

The Bus Ride to Sustainability

A few weekends back an extraordinary event took place in our back yard. A group of city based people concerned about the environment visited a number of local sites designated to host coal seam gas wells, pipes and refining plants along with open cut coal mines. They were a varied bunch. There were students, middle aged couples, nuns, singles, Atheists, Christians and a bloke called Harvey Clarkson whose great grandfather worked on Felton Station in the 1840s. What made this trip different was that it was at the invitation of and with local farmers and landholders. Environmentalists and farmers have not always found themselves on the same side of the fence.

The passengers in the loaded coach found out where much of their food and fibre comes from. They learnt how farming practises have changed over time and how growers have grown in an appreciation of their need to conserve and maintain the soil and the water. They were treated to traditional country style hospitality. After years of trading blows and waging campaigns against each other there is a growing realisation amongst farmers and greenies that it is in everybody's interest to protect and maintain prime agricultural country.

The day left me with a glowing admiration for what is possible when we get rid of labels and prejudice and sit and listen and learn about how we can work together. But the day also left me with a number of unanswered questions. It is estimated that 40000 gas wells could be installed in our region. These wells are designed to collect Coal Seam Gas (CSG) which could involve an estimated 280000 million litres of by-water extracted annually. The possible impacts of this extraction on groundwater supplies are great. A recent report by the Queensland co-ordinator general approving the Queensland Curtis LNG project states,

Drawdown of the CSG aquifer is integral with development of the gas field and extraction of CSG. However, the effects that this may have on other aquifers are largely unknown....If the Walloon coal measures are inter-connected to higher alluvial strata then the potential for long term changes to land uses that rely on groundwater must be considered. (p.119)

So two big questions are what happens to all of this extracted water and is there any guarantee that groundwater used for agriculture will not be permanently damaged? Another related question is what happens to the 54 million tonnes of salt waste produced through the treatment of extracted water? Can we guarantee that these damaging salts will not enter our water ways and soils?

Avenues for compensation or legal action are useless if a precious community resource like the Great Artesian Bore is damaged forever. And the key word here is sustainability. It is a much mis-used word. It is a bit like the word "peace". Everybody is in favour of it – we even fight wars to get it but it means different things to different people. Everybody wants peace – but how we get it and maintain it is another thing altogether. The local councils tell us they want sustainability, the mining companies tell us they are also in

favour of sustainability and both of the major sides of politics also trot out the “S” word when we talk about mining and agriculture.

But somebody, somewhere along the line is going to have to make a stand. We cannot continue to contemplate playing with nature and affecting some of the worlds most fertile soils and think that a few media bites promising sustainability will make it all OK. Until real steps are made to protect the soil and water that provide our clothes and food the promises of environmental protection are shallow.

This cannot remain a minority issue. If we eat food, drink water and wear clothes then we are all involved. Of course there is a place for mining and we use the products of resource extraction every day. But it cannot be at the expense of food growing land. Until the questions of water and salt can be properly answered it would be folly to proceed. The Gulf of Mexico is a real demonstration of what can happen when the rush for resources is taken at the expense of the environment. Safe guards need to be in place before we even consider messing with the precious soils of the Darling Downs.

Bus trips have a bit of a tradition when it comes to social movements. In the United States they were a crucial part of the struggle for civil rights. In Australia the Freedom Rides through Northern New South Wales highlighted the scourge of racism in the 1960s. Perhaps the tour of the Downs which took place a fortnight ago is a continuation of the same journey for social justice. I for one want to be on the food and fibre bus – I just hope we don't all miss it.