

Why bother about rural areas?

I suppose it began as a joke. A number of years ago a colleague introduced me to some fellow academics at a seminar as a person whose specialist area of interest "is anything to do with anything rural." It got the desired laugh of course, and I know that it was intended as a compliment, but for me it was a milestone in thinking seriously about the scope of what we really mean when we say the word "rural."

Is it a very narrow, or a very broad focus on life? Is 'rural' a fixed state, or a relational geographical point, and does the distance from urbanism change with the ease and frequency of global access? If we think of "rural" as somewhere far away from big urban areas, is there really such a thing as 'rural' any longer in a technocratic age dominated by distance-shrinking communications and global travel?

So what is rural? The simplest definitions are merely "something that is not urban." Even more loosely we are told by some people that they "know what it is when they see it." In reality, of course, there is a continuum of habitation from the very urban to the very rural, so a self-definition of perceived rurality is neither scientifically accurate, nor particularly useful unless we are comparing it with a common, agreed, standard of urban infrastructure. The study of this interaction between humans and the natural environment is the discipline of human ecology, and it has many facets.

Yet in 1990, at least 54.8% of the world's population lived in rural areas¹, with a projected 2,981,400,000 people or 51.7% of the world's resident humans by 1995. This year, 2008, marks a watershed in the history of this planet as the number of people living in cities is projected to surpass those in rural areas.² Even with the global rural population levelling off around 3.3 billion, and the urban population continuing to rise, it is still anticipated that 40% of the world's population will live in rural areas by 2030.³ Set these figures beside the knowledge that nearly 130 million square kilometres of the world - almost 66.3% of the land surface excluding Greenland and Antarctica is covered by arable, permanent pasture, or forest and woodland.⁴ This does not include other non-urban land areas. Together these statistics represent a significant proportion of the natural and human resources of this planet, and constitute a powerful argument for the reconsideration of the rural perspective in international development issues.

For almost my entire life, I have observed, created, and participated in rural life at close quarters, under a number of the clumsy but convenient labels that we tend to use to describe our society - rural resident, crofter, academic, environmentalist, educator, mountaineer, community activist. For much of this time I have had to explain to friends and colleagues just *what* it is about big cities that I find so repellent. I have to do this carefully, and diplomatically, not wanting to fall into the traps of stereotype or cliché, and not wanting to consciously offend good people whose preferred choice of lifestyle is very clearly different from my own. Part of the difficulty in projecting strong positive images of rurality is that they are often defined negatively as the inverse of perceived urban attributes. When urban life is ubiquitously marketed as 'progress', then rural values are

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considered at best an Arcadian unreality, and at worst a dangerous regression to a primitive, peasant barbarism – “getting away from it all” and “back to nature” clichés.

I explain to them, as best I can, with short-cut truths, in the knowledge gained from experience that even if they can be helped to understand my reasoning, and even if they empathize, they will not necessarily share my values. As city-dwellers, they frequently seem to harbour sneaking suspicions that, despite my assertions, and despite my apparent contentment with things rural, that I am somehow missing something by being exempted from big-city life. There is a tacit assumption that missing this urban link makes my quality of life poorer than my city counterpart. This is frequently reinforced even in the international language that we speak, for example the Oxford English Dictionary, in its definition of 'urbanity', equates 'urban life', as synonymous with 'courtesy and polished manners'.⁵ At Oxford University, being 'rusticated' used to be the punishment for students, who were sent into the country for a while as a result of a misdemeanour in the town.

This sense of loss, and escapism is captured nicely in the anonymous poem, written on the door of Ryvoan bothy in the cairngorms and copied before it was lost.⁶

I leave tonight from Euston

I shall leave tonight from Euston
By the seven-thirty train,
And from Perth in the early morning
I shall see the hills again.
From the top of Ben Macdhui
I shall watch the gathering storm,
And see the crisp snow lying
At the back of Cairngorm.
I shall feel the mist from Bhrotain
And pass by Lairig Ghru
To look on dark Loch Einich
From the heights of Sgoran Dubh.
From the broken Barns of Bynack
I shall see the sunrise gleam
On the forehead of Ben Rinnes
And Strathspey awake from dream.
And again in the dusk of evening
I shall find once more alone
The dark water of the Green Loch,
And the pass beyond Ryvoan.
For tonight I leave from Euston
And leave the world behind;
Who has the hills as lover,
Will find them wondrous kind.

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It is difficult to explain the attractions of the country without seeming to deprecate, or at least challenge, the dominant (and dominating) ideals of urban culture. It is not simply the noise, the dirt, and the densely packed rivers of humanity that I find so unpleasant, it is deeper than that. Culturally and ecologically I am as far out of my natural habitat as the proverbial fish out of water. In this case, I feel considerable empathy with Robert Louis Stevenson when he wrote from the South Seas to the author Henry James saying,

“I was never fond of towns, houses, society, or (it seems) civilization the sea, islands, islanders, the island life and climate, make and keep me truly happier.”⁷

The relentless, genetically influenced process of natural selection, producing the experimentation of our history as a species, has had 100 million years of fine tuning⁸ In contrast, it is barely 5,000 years since some members of our species began to come together, in Mesopotamia, in the earliest recorded cities.⁹ Fundamentally, it is difficult to conceive that the former has not had a more substantial and more profound influence than the latter, on our abilities to survive and thrive on this planet. We have, in effect, been hard-wired for the rural environment.

This association with habitats and biotopes is useful, and I will return to this, but first let me deal with the cultural aspects. When I left university I had been recently married, and was building our house in Lewis, where we still live. As I passed through Inverness on one occasion I nipped in to the British Telecom office to order my new telephone connection. As I worked through my application form with the clerk he asked me at one point for the title of my employment. I made a fatal hesitation, and he snapped, "You do have a job?" I responded that (like many rural people) I had several jobs. "Give me one!" he demanded. So I told him that I was a crofter. He eyed me coldly and said, "You'd better give me another." Glad to oblige, I told him that I was also a university Tutor (though in fact only a very part-time Tutor at that stage). His attitude changed immediately to obsequious. I wanted him to ask me to name another job, for at that time I had recently completed my PhD in geochemistry and was also working as a Plater's mate at an oil rig fabrication yard. But for him, the question of my status had apparently been resolved.

I tell this story as it serves to illustrate the rather ambivalent attitude of our society towards work, as well as to perceived social status. In a post-agriculturalist society, the differential in average wages and conditions between the rural peasant farmer and the urban artisan has grown increasingly wider.¹⁰ During the 20th century, this disparity in the materialistic quality of life has resulted in a continued drain of population from the rural areas as men and women sought to exchange life in the countryside for the expectation of a better life in urban areas. This general statement, however, projects images of cultural stereotypes which for both the urban and rural context. It obfuscates the extent and distribution of poverty, the levels of social inclusion, and the huge changes in popular expectations of quality of life.¹¹ I am reminded of a national rural disadvantage

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study when a respondent from Harris was quoted as saying that they were “only poor in financial terms”.¹²

There has been a growing interest in the phenomena of pluriactivity (multiple job-holding) in rural households¹³, and there have been a number of publications, which have explored its importance forcrofting¹⁴ and for rural development more generally.¹⁵ Though some academics prefer to adopt a more limited definition, a broad interpretation of pluriactivity includes recognition of all the different income contributions to the household, whether from farm or non-farm sources. Other researchers, perhaps more concerned with the impacts, rather than the abstracts, have identified the pursuit of pluriactivity as a form of survival strategy that enables the household to spread its risks yet maximize the benefits of its diverse skills.¹⁶

It is intriguing to speculate that there is perhaps an analogy between such survival strategies and the maintenance of genetic diversity by natural selection. In economic, as well as biological systems, specialization may lead to greater efficiency in the occupation of a particular niche, but at the cost of the loss of flexibility and opportunities for future change. Pluriactivity is a successful and practical response to the volatility of the rural economic environment by ensuring localized economic diversity.

The difference in the perceived quality of life between rural and urban is frequently characterized in modern creative literature. In novels such as *Sunset Song*¹⁷ *Grapes of Wrath*¹⁸ and *Independent People*¹⁹ gritty, gloomy images of rural drudgery are portrayed in sharp contrast to the promise of bright, fast, enticing opportunities offered by city life. Other authors, such as Hardy²⁰ created a mythical rurality lamenting the passing of a simpler, more innocent, golden age. Frequently, what these authors are portraying is the dramatization of an escape from the effects of the raw, untameable, physical, rural environment. The flight of the characters is to a sanitized, so-called 'civilized' life-style that is defined by the interpolation of artificial barriers intended to distance and cushion the individual from any direct relationship with the reality of the natural world.²¹

On a different plane, the writings of Neil Gunn²² and numerous works of John Buchan, have explored the thin veneer of the urban civilization. Buchan frequently juxtaposes the toils and cares of the city with the liberation and rejuvenation represented by the countryside. In an essay on “Scholar-Gipsies” in an anthology of essays of the same title²³, Buchan celebrated the educated men of learning who recognize their “wandering spirits”, renounce (temporarily but repetitively) the material pleasures of the world and “the luxuries of civilization” to roam the countryside in order to appreciate its basic values. This “kinship with nature” is analyzed in detail, as no mere weekend fancy of leisure, but a deeply primeval re-connection with the essence of the human condition in the natural environment. This is human ecology at its most pure that brings with it an education, an understanding, a type of wisdom, and a spirituality that cannot be found in books, business deals, or the materialist trappings of human society.

The books that I have cited are largely works of fiction, but possibly only marginally more fictional than the escapist and supposedly idyllic wilderness experience of Henry

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David Thoreau in *Walden*.²⁴ In this autobiographical work Thoreau adopts a rural life-style, and urges the simplification of life so that its true values can be more clearly discerned. Though successive generations of political reformers and environmentalists have lauded him, and though we may all agree with the general thrust of his polemic, it now seems certain that he was, as we say in modern parlance, 'economical with the truth'. Life is a lot more complex than simple choices between rural bliss and urban materialism. The two are intertwined much like a natural ecosystem, and like an ecosystem, human society progresses in small cumulative adaptations that are regulated by natural selection by society at large. This operates as a complex adaptive system, which I have written about elsewhere.²⁵

This, in essence, is at the heart of human ecology, that is, the study of the relationships between humans and the environment.²⁶ When we speak of "sustainable development" we are only now coming to realize in the body of scientific and political literature, that we require a holistic definition that includes economic, social, environmental, and social equity evaluations of sustainability. No single component in itself can furnish an adequate, comprehensive, analysis of the complexities enveloped in the whole concept of sustainable development.

As a human society, we have explicitly acknowledged that economic development by itself does not constitute progress without a demonstrable level of social improvement.²⁷ An example would be the acceptance of 'public good' services such as health, education, public order and the justice system, that are not themselves founded simply upon the profit motive. We have even, albeit belatedly, conceded that conventional economics is clumsy and inadequate in dealing with issues of natural resource use and natural capital protection. For example, the use of GDP as an indicator of development has severe limitations in that it only purports to measure the national income, not the distribution of that income, nor the 'usefulness' or morality of the expenditure. A reconstruction programme after an earthquake or another natural disaster may send the GDP soaring, yet only result in a reinstatement of the pre-disaster infrastructure, after a period of great destruction, loss of life, and human misery.

GDP is a measure of economic production, but this obscures the effect of local purchasing power, and takes no account at all of the features of well-being and individual use that cannot be obtained simply by money.²⁸ The basic human entitlements of health, education, and political liberties are some examples of these features of well-being. The issues of human social equity, both inter-generational and intra-generational, constitute perhaps the major political challenge for the first half of the 21st century, including issues of gender, socio-economic inclusion, and environmental well-being. At least the challenge has been recognized, even if the values placed upon equity seem to be as many as the myriad of global political persuasions, which apparently defy consensus.

A major attraction of the urban identity lies in the overweening concern for the primacy of political economy as the major pre-occupation of 'modern society'. This is based upon the realization that urban society offers opportunities for economies of scale, and therefore greater profits than is possible (or even desirable?) in the rural context.²⁹

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Political economists talk of "the free market" as if it is an independent biological entity rather than acknowledge that "the market" is a social construction, with its values socially defined and its benefits socially manipulated. The step, that *Homo sapiens* have evidently still to make, is to recognize that our perceptions of the natural environment are also, largely, socially constructed. It has been claimed³⁰ that humans

"live in a social world as well as in a web of symbiotic relations so that their areal patterns of adjustment depend on social as well as on ecological processes."

Following this, three levels of relationships between *Homo sapiens* and the environment have been identified, namely:

- 1) as a physical mass (e.g. gravitational attraction);
- 2) as a living organism, (changed by and changing the immediate ecosystem);
- 3) as a cultured human being (interacting with the environment in a complex manner, neither as a mere physical mass nor simply as a living organism.)

It is these cultural constructions of the natural environment that allow for the diversity of the interpretations placed upon rurality (or closeness to the natural landscape) and urban living (which equates sophistication with distance from nature). This in turn enables urbanites to assume a higher value on lifestyles that seem to supplant nature with technology - such as air conditioning, central heating, an abundance of commodities not produced in the immediate locality, and devices that dispense with the need for personal physical labour. The landscape is sanitized and reconstructed to appear in an image in which the comfort of the observer is valued more highly than the experience of physical reality.

A result of this re-invention of the countryside was that

"Nature was scarcely seen at all, for the lover of the picturesque was bent upon discovering not the world as it is, but the world as it might have been had the creator been an Italian artist of the seventeenth century."³¹

The deception goes further, however, prompting one observer to comment that

"The Arcadian idyll, for example, seems just another pretty lie told by propertied aristocracies (from slave-owning Athens to slave-owning Virginia) to disguise the ecological consequences of their greed."³²

The issue resolves around our images of the rural identity, - the individual perspective and the collective construction. This collective image of the countryside is sometimes called the cultural landscape - but what are these perceptions of 'culture'?³³ The concept

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of the cultural landscape is a mythical heterogeneous image that 'the people' of a nation conceive of their countryside heritage. In practice, there is unlikely to be a single, accepted image of rurality³⁴, other than, perhaps, a dangerously stereotypical rustic simplicity- whether the sanitized, planned landscape, or the perceptions of remnant wilderness. As Hugh Brody has eloquently explored in his books,

“beyond the farmers’ frontier, there is no such thing as countryside. Instead, there is wild, raw nature, a wilderness.”³⁵

This wilderness, he explains, has been regarded as being of little use by farmers and other harbingers of ‘civilization’ but with great care and a great deal of insight, he demolishes this reactionary romanticism that is attempting to re-write history in its own mode, and points out,

“This line of reasoning draws on a faith in progress and posits more or less a priori that human history is composed of changes that are improvements. Yet to suggest that all change is for the better is to pretend that frontiers do not exist, or that they proceed in some benign and innocent way. This is a belief, not a discovery made by social science. To insist that all changes are some form of ‘development’ does not oppose romance with realism. Faith in progress is itself a kind of religion.” (op cit p125)

Fortunately, there is a growing realization of the values of so-called ‘wilderness’, and an increasingly sophisticated international debate over the identification and protection of these values.³⁶

It has also been argued that

"The urban context of this little drama is important. Arguably, *both* kinds of arcadia, the idyllic as well as the wild, are landscapes of the urban imagination, though clearly answering to different needs."³⁷

Yet, it was the success of the very practical rural economy that allowed the urban dream to become achievable. In his scholarly work on the links between the agrarian revolution of the ancient Greeks and the consequent birth of democratic politics, Victor Davis Hanson³⁸ explains persuasively how improved cultivation and husbandry enabled the production of surplus food commodities, which in turn allowed farmers a greater disposable income and more time to enjoy lifestyle luxuries. This afforded a measure of rural power to counterbalance the growing political influence of the urban glitterati.

In ancient Athens, however, and later in Rome, democracy was for the free male citizens, it did not include women, children, and slaves. Their 'free' and 'civilized' societies were completely dependent on the captive and disenfranchised majority. The argument of social equity as an integral component of sustainable development was still two-and-a-half millennia before its time. The Mediterranean cities were, quite literally, both

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physically and economically, built upon the fertile, highly productive alluvial plains, and the rural workforce.

Very quickly, the settled population of the Mediterranean city states strained the limits of the agricultural resources of their immediate environment. This locked them into a cycle of expansion, conquest, and trade in order to ensure their survival. This trade was based upon grain, which was so important that "in 123 BC, Rome assumed the responsibility of distributing a monthly ration of corn - free - to every eligible citizen,"³⁹ (not including women, children, and slaves of course!)

The importance of grain in fuelling urban growth and power should not be underestimated. There is a convincing argument that locates the roots of the Cold War, not simply in a clash of ideology, for the application of Marxist industrial planning to the rural economy was a spectacular failure in most cases, but in the competition for domination of the global grain markets. It was the US fear of the power of the vast Soviet grain-producing lands that escalated tensions and trade restrictions. This hegemony is preserved in the US farm practice of feeding surplus grain to pigs, reducing the cost of production, and undermining local pork markets in countries across the globe.

In truth, it was the commoditization of agriculture that initially enabled urbanization. It is the urban demand for food and natural resources that has continued to drive the intensive commoditization of the countryside. Not simply arable cash crops, but timber, fishing rights, wild game, and more recently wildlife habitats have had a value placed upon them.⁴⁰ The natural environment itself has become regarded as natural capital.

An interesting contribution to our analysis of the global versus the local commoditization of food produce has been provided by Kloppenburg and his colleagues in their discussion of the concept of the foodshed.⁴¹ This raises the importance of the locality and of localism as a complement, and in some cases an antidote, to globalism by a consideration of the flow of food into a locality. Vegetables from the home garden, beef from a farm in the neighbouring county, and apples from New Zealand help to graphically illustrate the connectedness of a locality, in a similar manner to the concept of the watershed in geography and ecology.

In times of crisis - war, famine, transport breakdown, or large epidemics, the centrality of our inter-connectedness with the rural world is dramatically reinforced and brought to our attention – empty supermarket shelves and flooded farmers' fields. We are entering an age when localism is seen as a modifying factor to the debilitating effects of globalism. This is not a narrow, parochial, post-agricultural localism, but a growing realization of the contributions, values, and strengths of local identity, linked by ubiquitous electronic media of the internet to the best aspects of globalism – sharing values, knowledge dissemination, peer-to-peer learning, and solidarity-building between local interest groups and between producer-consumer networks across our planet. I will return to these electronic networks later.

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The contemplation of a locality, and the network of food production required to support that locality, becomes a powerful illustration of the links between place and people, nature and society. This includes a consideration of the strength of local, regional, and global networks, and offers both a vocabulary for academic analysis as well as a pragmatic bridge for shifting from theory to action.

This is not just a matter of self-sufficiency, or even self-reliance. Despite the persistent issues of rural depopulation and the differential socio-economic inclusion of rural residents within so-called "mainstream" society, there is a case that rural communities are inherently more sustainable than urban ones. Clear links to the natural resource base, a dependence upon remaining within the carrying capacity, and at least the potential of local self-reliance, create an area of clear water around the sustainability of rural communities. The total dependence of urban communities upon imported goods and food makes it imperative for them to support the mythical concept of a capitalist urban utopia.

Where this comfortable Arcadian vision begins to break down, however, is in the dislocation of communities from the primary production function of the land. In the system that we currently face, powerful drivers in the form of transnational agribusiness, and their desire to extend and consolidate their global empires, create profound and worrying implications for the homogenization of our food, our communities, and our landscapes. Happily, the remarkable growth of community land trusts in this part of the world offers an opportunity for communities to reconnect with the land, and the spaces for food, timber, housing, renewable energy, wildlife. The Community Land Trusts also offer stimulating models of innovative thinking for other parts of the world. In the pursuit of sustainable communities, rural areas offer enormous potential to be self-sustaining, with community-scale power generation, social housing, and self-managing, to a level that is very difficult, if not impossible, for large urban areas. The benefits to society from this rural renaissance are not simply local, they are national and global – such as the unique contribution that appropriate rural management can make in combating human-made climate change.

I have speculated elsewhere on the importance of the land, and the culture of the land⁴², and also the link between this culture and our concepts of democracy and civil rights⁴³. I believe that this affinity with the landscape, with the products and the moods of the landscape, is deeply rooted in the human psyche. On the metaphysical level it is encapsulated by a few of verses by Norman MacCaig in his poem *A man in Assynt*.⁴⁴

"Who owns this landscape?
Has owning anything to do with love?
For it and I have a love-affair, so nearly human
we even have quarrels. -
When I intrude too confidently
it rebuffs me with a wind like a hand
or puts in my way
a quaking bog or a loch
where no loch should be. Or I turn stonily

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away, refusing to notice
the rouged rocks, the mascara
under a dripping ledge, even
the tossed, the stony limbs waiting.

I can't pretend
it gets sick for me in my absence,
though I get
sick for it. Yet I love it
with special gratitude, since
it sends me no letters, is never
jealous and, expecting nothing
from me, gets nothing but
cigarette packets and footprints.

Who owns this landscape? -
The millionaire who bought it or
the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning
with a deer on his back?

Who possesses this landscape? -
The man who bought it or
I who am possessed by it?"

This level of connection to the rural ecosystem has been progressively obscured for most cosmopolitans, with only vestigial reminders manifested in the constructions of metropolitan features such as Central Park, the Bois de Boulogne, or Hampstead Heath. The urban connectivity with rurality, or lack of it, has been brought into sharp focus again with the crises of BSE, foot-and-mouth disease, and Asian bird 'flu'. These public health concerns have placed a rather abstract scientific concept - the food web - at the centre of popular awareness. More importantly, political acts such as the creation of a government Food Standards Agency have squarely placed the scrutiny of rural activities and the future of rural welfare at the centre of media interest. This, of course, is a double-edged sword, for public debate depends for its integrity upon both the selection of relevant news topics and the veracity of their coverage. The dumbing-down tendency for snappy sound bites as opposed to comprehensive scientific accuracy has at best distracted public attention from the serious fundamental issues, and at its worst has conspired against public education by elevating a partially sighted view of what constitutes a "newsworthy" article.

The debate on genetically modified (GM) foods is a striking example of this.⁴⁵ While no serious scientist would disagree on the need for further research into GM food production, the manner in which this research is conducted, prioritized, and implemented is of serious concern to many. The genetic manipulation of agricultural plants and animals has been the business of farmers since the dawn of husbandry. The difference

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now is in the speed of the adaptive mutation - from the patient and selective cross-breeding through generation after generation of farm produce, to gene-splicing almost overnight in the laboratory. Despite the public distrust, and the withdrawal of GM companies from Britain, there are continued demands from some quarters for field trials to test a number of GM species in the environment of the open countryside, as opposed to the hermetic environment of the closed laboratory. In these moves to treat the countryside as a laboratory, there are a number of serious risks. Firstly, the genetic modification of the GM species to produce the desired adaptations may fundamentally influence the interaction of the new gene sequence with other genetic features of the host organism, and with the wider ecosystem. Without extensive field trials it is almost impossible to fully predict the effects of such interactions. This may seem to support the case for field trials, but it ignores one of the most fundamental precepts of environmental science, the Precautionary Principle. This states that we should avoid inappropriate risks and abandon or reject policies and practices that could have unsustainable outcomes or negative impacts on the ecosystem.⁴⁶ Put simply, it means that when faced with any significant uncertainty in the predictability or the reversibility of an action, such as the introduction of GM crops to an uncontrolled environment, then we should take the precaution of NOT conducting the experiment until that unpredictability or irreversibility can be removed or adequately controlled.

The other major risk, however, comes not from interference in ecological systems but in the human social system. Observers of the debate on the introduction of GM foods are entitled to wonder if this is just another manifestation of urban imperialism, with rural communities in the firing line as expendable resources for the greater good of maintaining urban growth, urban values, and urban quality of life. There is little doubt that the countryside and rural communities will suffer more harshly than urban communities if the GM crop experimentation backfires. These risks damage the credibility of scientific integrity - what is investigated depends upon who funds the research, and who determines the funding priorities depends upon adequate and accurate information being available to government and to the public at large.

Scare mongering about genetic mutation itself is not only wrong-headed and dangerous. It is a red herring to the real and more lasting fundamental issues. We need to raise the level of ecological literacy in human society, not just interpreting the landscape, but applying our knowledge, and using our understanding to manage societal evolution. Most importantly we need to base management strategies for regional development upon sound ecological principles, ones that relate to the scale and carrying capacity of the countryside. We need also to deal with the incremental problems of the piecemeal destruction of habitats, death by a thousand cuts of short-sighted political expediency in countryside planning. The management of natural capital, including the biodiversity of a region, needs to be recorded on the balance sheet of public resources, and husbanded as carefully as we would tend to our own family.

In this new management style, we need to clearly agree a balance between efficiency and sufficiency, between the rights of individuals as opposed to the rights of their communities. We need to optimize the exploitation of natural and human resources rather

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than maximize them. We need to find a way to value the component parts of sustainable management of the resources of our own society in ways that add value to the whole, rather than allowing single-sector interest groups to set the components in conflict with each other – conservation versus development, human potential versus wildlife.

This of course challenges issues of power and hegemony. The non-farming component of rural areas is almost totally lacking a strong political voice, while agriculture *per se* is a minority and diminishing economic force in the countryside. This is one of the reasons that we have seen the impressive growth, in numbers, extent, and influence, of the Scandinavian Village Associations and the European Rural Parliament Movement.⁴⁷ I do not want to get into a discussion here on development versus conservation, or the equation that ‘development’ equals ‘progress’. These topics have been dealt with in other places.⁴⁸ Suffice to say that it is more helpful to envisage conservation as a form of development, a form with different outcomes perhaps, but never-the-less a structured, positive activity with benefits and constraints upon human communities and their various sub-groups.

The fundamentally important point is that this vision that we have of rural areas, this concept of rurality, is constructed by the things that we have been told about rurality, our past experiences of it, and the pictures, films, and books with which we have come in contact. In short, we recognize the memes – the ideas – relating to rurality that replicate successfully and survive to multiply. In this context, a view of cultural evolution is becoming understood that treats the "self-replicating elements of culture passed on by imitation" as "units of information residing in a brain" and has labelled them 'memes' by analogy to genes as the drivers of biological evolution.⁴⁹ Looked at in this manner we can perhaps begin to appreciate the enormity of the task ahead of us in our pursuit of sustainable development and socio-environmental harmony.

We need to become better ecological accountants, able to balance the costs and benefits of our impact on the world around us. This entails developing relationships that encourage becoming native to place, a sort of ‘place-based-learning’⁵⁰ that supports various forms of sustainable development as core of lifestyle values. As I have already said, this is a complex adaptive system, and sustainable development is a complex problem, the possible solutions of which are inter-related, often unpredictable, and subject to natural selection. The ideas that perpetuate themselves will survive, those that don’t will not, regardless of how intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘moral’ these ideas might be.⁵¹ We have an obligation to identify clearly what the indicators of sustainable development might be, and to convince the public that these are indicators of public welfare in exactly the same way that we measure literacy, access to education, healthcare, clean water, and personal security as basic human entitlements. The really BIG idea for the 21st century is the management of sustainable development that is relevant to localized human communities. How will this be done? How will we know when it is being done effectively? Who will control it, and who will benefit most? I think that the Community Land Trusts and more powerful, more responsive Local Authorities should be key players in this equation. At present we do not know the definitive answer, but we have an obligation to explore possible scenarios that appear to foster positive solutions – inter-

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connectivity (people-to-people as well as people-to-nature); altruistic activities that promote an appropriate balance between the individual ego and the good of the wider community; and learning activities that encourage popular understanding of scientific praxis (i.e. reflection and action) that work to reduce destructive emotions, inappropriate memes, and negative outputs.⁵²

So what is development? Well, that is a big topic for another day. The activities that constitute 'development' – as opposed to shadow development that appears similar but produces no benefits to the grassroots communities – are complex, contested, and convoluted. Often it is easier to define what is *not* development, the bricks, tarmac, and red tape that create further problems in their wake. At its core, sustainable rural development is about **people** and **communities** – but not *just* this. It is also about human ecology – how people relate to their natural environment – and humanism – how people relate to other people and their belief systems.

An ethnocentric myth frequently propagated by urbanites is the assumption that the urban life style is "at the centre of things", that it is the focus of politics, the arts, the economic nerve centre, the cultural leader. This has a certain currency, for a key definition of "rural" is the sparsity of population, which means less interconnecting events between people, less exposure to world lifestyles and world dialogue.

There are two major failings with this perspective; the arrogant assumption that urban difference inevitably means 'better' rather than simply alternative, and secondly the complete neglect to give value to other forms of cultural values. This supposes of course that there *are* considerable differences between urban and rural values. This is a moot point, for though there *are* certain unique characteristics in each stereotype, there is also of course considerable overlap. In an increasingly interconnected global society, networked by computer power, with the archive and human resources of the Internet, is anywhere really isolated from anywhere else now? If rurality is simply defined as distance from the urban, how does that spatial understanding alter with distance-shrinking technologies that allow me to video-conference to a meeting 1000 miles away, or tele-commute daily to work without leaving my own croft house? Electronic forms of distributed education hold an exciting potential for rural schools, training for rural micro-enterprise, informal learning, and decentralized universities with online resources.⁵³ The UHI should be at the centre of this debate and should lead by good example.

With ebusiness enabling transnational collaboration, elearning techniques to moderate the constraints of geographical and time access to specialist education, telemedicine and edemocracy to enable distributed services and participative decision-making, the possibility would seem to exist for combining the convenient connectivity of urban areas with the high quality of rural ways of life. Communities of physical place have been augmented by Internet-based communities⁵⁴ that allow even the most specialized and remote enthusiast to relate intimately to fellow enthusiasts in widely distributed parts of the world. With global digital access, are rural areas nowadays not just examples of highly distributed cities? In the future, the roll out of broader bandwidth Internet access will be seen as a fundamental turning point in this re-visioning of the rural identity.

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Globally, 50% of the population is under 25 years of age. In the last 60 seconds, 1000 mobile phones have been sold. In Bhutan, Nepal, Kenya and Somalia, people are choosing to purchase mobile phone connections over the complicated impossibilities of land-lines – leap-frogging the trial-and-error development of more technologically advanced societies and delivering what is most appropriate for their own. The generation of digital natives is now no longer avoidable; it is the option of first presumption for the school children and students at college and university today. It will change completely what tomorrow's generation will expect in the way of educational and career opportunities in rural areas. If it is possible to do satisfying and remunerative work from a beautiful, spacious, rural area, why would anyone choose to commute from an overcrowded, homogenized suburbia to an overcrowded, polluted, over-valued, stack of office-blocks?

Almost instantaneous, always-on access to complex data transfers will enable the benefits of immediacy and intimacy in service-delivery, retail transactions, and social intercourse that is currently almost unimaginable, unpredictable in its limitations, and almost science-fiction in its aspirations. But the joke is that this is based upon science-fact, not science fiction.⁵⁵ The limits of connected learning, digital information sharing, collaborative working, and device convergence remain to be tested, but a key emergent property is the reduction, even abandonment, of many of our preconceptions of rurality. How do we draw a line around rural communities when the lines of connection – urban to rural and rural to rural in other countries – are so pervasive, and so unpredictably flexible? Is it possible that rural areas will come to be defined by the opportunities and entitlements of the rural space, hill-walking, livestock grazing, pleasant countryside surroundings, lack of traffic, rather than simply by the distance *from* centres of dense population? For this reason, I believe, the really exciting, innovative applications of new technology to eSociety will have greatest impact in rural areas rather than urban regions.

Simply because there is no ONE rural type, no single image of rurality, the definition and the extent of a rural area is messy for the tidy minds of the academic, the civil servant, and the politician. It is easier to define the boundaries and total population of the metropolitan areas of the globe, than it is to similarly quantify the rural regions. Nevertheless, to focus upon the urban areas as being definitive of the politics, culture, landscape, or economy of a country is self-evidently limiting and erroneous, - it is the non-urban areas of a country that characterize and differentiate the nation-state or region from the heterogeneous similarity of humanity that the urban zones exemplify. It is the mountains, lochs, field patterns, forests, and traditional architecture that are the icons of our unique heritage, not just the isolated but distinctive urban buildings set in a sea of concrete uniformity.

In conclusion, there are six main reasons why rural areas are important:-

- 1) As sources of biodiversity – a vital gene pool with unknown and unpredictable applications.

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- 2) As a reliable source of food supply – the agricultural and horticultural basis of human food systems.
- 3) As vital sources of natural resources and capital – the resources of future ecosystem management.
- 4) As important localities of cultural reserves – maintaining regional languages, customs, and artistic heritages.
- 5) As resources for human recreational activities - the clichéd “lung for the city” is now no longer limited to localized recreation, but is open to transnational eco-tourism.
- 6) As new work spaces for the digital, online age – with the benefits of rural space, sense of place, and quality life-styles.

It is likely that these reasons will become more important, rather than less, as human pressures increase on global resources. This makes it more urgent than ever before that we can really understand the natural systems of the countryside and our own interactivity with these systems.

To conclude, perhaps, in time, we will all be able to empathize with the sentiments of Norman MacCaig in his poem *Among scholars*⁵⁶ in which he said:-

"On our way to a loch, two miles from Inveruplan,
Three of us (keepers) read the landscape as
I read a book. They missed no word of it:
Fox-hole, strange weed, blue berry, ice-scrape, deer's hoof-print.
It was their back yard, and fresh as the garden in Eden
(Striped rock 'like a Belted Galloway'). They saw what I
Saw, and more, and its meaning. They spoke like a native
The language they walked in. I envied them, naturally...."

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