

The Case for an Institute and College Of Tropical Agriculture (ICOTA)

'putting the capital back into Farming'

THE AIM

of the College would be to bring Farming Land Management into the professional arena where farmers and other land managers can be trained in a broad spectrum of skills from the technical to the philosophical, producing a well rounded graduate with imaginative and lateral thinking skills, to keep pace with a fast changing world via

- ability to locate and source new techniques and skills
- ability to present and argue a business plan
- to be involved in research and collaborate with researchers and
- provide considered opinions valued by decision makers and media

THE RHETORIC.

With the current push on to develop Northern Australia into a food bowl, and new areas opening up, third party involvement is inevitable and probably essential, however all sides farmers, conservationists and government decision makers, and entrepreneurs need to be on an equal footing in terms of needs and impact. Currently the system is skewed away from the farmer/land manager.

Farmers and Resource Managers control most of the Australian Landscape. Current training in this field is adhoc, except for a few notable exceptions, chief among these is the Marcus Oldham College at Geelong at the southern extremity of the Australian continent far, removed from the tropics. Mostly any managers with qualifications are a product of associated fields such as veterinary science, ag science (specialists in a particular field), conservation, business, law etc all good and true to their particular training in a singular aspect pertaining to agriculture.

Agriculture is currently portrayed and seen as a wrecker of landscapes, a price taker, subject and victim to the vagaries of the weather, markets, and government legislation/regulation resulting in a fast degeneration into the realm of the peasant farmer, this is happening on a broader scale than just Australia. With the average age of farmers being around 60yo and increasing and those of agricultural researchers being of a similar vintage something has to change, a fresh approach needs to be taken. Whether the family farm survives or corporate farming steps in, skills will still be required at the coal face.

The current system is failing to attract students, a notable exception is the aforementioned Marcus Oldham College presenting a Farm Management course. Why do universities continue to flog a tired horse or give up altogether, ignoring the basic principle of supplying what the customer demands.

THE HOW

An Institute of Tropical Agriculture supporting and being supported by a College of Tropical Agriculture to research and train upcoming Scientists and Farmers. If Australia can boast two environmental research flagships in the Antarctic Research Division and Australian Institute of Marine Science, surely one that will actually pay a return on investment economically is way overdue.

To achieve such a goal, what remains, of those having any Tropical Agricultural Science expertise, could/should be seconded as the core staff of the institute and also used for teaching relevant subjects within the College.

Alternatively (or in conjunction), this goal may also be achieved by negotiating the establishment of an external campus of a southern Sandstone University with the relevant expertise and commitment.

Other cheap sources of teaching expertise could be accessed from the ranks of Grey Nomads visiting the north each year, many have expertise in management, politics, farming, banking, teaching, etc.

THE COURSES

Open to debate within the industry. However as a starter :

No training exists at present, that I am aware of, where skills from one area of agriculture (food production) can be utilised in another, each is done in isolation. However a course allowing flexibility for career changes within the agricultural sector would be attractive to students as their needs change or changes are forced upon them by circumstances beyond their control.

In order to address this the initial course could proceed as suggested,

A generic 2-3 year course concentrating on core skills common to all farm/land management then a 2 year specific course in the students chosen field with the option of a return in later years to do a 1-2 year diploma in another field for a career change.

Employment sectors covered by the course

- Cattle
- Cane
- Aquaculture
- Horticulture
- Agricultural Science
- Economics/Accountancy/Banking
- Biosecurity
- Forestry
- Overseas Aid
- Land Management
- Peace Keeping/Aid/Rehabilitation
- Mine Rehab.
- Law
- Media
- Indigenous development

THE NEED

for a stand alone Agricultural Centre of Expertise and Training is because local (tropical) centres of higher education have abandoned agricultural training in pursuit of other areas attracting ready funding such as the environmental sector, then backtracking as funding flows reverse. What serious level of expertise, training, skills and reputation can be achieved by such fickle methodology? While others are located far to the south mounting periodic strategic forays into the deep north dictated by weather, time and funding.

Therefore what is needed is an ongoing, agricultural specific, centre of expertise whose ultimate aim is to become independent of government funding to safeguard against the vagaries of politics.

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