

Global Focus tour: Summary

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March 2010

It's often said that your perception is your reality, and we are all guilty of making assumptions on how others live their lives and how other countries operate. Personally, I found the Global Focus Tour (GFT) was all about disassembling and then rebuilding my perceptions of the world, in particular agriculture.

The GFT included 20 flights, about 80 hours in flight, and covered seven countries in seven weeks! It started in March 2010 when I joined seven Australians on the 1st Australian Nuffield Global Focus Tour (Australia, Wales, Washington DC, Pennsylvania, California, Mexico, Brazil and Uruguay).

The general recipe in each country was to get an overview of the agriculture from 'someone in the know', which was usually either the Minister of Agriculture, his/her representatives or industry good-bodies. We then dug a bit deeper with visits to farms and processing plants. Within a few visits we had a good picture of the agriculture industry in each country and some live examples of people like us, who are trying to make a living and lifestyle from the land.

We left Australia and flew to Wales, where we were straight off the plane and into a hire car at Heathrow. We arrived at our first visit, a dairy farm on the English/ Welsh border where I'm sure we all looked like possums in headlights. By the end of the first official day we hadn't been to bed for 46 hours. This was our first taste of the reality of the pace and logistics needed to be able to cover seven countries in seven weeks.

The tour covered a range of climates from freezing snow in Wales to choking humidity in Brazil. Cultures changed from the posh and plum of the UK to the afternoon siesta in South America. The primary industries also changed to suit the climate. Examples included traditional stock and cropping in the UK, market gardening and horticulture in sunny California and soya bean and cattle farming (measured in square km's!) in South America. While we saw extremes and variations the main issues tended to revert to the same themes. Agriculture could be the strongest link we have to other societies, as it became obvious that we live in a global world, skills, knowledge and products can move around the world faster and more frequently all the

time. This in itself creates some opportunities and threats, the obvious threats being biosecurity and competition from other nations. Developing countries such as Brazil could flood traditional markets overnight with agriculture products. The global opportunities, on the other hand, are limited only by your imagination and enthusiasm.

For all primary producers we visited the only constant factor was change itself. The feature which stood out to me was that '*farmers*' can only exist under subsidies. Without financial support, '*agri-business people*' dominate and lead the industries in quality, novel and dynamic styles. Changes are proposed to reduce subsidies in the European Union by 2013, but it is hard to imagine subsidies being removed completely. It seems more likely that they will morph into a new name. The UK farmers in general don't have the mindset to be re-born as production based farmers. The current reality is they can lose money farming and still make a living from clipping the ticket of subsidies, and more recently, environmental criteria payments. Across all pasture-based systems in the UK, subsidies average around half the gross farm income. Given the regions passion for the heritage and cottage- type industries, the UK is unlikely to ever be amalgamated into large production units. This will shift the challenge (and potential power) of feeding the world to the developing countries. Given the huge production lifts in South America and the potential yet to be realised, it is easy to see these countries dominating global food production. NZ can't compete with that scale or climate, but appears to have a valuable niche as a high quality producer of environmentally sustainable food and agri-tourism ventures.

While New Zealand are revered as production farmers I didn't see many examples of NZ maximizing its value and returns overseas. A trip to a Welsh freezing works was an eye opener - the Welsh import a heap of NZ lamb cuts, pull them out of the packaging and further process and re-package them. There was also a mountain of NZ lamb-legs sold with half-price stickers on them - they use our lamb to fill their off-season market, selling it cheap to ensure plenty of consumer demand, and then bring in their own product at a premium during their season. This was highly disappointing to put it politely, however as expected the Aussies's found it very entertaining... they appear to be doing much better in the USA markets.

Four days in Mexico was a great experience but enough for me! The speakers we had were very hospitable and knowledgeable but it was hard to get over the fact that in the town all the windows were barred, there was rubbish everywhere, and stray dogs owned the place. Everything was cheap and accessible, and I mean 'everything'!

There was a saying given to us, 'poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to America'. What this refers to is the fact that Mexico, being on the border, is the main traffic route for the South American drug trade into the US. Interestingly, also, the Mexican government used to subsidise Coca-Cola, making this 'energy' drink easily accessible to its population. As a result a bottle of coke that was 50c in the US would be five cents in Mexico; even now you can buy beer cheaper than coke, and both drinks are more expensive than bottled water! All these drinks are sold side by side on most street corners and all the shops we went to.

Brazil was the highlight for me. It is very different to NZ and yet has a familiar feel to it. Looking out the bus window there are lots of rolling green hills and bushy gullies all reminiscent of parts of NZ. Yet as you step out of the air-conditioning, the heat and humidity hits, and you soon realise you are far from home!

Brazil is a huge country, and its climate and soils lend themselves to a wide range of crops and produce. If and when the Brazilians concentrate on quality output and tidying up some of the logistical issues they have with processing and transportation, they have the potential to be a huge global force. They have already progressed from being the eighth biggest world power to being the fifth, since the start of the global recession. It seems Brazil is still just in 'cruise mode' for agricultural production and exporting.

Overall there have been some clear common threads on the GFT: water, soils and subsidies are the three factors that stand out for me. Another thing that has been apparent at every turn is the high regard in which New Zealand is held. Our 'clean green' image is put on a pedestal overseas and we are respected and revered as excellent primary production managers, particularly in grass-based farming. Our attitudes towards farm succession and growing our businesses are also admired. It was quite humbling but also exciting to see how such a small country with a small farmer base can punch so high above its weight.

The GFT is a great way to see a range of countries. There were many benefits to travelling in the group - extra sets of eyes were very useful to spot signs at airports and when travelling, and the extra sets of minds were great when it came to discussing and debating what we had seen and done. The group environment led to lots of special memories and social times, great laughs and friendships formed.

Special mention needs to be made of Jim Geiltch who is the icon and driving force behind Nuffield International. His passion and energy is inspiring and his manner and hard work endeared him to everyone involved.

Thanks very much to the New Zealand Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust and our major sponsors for providing me with this opportunity.

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