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What is the “agricultural rut” and how did we get here?

by John James, APEN President

I want to round out a discussion about extension being in an “agricultural rut” as it was I who introduced the topic during the APEN open space forum in Toowoomba last year. I was encouraged, but not surprised, that the topic attracted so much interest from extensionists keen to explore new futures for extension. Like others, I’m keen to see the extension profession’s traditional alliance with agricultural science does not blind us to other opportunities.

I should say at the outset that I’m not “anti-agriculture”. Like many members of APEN, much of my working life has been spent in agriculture and the professional and personal rewards I’ve reaped have been very satisfying. There is, of course, an enduring need for agricultural and land management science and some platform for communicating new technologies to those who would use it. One of the world’s most

pressing challenges will be – or is – matching the capacity of our arable land with the food and fibre needs of a burgeoning global population. Extension, from this perspective, is already assured a rich and busy future.

The term “agricultural rut” may understandably carry negative connotations and some extensionists may be offended at the suggestion that agricultural pursuits somehow lead to some sort of professional dead-end. Nothing could be further from the truth. We all know local “gurus” of extension who are passionate about pushing the boundaries of extension and tenaciously pursue professional excellence. They have innate or cultivated skills in communication, make excellent mentors, and take great care that extension – as a vocation and also enriching life work – is nurtured amongst novice practitioners. Usually, these “gurus” have a broad ranging understanding of agriculture –

Continued page 2...

IN THIS ISSUE

Road toll extn p3

Qld Transport’s Kerrie Tregenza explains how messages are used to change motorists’ speeding behaviour.

Erotic messages p4

Qld Parks & Wildlife Service officer Karen Smith uses the “erotic” mnemonic in interpretive engagement with the community.

APEN contacts p8

Where to contact your local APEN representative. Also story guidelines for the next edition of ExtensionNet.

From the (new) editor

Hi all. I was briefly introduced in the last edition of ExtensionNet so I won’t talk too much more about myself here ... it’s one of my least favourite subjects!

I look forward to the challenge of editing ExtensionNet in the future and see it as one of the primary benefits of being a member of APEN. The stories from around the regions about members doing what they do best are illuminating and inspiring.

I thank and congratulate the former editor, Mark Paine, who has maintained the quality of this newsletter at an extraordinarily professional level in the past. I’d like to keep up that professionalism and introduce some new features in subsequent editions. Above all, if there’s news in extension, you’ll read it here. Please let me know what you think about the newsletter and pass on ideas about how we can keep it relevant and readable.

Darren Schmidt

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... the social, political and economic circumstances that gave rise to a population of experienced extensionists have now changed markedly ...

What is the “agricultural rut”? And how did we get here? (cont’d from page 1)

the scientific principles, the practical realities, the facts and figures – and of the people that practise it. This deep and rounded education means many experienced extensionists frequently leave significant ripples in a rural community when they move or retire.

These venerable professionals are, I think, wonderful examples of what novice extensionists can aspire to. However, I do argue that the social, political and economic circumstances that gave rise to a population of such experienced extensionists have now changed markedly.

Socially, agricultural world is different to even 20 years ago. Social backbones in rural communities such as tennis clubs, church groups and rural youth organisations have declined in importance. It was once relatively easy for an extension officer to socialise with a great many clients simply by joining the local service club or by being otherwise socially active.

Politically, it now seems less acceptable to channel resources to a narrow segment of the food value chain – agricultural production – at the “expense” of other segments such as marketing or business development. Increasingly, extension officers are no longer likely to be afforded the luxury of being of a purely agricultural bent. Of course, for many extensionists this is not new ground at all and they revel in wearing the different hats required of their job.

Economically, extension has never had a tougher time of proving its contribution to the region’s financial output. By its nature difficult to evaluate in monetary terms, extension faces increasing competition – especially in the public sphere – from research, business-oriented activities and even corporate image spin-doctoring. For bean counters, local testimonials, ethical advice and productive support do not fit easily into the credit and debits columns.

So, to re-iterate, extension has traditionally sat side-by-side with agriculture in a chair that was socially cohesive, economically justifiable, and with a political identity that was resolute and almost a given. Clearly, those days are past and, as modern professionals, we must take careful note of these changes and carefully plot our journey through them. Better still, let’s seize the inevitable opportunities generated by changing circumstances and turn them to our own advantage.

We need only to look to other agencies to pick up clues. Most of us have at some point worked or communicated with national parks and wildlife officers, mines and water infrastructure departments or environmental protection agencies. We’ve all been exposed to highly targeted public information campaigns, we ring up companies and organisations to book tickets, reserve restaurant tables, or hire equipment.

Continued on page 7

ABOUT THIS ISSUE ...

Long time readers will notice two things about this issue:

- 1 there is little “hard and fast” extension field work reported, and
- 2 the authors are all from Queensland.

The second point is easy to explain: the new editor is a Queenslander and as a way of “easing into the job” it was a lot easier to use local contacts to write the articles. Future editions will be less parochial!

The first point reflects the fact that there simply wasn’t room for agricultural extension stories in this edition because it is full of information about how other agencies deal with “extension”. This is *not* an indicator of how the newsletter is destined to evolve; future editions will, of course, carry stories about the sort of work we’re all familiar with: agricultural extension.

During the 2001 Open Space APEN forum in Toowoomba there was considerable interest in the “agricultural rut” (see story by John James, page 1). Consequently, this edition is themed toward showing how non-

agricultural organisations act as change agents, and you’ll see that some of practices and philosophies are familiar.

Other “hot” topics at the forum included marketing, a national extension framework, professional development, and extension theory and these themes will be more fully explored in future editions.

Darren Schmidt



