



EXTENSIONNET

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From the Chair

Terry Makin

On June 13 I will attend a meeting to form another chapter of APEN to cover Western Victoria. We need to continue to attract new members to ensure we are a viable and effective organisation. As a new organisation with scarce resources we need your contributions and creative thoughts.

APEN has been shaped by its history of people in agricultural extension, tertiary education and Landcare who provided much of the early impetus behind APEN's inception. Yet its future can be shaped to capture the early vision of a more diverse membership around the **facilitation of social change**. ExtensionNet wishes to embrace a widening constituency. This could include increasing APEN membership among farmers; rural politicians; local government politicians; primary and public healthcare workers; individual, group, community and regional forms of enterprise management; rural counselling and consultancy; community learning, support and action groups, etc.

There is a growing appreciation that community change is a process where by sharing our collective knowledge through a process of discussion around key issues, and focused questions, we can gain new insights into our current situations. These insights can give us the ability to improve these situations in new and creative ways. A broader APEN membership with a wider knowledge base, will bring new perspectives to share with each other. This will improve our ability to add value to what we do.

As the approach to community development becomes more complex, institutions change, and people often become more isolated, we need to have better ways of coming together to share our knowledge and experiences. One area that appears to have potential to improve our communication and networking is Email and the Internet. John McKinlay is convening a working group in this area and would welcome ideas.

Theme - Extension for Sustainable Rural Communities

Elwin Turnbull

Over the last decade or so there have been pressures on rural communities through the decline in the number of extension officers in the government sector and an increased community awareness in the environmental care area. New forms of government and non government structures have evolved under these conditions and there has been a parallel emergence of different extension theories to deal with this situation. This ExtensionNet is a chance to share some of the experiences of our group and to catch up on some of the guiding principles behind the initiatives. The first article by Robyn Penman uses insights from dramatic failures in communication in the PNG situation to analyse probable causes of poor communication between the scientific fraternity and farmers in Australia. The next article from Mary-Anne Young complements this assertion from some critical observation and action with farmers in the northern districts of South Australia. The clear inference is that people must be able to share a common intellectual framework if they are able to communicate effectively.

Experience from the Western Downs of Queensland shows the potential of teamwork by extension officers in building activities to help farmers which are within their framework. Property management planning and land care are not imposed constraints in this situation, rather they have become a means to an improved farming situation. It will be interesting to see if

CONTENTS

From the Chair	1	APEN International Conference	6
Theme	1	Have Your Say	7
Talking About Farming		ExtensionNet	8
Practices	2	Book Review	9
Attitude/Behaviour Study Changes		Book Review	10
Extension Approach	4	Chapter Roundup	
		Tasmania	11
Property Management Planning-		Western Vic	11
Western Downs Style	4	APEN Contacts	12

the early results of improved attitude to the DIP and better business management outcomes for farmers translate into more sustainable situations.

The final articles are book reviews provided by Horrie Poussard and Harold Mattner. The topics covered in

the books complement one another in that "Landcare; communities shaping the land and the future" tells the story of the movement to date and "The Environmental Imperative" takes a critical approach to the issue of environmental management through political and sociological concepts.

Theme - Extension for Sustainable Rural Communities

Talking About Farming Practices: The Didiman Said To Do It.

Robyn Penman

In 1977, Robert Scott wrote about agriculture and language in Papua New Guinea. According to Scott prior to large scale intervention by other nationals, Papua New Guinea farmers had developed a system of agriculture admirably suited to their ecological and social environment. Their land tenure system had developed around agricultural potential of the land, their concept of ownership, their need for defence, and certain other socio-religious influences.

Their gardening methods were influenced by practical and ecological needs. For example, crops were mixed to reduce the incidence of pest and diseases, and were not planted in rows, thus reducing erosion. In all, Scott's description of their agricultural system sounds remarkably like a sustainable one envisaged for today. But, something happened. The *didiman* - the expatriate agricultural officer - came.

Scott, who was one of the early *didiman*, explains that these agricultural officers failed to recognise the ecological balance of the indigenous agricultural activities and failed to acquire a language in which to do so. Instead, the *didiman* relied on Pidgin, and only to the minimal extent needed to give concrete instructions.



Scott believes that the consequence of this was to divorce the Papua New Guinea farmers from all involvement and decision making in agriculture. Agriculture instead, became a technical area of activity divorced from the villagers' broader practical world and rational deliberation. The *didiman* told the farmers what to do in concrete and simplistic terms, and the farmers did it - as labour, not as personal involvement. In doing this the *didiman* only used the existing Pidgin language (and not the local indigenous one) to describe new things and introduced little to the language except some simple naming: for example *bulmakan* for cow and *kopi* for coffee.

By the 1970's the advent of indigenous agricultural officers heralded some change. But, in Scott's assessment, "while the Pidgin of the past will be adequate to the task of concrete and action orientated things...it will need a massive infusion of simple and uncluttered English and adapted English terminology to meet the needs of our farmers. Without such growth and development [of an agriculturally adequate language] the farmers of this country will find they are limited in their ability to participate (p 731)".

Scott's analysis is very insightful. He directly points to the relationship between communication and agricultural practice. More specifically he shows how a language inadequate to the users' needs and one not sufficiently

undifferentiated) can inhibit agricultural practice.

The *didiman* in Australia - today!

I have written at length about Scott's article because I want to argue that a parallel situation exists in Australia today. We too have our own *didiman* - the agricultural extension officers - who, in **speaking the language of science, fail to speak a language that meets the needs of farmers.**

From our work on communication practices in the rural sector (funded by Lands and Water Resources, Grain and Rural Industry Research and Development Corporations) we have identified substantial problems arising from scientists focusing on the provision of technical information to farmers, without any consideration of what the farmers wanted to know and how they needed to know it. Scott identified this same problem when he described the *didiman* in Papua New Guinea providing concrete, technical information only, without any consideration of the broader social-ecological context or the information needs of the farmers.

The particular problems of **linguistic inadequacy and inappropriate communication practices** are exemplified with the concept of

In a recent study by Holsinger (1994), natural resource managers were asked what the term 'sustainable land use' meant to them. These managers had varied views on the term, including 'preserving resources', 'ecologically sound land use' and 'economically viable and minimal land degradation'.

Conversely, in another exploratory study into consequences of employing sustainable practices, farmers complained of the **'high input treadmill' associated with sustainability (Gray, 1994)**. It seems that to farmers in that study, the more sustainable you are, the more inputs into the land are necessary. In a different study, by Ison & Humphreys (1993), producers were asked to define 'sustainable land management'. Again, the views were varied and, in this study, the authors found they had to remove the term 'sustainability' from all discussions with producers because it created too much confusion. An earlier study by Tisdall (1990) points to one reason why there are problems with the term 'sustainable': **while many people favour 'sustainability' they want to sustain something different!**

Appropriate language - reverential adequacy & social adequacy

The appropriateness of a language can be assessed on the basis of a number of criteria. Two are particularly relevant here: reverential adequacy and social adequacy. The question here is how well does talk of sustainability measure up against these criteria?

For a language to have **reverential adequacy**, it must have sufficient lexical (word) resources to discuss a given topic in sufficient detail. Sufficient lexical resources require a language with sufficient distinctions for objects and actions, that has terms assigned to the right semantic category, and does not have non-functional synonyms. On the basis of the studies cited above, it would seem that the

concept of 'sustainability' does not meet these criteria and fails on the grounds of reverential adequacy. It is semantically vague and semantically undifferentiated, meaning many different things to many different people.

Social adequacy requires that language is acceptable to a maximum number of speakers in the target community, promote social unity and communication and cater for present as well as future social needs. The documented inability of producer and natural resource managers as specific rural groups to agree on what sustainability means suggests the concept is not one held, with the same reverential meaning, amongst speakers in the same community. Indeed, as the studies described above indicate, different farming groups can hold opposed meanings of the term. And the data from Ison & Humphreys (1993) would suggest that the concepts do more to divide and confuse the community than promote a unity; discussions proceed better without the term than with it.

I can't but wonder here as to the reason. Within rural communities, practices implicated by the concept of 'sustainability' have been used for centuries. Farmers may not have used the word 'sustainable' but many have engaged in farming practices that reflect what at least I think is the underlying philosophy of the word. Despite the 'bad press' of overgrazing and tree-felling (the latter once forced by government decree and grants), many farming families know they must keep the land in the same or better state for future generations (Holsinger, 1994). So why do they find the word 'sustainable' confusing?

People often find words and concepts confusing when they are not words or concepts that they have generated out of their own context to serve their own needs. This would strongly suggest that the concept of sustainability is confusing because it came from outside the rural community. Sustainability is a

term imposed by others, our very own *didiman*.

...we need a more appropriate and adequate way of talking; a way of talking that meets the information needs and practical contexts of our clients...

As with the experiences described in Papua New Guinea, inadequate and inappropriate talk about agricultural practices means the implementation of inadequate and limited practices. To foster truly sustainable agriculture we need a more appropriate and adequate way of talking; a way of talking that meets the information needs and practical contexts of our farmers.

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