

New (ad)ventures in family farming: Rural entrepreneurship in 21st century New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper arises from a larger research programme examining current transitions in New Zealand agriculture. Our particular interest is in the rise in New Zealand of the multi-functional family farm. These family-owned farm businesses are best characterised as 'hybrid' commercial entities because they combine, in novel ways, traditional production-orientated activities (business as usual) with one or more new, and often small scale or niche, consumption-orientated enterprises. How farmers go about creating the consumption-based arm of their farm businesses, and embedding them in the family farm structure, is the main focus of our inquiry. This process is significantly underexplored in the recent context of the New Zealand experience and thus our research attempts to open up a new conceptual space for thinking about the subject. Our fieldwork has included in-depth interviews with entrepreneurial family farmers, an analysis of secondary data, and interpretive farm-walks. Our conceptual work has been informed by ideas sourced from the literature on: rural entrepreneurship; the commodification of rural space and the multi-functional global countryside. In this paper we present three family-farm business case studies which are used to illustrate the ebbs and flows of the process of new farm venture creation in New Zealand. Our discussion leads to two main conclusions. First, rural entrepreneurs do not operate in insolation when developing their new venture but rely on, and sometimes create from scratch, particular local-global networks. The shape and success of their new business may be strongly influenced by these network relations or 'social worlds'. Second, the peripheral location of many family farms creates a unique way-of-working: resource-constraints are common to the experience of business start-up and thus many entrepreneurial farmers do, by necessity, adopt a 'bricolage' approach to the development of their new on-farm enterprise(s). Our concluding discussion also highlights a major challenge for entrepreneurial family farmers in New Zealand: balancing the demands of new venture creation with the exigencies of family and community life.

KEY WORDS: Rural entrepreneurship, family farming, networks, bricolage, New Zealand, global countryside

Introduction

In a feature story in the 2016 March/April edition of *NZ Life and Leisure*, Cheree Morrison offers the story of Westmere Farm: “home, business and playground” of the Laugesen-Campbell family (Cheree, 2016). The property, which is located in the Waitaki Valley of New Zealand’s South Island, is characterised as a multi-functional family business. It comprises an established 1100 hectare irrigated dairy operation, wagyu beef raising enterprise and new lavender venture, involving the growing, harvesting, processes and selling of home-made lavender soaps, balms and oils at the family’s small retail store located on the property. The Laugesen-Campbell’s entrepreneurial (ad)ventures are not uncommon in New Zealand where many family farmers are diversifying their on-farm income streams and producing their own version of the ‘multi-functional family farm’ (Seuneke, 2014). These ‘hybrid’ entities combine conventional farming with one or more non-traditional on-farm enterprises. They represent the efforts of farmers who are proactively ‘changing with the times’ via innovative thinking and action. They also represent a shift away from the single enterprise ‘super-productivist’ farm for which New Zealand is most acclaimed (Roche & Argent, 2015).

Here we report part of a study of rural entrepreneurship in New Zealand, focusing particularly on the rural entrepreneurial process: why three family farms in New Zealand have diversified their income streams and how, in practice, they developed their new on-farm enterprises. As noted by Westhead and Wright (2013, p.7) “the entrepreneurial process involves all the functions and activities associated with perceiving opportunities and pursuing them.” A process-orientated study of entrepreneurship requires attention be given to the combined elements of opportunity recognition, information and resource acquisition, and networking. The rural entrepreneurship process is significantly underexplored in the recent context of the New Zealand experience and our research attempts to open up a new conceptual space for thinking about the subject. We begin with a short backdrop of rural change in New Zealand combined with relevant literature. This includes commentary on the neo-liberalisation of the New Zealand economy in 1984, which set in train a ‘flowering’ of entrepreneurial activity on farms (Gow, 2005). A brief methodological note is then offered, followed by the presentation of three multi-functional family-farm business case studies. A brief concluding discussion highlights our main findings.

The New Zealand context and literature

A review of the literature on rural change in New Zealand (Mackay et al., 2009) highlights an enduring interest in the structural forces which transformed New Zealand agriculture in the late 20th century. This research focused mainly on the rapid neo-liberalisation of the New Zealand economy (in 1984) and accompanying processes of rural restructuring, which

included farm subsidy removal and the deregulation and re-regulation of primary industries (e.g., Britton et al., 1992; Cloke, 1989, 1996; Fairweather, 1987, 1992; Lawrence et al., 1992; Le Heron & Roche, 1999). During this time, the removal of agricultural subsidies was a primary concern for many New Zealand farmers as it had an immediate detrimental effect on farm income and debt-levels, and the capacity to employ outside labour (Gouin, 2006; Rayner, 1990).

Subsequent studies positioned rural entrepreneurship within these discussions of rural structural change. They characterised the coping strategies that New Zealand farmers employed in response to the restructuring. One strategy was for members of the family to seek employment off-farm (i.e., to 'self-exploit' (Wilson, 1994)) in order to generate much-needed supplementary farm income (Benediktsson et al., 1990; Johnsen, 2004; Le Heron, 1991; Robertson et al., 2008). Another strategy was to diversify into new forms of on-farm economic activity, including tourism, but also new variants of agriculture and horticulture, food and beverage processing, light manufacturing and agricultural services (Wilson, 1995; Taylor & McCrostie, 1997). Taylor and McCrostie (1997) note that the proliferation of these farm enterprises was part of strategy to build a more diverse farm-business, and thus a more resilient family farm, in what was a particularly disheartening and volatile economic time. In these terms, the 'flowering' (Gow, 2005) of rural entrepreneurship in New Zealand in the late 20th century can be interpreted as an economic *survival* strategy.

A more recent research theme positions family farming and rural entrepreneurship at the epicentre of new debates about globalisation – a process and context which is creating new landscapes of change and economic opportunity (Woods, 2014, Perkins et al., 2015; Mackay, et al., 2014). Woods (2014) examines this in reference to a number of cases from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. He discusses how 'globally-engaged' family farmers have deployed their business acumen and resources, and/or used/created local-global networks to develop new on-farm businesses. Woods (2014, p.32) adopts a relational perspective, which "allows for rural actors to have the capacity to influence and shape globalisation outcomes". The global countryside thesis has much in common with the idea of neo-endogenous rural development which emphasises the possibilities that exist for local income generation in globalising rural settings (Ray, 2006; Perkins and Thorns, 2012). In these terms, the rise of the multi-functional family farm can be linked to a growing recognition among farmers of the new and interesting opportunities which exist and can be pursued in the context of a modernising and globalising rural economy (Perkins, 2006; Woods, 2014). How this occurs in practice is explored in this paper.

A methodological note

Consistent with studies of new venture development on family farms (e.g., Grande, 2011; Ainsley, 2014), a small number of business case studies were used to explore the rural entrepreneurial process. The selection procedure was informed by Ainsley (2014), starting with a search of the internet and rural print media for promising cases. A 'short list' of farms was devised. The list included properties which were: (1) family farms, (2) multi-functional in character, and (3) included a new enterprises which had been *developed over the last 10 years* and, at a minimum, had been *operating for at least the last 2*. Three farms were then selected from the short list. They were chosen because they represented different farm types and sizes, and because they covered a range of enterprises, including: niche food processing and direct sales, agri-tourism, light manufacturing and education (Table 1).

The exploratory nature of our research called for the use of qualitative social research methods. Farmers were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the study by way of a semi-structured interview at their home, combined with an interpretive farm walk. All the farmers we contacted agreed to be interviewed and to our request for a 'walk-and-talk' tour. While the person interviewed at the farm was the family member who self-identified as the initiator of the new venture, it was common for 'other' family members to drop in and out of the interview, providing additional comments about the family's entrepreneurial experiences. Interviews ranged in length from 1.5 to 2 hours, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, prior to thematic analysis. Field notes and photography were used to collect data during the interpretative farm walks.

Table 1: A snapshot of the farms included in this research

	Farm 1	Farm 2	Farm 3
Type of new venture	Raw milk/locally made cheeses sold direct to consumer	Eco-education, luxury eco-lodge and farm branded eggs/pork	Bed and Breakfast and tourist accommodation (6 'glamping' huts)
Start of new venture	2014	2012	2008
Main farm system	Dairy (irrigated)	Sheep and beef	Dairy grazing and beef
Size of farm	260 hectare milking platform (large dairy farm)	610 hectares (medium sheep and beef farm)	251 hectares (medium grazing unit)
Location	North Island (NZ) close to urban centre, major dairy region	North Island (NZ) semi-remote rural area. Prominent for viticulture, horticulture and sheep and beef	South Island (NZ) semi-remote rural area which is a dairy growth zone. Close to tourism corridor
Involved persons (family)	Couple (husband and wife), and adult daughter	Couple (husband and wife). Some involvement of school aged children	Couple (but wife mainly involved). Some involvement of school aged children
No. of employees contributing to new enterprise (not family members)	3 full time	2 full time (plus WOOFERS)	2 local people on casual/on-call basis

Case descriptions

Farm 1: This farm is, by North Island standards, a 'large' dairy unit. The land area used for dairy farming is 260 hectares. Each day, 15,000 litres of milk is sourced from the property, involving 6 full-time staff. The main business is the sale and supply of milk to New Zealand's second largest dairy processing company. The family have been farming in New Zealand since the 1860s. Two years ago the family – husband, wife and adult daughter who works on the farm – created a small-scale raw milk enterprise. The milk is sold direct to the public from high-tech vending machines located in a purpose built shed on the property. Consumers bring their own bottles to fill and payment is by pre-paid debit card which can be topped-up at the shop. In a recent development the family have contracted a local cheese-maker to produce camembert, feta and haloumi from the farm's milk which are also dispensed from vending machines located in the shop.

The 'trigger' for the new raw milk enterprise was a story in a farming newspaper which focused on the success of a franchise which supplies farmers with the machinery, and technical and marketing support to start a small-scale raw milk venture. The story peaked the family's interest. For many years they had wanted to try something new on the farm, and were particularly interested in enterprises that would complement their ethos of "pure food and healthy eating." They initially explored the franchising option but decided against it, preferring to pursue the venture on their own terms.

It took the family 8 months to start the business. They anticipated a speedier start-up process but were stymied by administrative and regulative barriers. First, they needed to re-negotiate the terms of their supply contract, which required them to provide 100% of their milk to their processing company. An agreement was reached to separate out a small herd of 30 cows for raw milk supply. Another hindrance was strict legislation relating to food sales and raw milk particularly. Raw milk supply is a controversial business in New Zealand because of perceived health risks. The family worked closely with representatives from the Ministry of Primary Industries who required a Risk Management Programme to be produced which took several months.

Creating the shop also took longer than expected. They needed 'everything' including the vending machines. For advice they reached out to an independent raw milk supplier in another district, who became a good friend and business mentor. This new connection was described as a vital source of information and motivation. He connected the family with the appropriate networks, such as an Italian-based supplier of vending machines. Another crucial relationship formed with a branding expert. This contact also became a "*very good friend*". Marketing has been crucial from the outset: as noted above, raw milk supply in New Zealand is a contested space and so our interviewees said they made a "big effort" to construct a 'family' brand that consumers could trust.

The business is doing well. A diverse customer base purchases 250 litres of raw milk each day. While the family are getting used to the flow of people onto the farm (7 days a week, 7am and 7pm), they are confronting some new pressures. Despite it being a self-service store, the family offer a call service, pledging to their customers that someone will be on the phone if they need help with the vending machines. They can get up to ten calls a day, each one requiring one of the family members to go to the shop to assist. During busy times on the main farm this can be problematic, however, they always follow through with their commitment and value the social interaction and feedback they get while helping their customers.

Farm 2: This North Island hill country farm covers 610 hectares of land and carries 5400 stock units, mainly sheep and beef. The property includes a: 35 hectare lake and 13 hectare conservation block. The farm also carries a small dairy herd (n=17), and there are roaming hens for eggs and Berkshire pigs grown for pork. The farm is run by a husband and wife team. They officially took over the property from 'his' parents 10 years ago. They describe their farming experience as a "journey" which took a significant turn 12 years ago with the arrival of the first of their three children. This experience prompted them to consider the link between their farming practices, the state of the environment and the quality of the food they were producing. When they took possession of the family farm they moved it towards a sustainable model of regenerative agriculture. Since this time they have gradually "layered new enterprises on the land" all of which demonstrate their commitment to sustainable land practices, while also supporting the farm's profitability.

The most recent farm enterprise, developed 4 years ago, is an eco-education centre combined with luxury eco-lodge. Its creation was triggered by a desire to (re)connect people with the land via the provision of a 'holiday by the lake' combined with a hands-on farming experience. Guests at the lodge are encouraged to get up early and help milk the cows, plant native trees, kayak on the lake, feed the chickens and pigs and generally experience farm life. The lodge and centre were built using local materials, including timber sourced from the farm. The shell of the building was configured from two old school classrooms that were transported onto the property. The eco-education centre has an industrial kitchen where food grown on the farm is cooked for guests. 'She' mostly takes charge of the catering, but expressed to us that she was worried that this responsibility would "take over" her life and pull her away from both family and community commitments.

As the couple's farm business portfolio has grown they have employed extra labour, particularly over the summer months at the peak of the tourism season. *"We feel we've got the foundation of the businesses in place and there's opportunity to grow what we're doing and refine. We feel we're got it as far as we can push it as a couple"*. They have employed local labour for maintenance tasks, such as window cleaning, and more intensive jobs, such as the construction of buildings. At the time of interview they were in the process of employing a marketing manager to create the story for the business and raise its profile. They have also employed a couple who live on the farm and who are expected to help out with tasks across the different enterprises.

The central pillar of this multi-functional farm is the business philosophy of sustainable practice and regenerative agriculture, and the couple are always searching for opportunities to support their vision. For example, in 2008 they approached a major airline company with the idea of forming a partnership to promote the restoration of native forestland and provide opportunities for people to (re)connect with the land by planting the trees. Fortunately, the airline was in the process of establishing an environmental trust and looked at the idea favourably. The company is now in partnership in a programme of regenerative native planting on the farm. Other on-farm initiatives aimed at building 'connections' include: the sale of farm grown and branded pork and eggs sold at (only) local stores; community film nights in the lodge; and fee-paying regenerative agriculture workshops for local farmers.

Farm 3: Farm 3 combines winter dairy grazing with a tourist accommodation enterprise. The accommodation business has two parts: a pre-existing bed and breakfast (B&B) operating from the family home and seven new and uniquely built huts on a site located out of sight of the farm house. The huts provide visitors with a 'glamping' (glamorous camping) experience. The farm owners – a married couple with two school age children – were originally sharemilkers on a large dairy farm in the district. They had long aspired to own their own farm and, to this end, had progressively purchased blocks of land in the area. The current family home stands on one of these land parcels ('homestead' block). The division of labour on the family farm is clear: 'he' runs the farm, while the tourism enterprises are 'her' concerns.

The B&B was operating when the family purchased homestead block and so our interviewee initially concentrated her efforts on growing this part of the business. The growth of tourism in the local area, driven mainly by the development of a new cycle way, soon inspired her to expand the on-farm accommodation operation. Personal savings were drawn on to purchase a block of land close to the homestead, which included a run-down colonial dwelling and historic woolshed. Her idea was to use them for tourist accommodation, targeting especially the users of the cycle way. A local builder, however, classified the villa as uninhabitable and it was subsequently demolished. Driven by determination and a strong sense of resourcefulness, our interviewee reused the materials salvaged from the villa to create seven historic cottages for guest accommodation. Each has its unique style or 'design feature': one room, for example, showcases the fireplace from the original villa. The historic woolshed was converted into shared guest facilities: commercial kitchen, dining room and ablution block. This decision – to exclude these facilities from the cottages – was important as it enabled the site to be classified as a 'campground' which freed the build process from

restrictive and potentially expensive rules and conditions. This positive outcome emerged from a “*good working relationship*” which she formed with the local authority.

In order to complete the project, a local builder was enlisted who shared the in the vision of our interviewee. This relationship was described as critical to the success of the venture. Another critical step in the process was the development of a good relationship with the wider community. While there was some initial scepticism from the ‘locals’ when the villa was demolished, they appreciated that materials were being reused and thus preserved. This inspired some local farmers to donate items of historic value to the project, such as vintage farm machinery which are now permanent features at the site. Crucial connections were also made with local tourism operators, such as the owner of a 4WD company who agreed to bring his clients to the site. This new relationship helped to raise the profile of business and generate a strong client base.

While the entrepreneurial process provided our interviewee with a deep sense of self-satisfaction, achievement and enjoyment – she refers to the site as her “*happy place*” – it has also created some problems. The main issue is balancing the demands of the business portfolio – the farm and the accommodation venture – with the responsibilities of raising school-aged children. Having people on the farm and, in the case of the B&B, in the house overnight, can be demanding. These demands are exacerbated during the peak tourism season when over 20 guests can be on the farm on the same day and when her husband is busy with farm duties. The demands of the business have also reduced the amount of time she is able to commit to rural community events and activities.

In an attempt to “relieve the pressure” two local support staff have been employed on a part time basis to help with cleaning duties and food preparation. More dramatically, she is now considering selling a share of the ‘glamping’ operation, providing that the new partner agrees to help with the day-to-day running of the business. Interestingly, her entrepreneurial spirit has not abated: she has identified a new business opportunity in the area and was excited to share the vision i.e., the conversion of an unused church into accommodation for cycle tourists. She was quick to point out that her entrepreneurial adventures were not underpinned by any urgent need to generate extra farm income, but to suffice an innate desire to be creative and “do something interesting and different”. That said, she does believe that the diversity of their on-farm income streams has created a more nimble and resilient family farm, able to withstand the vagaries of agri-commodity cycles.

Concluding reflections

Our research participants were *archetypal* entrepreneurs: they had all identified an opportunity to generate additional farm income (profit) and had *acted* to bring the idea to fruition. Unlike the rural entrepreneurs of the 1980s and 1990s in New Zealand, as characterised by Taylor and McCrostie (1997), our interviewees were not forced into entrepreneurship to keep the farm viable, but had opted into the process. This decision was commonly 'triggered' by a mix of lifestyle and personal goals, and a strong desire to do something new, creative and interesting with their land.

While we cannot generalise from our small sample of farms, our research *suggests* that rural entrepreneurs are not only proficient at building businesses, but are also adept at creating networks to support their entrepreneurial activities. The networks most evident in this study included: builders, authorities, community organisations, corporate groups, marketing experts, local citizens, other business owners, local-global traders and friends and family. While none of these actors invested capital in the new venture (and therefore did not carry any of the risk), their commitment of time, friendship, support, advice and creative energy firmly anchored them in the entrepreneurial process. Our research participants acknowledged that trust was a critical component of these relationships. This finding aligns with the work of Moyes et al. (2015) who show how networks and associated social capital is *harnessed* and, if need be, actively *created* by new-venture entrepreneurs in order to achieve their vision and make their new rural business thrive.

Resource-constraints are common to the experience of rural business start-up and thus many entrepreneurial farmers adopt a 'bricolage' approach to the development of their new on-farm enterprise(s). While none of the farmers in this study were financially constrained, and therefore did not *need* to be thrifty in their approach, our interviewees from Farms 2 and 3 did take a bricolage approach. One of them (Farm 2) was an advocate of resource re-use because it outwardly demonstrated his commitment to the sustainability ethos. This was also a strategic move as the message of sustainability was the unique selling point of the business. Our informant from Farm 3 was also keen to re-use existing materials because: it supported her commitment to local heritage conservation (for a recent discussion of the role of agritourism in heritage preservation see LaPan & Barbieri, 2014). Thus, our research points to a strong connection between peoples' approaches to new-venture creation and the maintenance (and display) of a particular social identity and associated set of lifestyle goals.

While the new venture creation process was a rewarding experience for all our interviewees, they all reported encountering new challenges associated with the running, management and growth of their new business venture. Our interviewee from Farm 1, for example, talked

about “*adjusting*” to the presence of increasing numbers of people on the working farm, and an associated anxiety about their requirements under strict new ‘health and safety’ legislation which came into force in New Zealand in April 2016. For Farms 2 and 3, the main problem was balancing the demands of their growing business with parenting duties and the ongoing work of the main farm enterprise. Both were developing strategies to “*relieve the pressure*” including the employment of local people. Research on the notion of ‘embeddedness’ is helpful here and a theme we intend to pursue further, particularly Jervell’s (2011) work which observes that family farms are particularly complex settings for enterprise development because the farm is also the family home, and thus each affects the other.

To conclude our paper we return to the work of Woods (2014) and allied researchers who have examined the entrepreneurial activities of family farmers in globalising rural settings. This project and its future direction we hope will contribute to these debates by showing how, in practice, farmers bring their commercial ideas to life by using their business acumen and adeptness at creating and orchestrating new and often far-reaching actor-support networks.

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