positive manner) to the objectives and goals of the persons who implement and practice that system. (Whether this system eventually proves to be sustainable in regard to its environmental impact is a further issue not addressed in the current research note.) Due to the significance of 'vision' in approaching sustainability from a social perspective, participants in the ARGOS programme were asked to identify such visions as part of the initial interview with the social research team. (This series of interviews was conducted by Dr. Lesley Hunt from May to November 2004 and involved the owners and/or managers of 35 kiwifruit orchards, divided into three panels defined by management system— KiwiGreen Hort 16A [Gold], KiwiGreen Hayward [Green], and. Organic Hayward [Organic]) Whereas the questions about vision were posed by the economic objective to facilitate construction of individual orchard plans, the depth of response provided by participants reinforces their value for the analysis of social aspects of sustainable orchard management.

Except for a minority who had difficulty describing their visions, the participants readily identified visions for themselves, and

for their orchards, that covered a broad range of goals and objectives. The diversity of their visions suggests that a range of motivations underlie the management strategies of participants in the ARGOS programme. Despite the large variation in response, it is apparent that vision is dominated by financial or economic concerns, followed by social, environmental and personal aspects of vision as discussed in the following sections.

Economic aspects of vision

The most common element of the visions noted by participants was that of financial expectations. Because kiwifruit production is strongly oriented toward the market, such a response is not unexpected. Despite the apparent importance of financial aspects of production, it is noteworthy that participants generally focused on maintaining positive cash flow without assessing comparative returns to investment or levels of risk. The financial aspirations expressed during the initial interviews can be further sub-divided as those relating to a) financial improvement, b) productivity, c) investment in the property, d) move to retirement, e) alternative products, and f) good fruit. Taken as a whole, there was little substantial difference among the kiwifruit panels (Gold, Green and Organic,) in regard to their discussion of financial aspects of production.

Social aspects of vision

The second most common element of orchardists' visions involved social aspirations. In these cases, the participants referred to their ownership and management of a kiwifruit orchard (or property, more generally) as contributing to their own well-being and that of their families. The lifestyle associated with rural life in general (aided by their access to contract labour) is frequently a part of the personal vision of participants and a principal reason for remaining in the sector. Several of the orchardists contrast the labour demands of kiwifruit with those of dairy when discussing this aspect of their vision. The remaining responses focus on the contribution of orchard life to the family, both through its lifestyle and its potential for economic return. While family was often an element of vision, succession of children to orchard ownership was infrequently cited except in situations where the orchard had been in the family for more than a single generation.

Environmental aspects of vision

Only one orchardist (Gold) discussed environmental factors in direct response to the vision questions. This suggests that the majority of participants do not recognise ecological goals that are separable from their economic or social motivations. Despite the absence of ecological goals in response to the vision questions, orchardists' discussions of nature and their interactions with it indicate that many do envision their properties as an element of the natural landscape and that it is their responsibility to care for or improve the potential of that landscape. Responses that placed the property within the natural landscape did not vary substantially among the panels. The latter ideal was more prevalent, however, in the interviews on organic orchards. This apparent difference between panels suggests the need to further explore the extent to which a desire to maintain the land is more active among those who practice organic methods.

Personal aspects of vision

The final aspect of vision identified in the interviews reflected characteristic traits of the participants that helped to form their

approach to orchard management. Such traits can be categorised as a desire to be in control, the enjoyment of meeting a challenge, or reliance on a strong set of experiences. These aspects do not identify specific goals or motivations for using a particular orchard management system. Identification of these traits does, however, indicate the importance of the context within which an individual has formed a particular vision or approach to orchard practice. Because of their personal orientation, these perspectives come in conflict with visions focused on family, society or the environment.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the various aspects of vision identified by the participants in the first interviews indicate the complexity of social elements of sustainability. While the financial aspects of orchard management were considered important by the greatest number of participants, the pursuit of economic returns appears to be tempered by concerns about the well-being of the family and the environment. Furthermore, an individual's approach to management can be expected to influence her or his assessment of the relative merits of differing management practices. Thus, we will remain aware of the variety of influences on the goals and objectives of those who participate in the ARGOS programme.

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