

The ABC is Doing Something Right

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WITH the common perception that our ABC is full of urban elitist, anti-market greens who care too much about the environment—the romantic view rather than the realist view—one programme on ABC Radio National has broken ground by telling it like it is, and it stands out brilliantly.

The story started with a chance encounter at a dinner party between the ABC Radio Presenter of *Bush Telegraph*, Sarah Macdonald, and Stu Higgins, a cotton farmer out Dalby way in southern Queensland. She had the temerity to suggest that he was ‘an environmental vandal’. Sick of predictable city-slicker responses, he offered her a serious challenge. He would give Radio National listeners one of his five-acre paddocks to grow cotton themselves. They could make all the necessary decisions and grow cotton their way, either by phone or through the ABC Website, all expenses paid.

A unique experiment, ‘*Grow Your Own*’, was born. The farmer had effectively donated land, chemicals, fertilizers, machinery and labour. He maintained control, but would do everything the listeners asked. All he wanted was a greater understanding between farmers and urban people; to create a connection between what people wear and where their clothes come from.

Alicia Brown, who worked on *Bush Telegraph* and subsequently produced a *Background Briefing* programme on the whole project was quite frank: ‘To grow cotton, one of Australia’s most controversial crops, you have to grapple with all the big

issues: genetic modification, pesticides and water’. *Background Briefing*, to its credit, recounted exactly what happened and, in so doing, exploded the myths that farming is simple and that farmers make environmentally irresponsible decisions.

The strength of the project—which ran for ten months and involved thousands of listeners—was that it forced listeners to face the same dilemmas, hard decisions, and financial realities as real-life cotton farmers.

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To ensure a level playing field, Stu Higgins used a comparable paddock for himself. ‘My paddock will be watered from the same head ditch; it will be within a metre of your field, from the “Grow Your Own” field.’ Stu knew he would do things differently, but he offered to be available to explain exactly what he did and why.

The listeners’ first choice was what fertilizer to use. Rather than chemicals, they chose natural manure. Stu Higgins commented, ‘We

disagreed from the outset ... I went with the synthetic fertilizers. I used a urea blend, so I could control the nutrients the plants need ... I’d like to be green and go manure. Unfortunately I can’t control what comes out of a cow.’ *Background Briefing* confirmed that ‘manure simply doesn’t have enough nitrogen to replenish the soil and get the best yield.’

And Alicia Brown also added a dilemma for going organic. ‘It takes ... years in fact, for a farmer to switch to organic methods. And during that time, he doesn’t bring in any income ... No-one wants to pay what it cost to produce. Organic farming can’t get the yields to keep up with consumer demand.’

The next choice for ABC listeners was to determine what type of cotton to plant. Stu Higgins explained: ‘There are four types of plants a farmer can choose: conventional cotton, which was first discovered four-and-a-half thousand years ago. The other three are genetically modified.’

Predictably, most listeners would have none of the GM, and phoned in to voice their feelings. Curiously, voting went through the roof, but there was an interesting division. Almost everyone who voted by phone wanted to grow conventional, natural cotton. But those who voted online, through the Website, wanted to grow a genetically modified variety. Conventional cotton won.

According to Stu, ‘Out of the 1,200 growers in Australia, 95 per cent plant a third of their farms with GM Ingard cotton, and I’m one of them. I believe most cotton farmers choose GM cotton for lifestyle reasons and to reduce pesticide use.’

In terms of the impact on the environment, or the farm, University of Western Sydney Professor of Agriculture Peter Cornish, was clear. 'I'd say that cotton is perhaps the best case for genetically modified crops. If there's to be a classic case, it's cotton, because it has so reduced the use of pesticide.'

Water was yet another difficult choice for listeners. As Stu put it, 'The dams were empty, the creek was dry, all I had was two bores. The farm was in the grip of drought.' The listeners still had to choose between their allocated water from the bore, cut back on their water use by 40 per cent, or they could wait for rain. On this critical issue there were heated exchanges of opinion but, in the end, the ABC listeners voted to use their entire water allocation, even though voter response was low overall on this issue. It seems the listeners were faced with the possibility of not getting a crop at all. *Background Briefing* expressed the mood: 'Maybe after going to the trouble of deciding how to fertilize and what kind of cotton variety to grow, the listeners just didn't want their efforts to go to waste due to a lack of water.' The reality was, no water, no cotton. Interestingly, the experienced farmer Stu, whilst also using the full allocation for his paddock to maintain fair comparison, actually cut back his water allocation by 40 per cent for the rest of the farm.

From here on in, a curious thing started to happen. The listeners' idealism began to drop away. What would they do about insects and weeds? Well, they voted for the same 'middle of the road' choice as their cotton farmer landlord. They voted to use a tractor to plough most of the weeds out, but put a bit of herbicide on as well. And they sprayed for insects.

Nevertheless, although 95 per cent of all farmers, including Stu, take out hail insurance against devastating losses, the listeners chose not to. As Stu put it, 'Cotton farmers only get paid once a year. A hailstorm can strip my income to the ground in a

matter of minutes.' The urban dwellers seemed a little indifferent to this real possibility as, ultimately, it would not effect them. So to make the listeners worry a little more, a decision was made that any profits from their cotton would go directly to a charity of their choice. Alicia observed, 'Now that someone was going to make money out of the crop, listeners started to compromise a bit more on their environmental ideals in order to get a higher yield.' So, when it came to using, or not using, synthetic hormones to get the cotton bolls to open at the same time for harvesting, listeners didn't hesitate.

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What were the final results? ABC listeners had used 730 litres of irrigation water to grow each T-shirt, and Stu had used marginally more to grow his T-shirt. However, the listeners grew only 12 bales of premium cotton, or about 12,000 top quality T-shirts worth of cotton on their five acres, whereas Stu had grown just over 20 bales, or 21,000 T-shirts. Even though the listeners grew considerably less than Stu, they still produced what amounts to double the world average per hectare.

Further analysis made in the programme by human ecologist David Dumaresq suggested 'there is an environmental price to pay for everything we buy. Whether an apple, driving to the shops or flushing our toilets, all have an "environmental load".'

The farmer producing the primary ingredient creates a very small environmental load compared to the transport, manufacture and delivery. Says Dumaresq: 'if we measure it by ... external energy applied, only about 20 per cent of the total environmental load of any particular foodstuff is likely to have been carried at the farm level, about maybe 1 per cent to 3 per cent is carried at the retail level, and the major load is actually carried by everything that happens in between. The transportation, processing, packaging, preserving, repackaging ...'

ABC listeners had grown 12 bales of cotton using organic fertilizer and minimal chemicals and all the profits were going to be donated to charity. Would there be a cotton merchant or retailer willing to give consideration for the organic fertilizer, the GM-free effort and charitable cause? As it turned out, through many twists, turns and tentatives, nothing could be done. It was all too costly, even when they were offered free spinning in Melbourne. This was surprising even to Stu. 'I just can't believe that it's cheaper to send bulk cotton to Brisbane, load it on a ship, sail it to Asia, have it turned into T-shirts, then sent back by boat to Australia, than it is to send a few bales by truck to Melbourne, to be spun for free and then turned into T-shirts in Sydney.'

The ABC is to be congratulated on an innovative and fascinating programme that illustrated the complexities of farming and explored the interaction between productivity, efficiency and the environment.

NOTE

This article is derived from the ABC programme *Background Briefing*, 'Grow Your Own—Summer Series'. The complete transcript can be found at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s1010016.htm>

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