



Royal Agricultural College



100 Club

RAC/RICS Annual Fellowship in
Rural Land Management
Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester

“New Demands; old countryside”

Report No 6

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Rob Yorke Associates Ltd



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2. Research Methodology; interviews and focus group feedback

2.1 Interviews.

I undertook face to face and telephone interviews of key industry leaders within farming, conservation NGOs, supermarket, politics, media, government departments and other rural interests to garner opinion and comment on current and future topics within the rural sector.

No individual names are attributed to any of the content, statements or quotations; unless already in the public domain or cleared with the individual. The opinions expressed within this paper are entirely my own but may at times also reflect other general views canvassed from my interviews.

<p><u>Farming</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter Kendall - National Farmers Union (NFU): President • George Dunn - Tenant Farmers Association (TFA): Chief Executive • Helen Browning - Soil Association (SA): Chief Executive • Christine Tacon - The Co-Operative Farms: Managing Director • Ed Bailey - NFU Cymru: President 	<p><u>Conservation NGOs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Riddle - National Trust: Land Use Director (now retired) • Mark Avery - RSPB: Director of Conservation (now retired) • Alastair Leake - Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT): Head of Policy • Mark Lloyd - The Angling Trust: Chief Executive • Neil Sinden - Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE): Director of Policy & Campaigns 	<p><u>Politicians</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richard Benyon - Minister for Environment • Mary Creagh - Labour Rural Affairs MP • Tim Farron - Lib Dem Rural Affairs MP • Daniel Kawczynski - Conservative MP • Anne Mcintosh - MP EFRA Chairman • Lord Cameron of Dillington • Baroness Byford
<p><u>Civil servants</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sally Webber - Defra Specialist Advisor Food & Farming • Roger Thomas - Countryside Council for Wales (CCW): Chief Executive • Huwel Manley - Countryside Council for Wales: Specialist Support Team Manager • Poul Christensen - Natural England: Chairman • Patrick Isaac - Welsh Government 	<p><u>Supermarkets</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steve McLean - Marks & Spencer: Agriculture Manager • Annie Graham - Sainsburys: Agriculture Manager • Pearce Hughes - Asda: Agriculture Manager 	<p><u>Land managers/advisors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stuart Goodall - ConFor: Chief Executive • William Woolsey - Country Land & Business Association (CLA): President • Caroline Drummond - Linking Environment And Farming (LEAF): Chief Executive • Simon Thorp - Heather Trust: Director • Sue Steer - RICS Countryside Panel • Peter Fane - RICS Countryside Panel • David Slack- RICS Rural Chairman • Jeremy Blackburn - RICS Policy • Jonathan Harrington - plant biologist
	<p><u>Media</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jane King - Farmers Weekly: Editor • Andrew Thorman - BBC: Head of Rural Affairs 	

Table 1: List of Interviewees

1. Executive Summary

If the Foresight report on *The Future of Food and Farming* has faded from your memory, and the Lawton and Read reports on biodiversity and climate change are just a vague recollection, you are probably in tune with the majority of the population. In recent years, they've come thick and fast.

But the reports do have one thing in common. Whether in food production, in biodiversity management or forestry, they demand a 'step change'.

The UK countryside, of which 75% is farmland, is much loved by our urbanised nation.

It helps to feed our stomachs and our souls, it's a place for leisure. However, the general public, seeing it on a short weekend walk at best, or through the warped prism of food packaging at worst, don't get the full picture. Insulated in our urban habitats, Brits are largely ignorant of nature red in tooth and claw, not to mention the complex web of demands we make on our natural environment.

Reconnect our thinking....

The Natural Environment White Paper is pushing biodiversity high up the agenda, aiming to reconnect us with the countryside via nature, rather than food. At the same time, European bureaucrats now claim that on top of paying farmers for their produce from our own pockets, we should pay them from the public purse for a range of benefits – such as clean air or the protection of our fauna and flora. In addition, the EU sets tough targets to cut CO₂, reduce pollution, increase energy from renewables and protect our soil and water.

The vested interests set out their stalls in response. Farmers believe we should prioritise food production and increase self-sufficiency; supermarkets busily provide cheap food; conservationists talk of more money for wildlife and environmentalists call for greener energy. Very often, large membership organisations have the ear of politicians whereas smaller expert groups are ignored. The media, always hungry for emotive stories to feed our 24hour appetite for news, tend to give an unbalanced view which, intentionally or not, can easily feed public prejudice, or worse, hysteria.

Organic confronts conventional farming, town is set against country and everyone seems against biotechnology. Overloaded with these and many other issues, both land managers and the public turn away.

It has led us into a state of confusion, disinterest and general apathy. Scaremongering and belt-tightening have seen climate change slip down the agenda. On the positive side, there is a growing interest in how our undervalued food is produced, but price tends to rule and as long as the countryside looks pretty, we don't enquire how it all works and have little idea that advances in one area may be traded off against reverses in another.

...to drive new action

But we cannot afford to ignore these demands, as the countryside, not nature reserves or gardens, is where our combined demands for food, biodiversity and climate change must be reconciled. Old countryside hands have to grapple with new demands and, together with NGOs, the government and even retailers, explain it to the rest of us. Ecosystem services and sustainable intensification may mean little now but, carefully communicated, traditional farmers, foresters and the new breed of conservationist land managers can understand their *raison d'être* and, critically, the opportunities these new demands bring. Only then will they be able to deliver what wider society is asking of them.

Now's the time for all of us to engage. Vested interests and sacred cows must be put aside as we begin a genuinely 'national conversation' based on trusted, informed and balanced information. The rural sector must get more involved in consultations and co-operation. We must scrutinise new incentives, lobby for rural funding and initiate these step changes before the way we live stamps too heavily on our natural heritage.