

Indigenous peoples and how they have adapted to modern farming practices.



A report to the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust

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Contents

Acknowledgements	Page 2 & 3
Introduction	Page 4
Land Ownership	Page 5 & 6
Education	Page 7
Opportunities	Page 8
Looking Ahead	Page 9
Summary	Page 10 & 11

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Introduction

I initially chose my topic as I believed that Maori farming is going through a renaissance and that we as a people are realising the potential of our immense land assets. Looking at New Zealand on a global scale I asked myself the question; how are other Indigenous peoples with bigger land area's farming their land?

As a farmer and a Maori who has been involved in farming all my life I have a passion for both farming and the farming of Maori land.

As a Maori, educated through the system to tertiary level, with work experience through NZ and overseas and now employed by a Maori Incorporation, I thought I was in a good position to look further into this.

I had to first of all define 'Indigenous' to myself. This in itself was an exercise, so I had to break it down further to narrow down my research.

Through my Nuffield travels I was fortunate enough to travel to England, France, Belgium, Scotland, Australia, Philippines, Hong Kong, China, USA, Canada, Ireland, Ecuador, Argentina and Uruguay.

My initial research showed that there was a very noticeable gap between Indigenous peoples who had adapted and were benefiting from using their assets, both land and water, and those that were not. I decided to research the later and find out why.

Land ownership

Whenever I mentioned my study topic, the general answer was it is not a case of adapting to modern farming practises; the most important issue was land ownership, and proving land ownership.

Most of the challenges facing indigenous peoples in terms of land reform are structural, institutional and complex. There are also both deliberate and clandestine government and interest groups' actions which do not help the quest and cause of indigenous people to become mainstream players in commercial agriculture.

In the case of Zimbabwe, despite the government's vehement denial, it is not committed to a fully fledged indigenous commercial farming sector. Since Independence in 1980, there has been no comprehensive government programme to promote the indigenous farming sector. It even took a white Minister of Agriculture (Denis Norman) to assist getting an indigenous commercial farming union to be registered in Zimbabwe after independence.

The government is more interested in using land reform for political gains by implementing a populist land reform focused on settling masses of people regardless of their interests and experience in farming. These people are poorly supported and they are at the mercy of government for political expedience. They cannot cope with all the tenets of modern day farming from financial and input sourcing to agricultural logistics and marketing and are trapped in a vicious cycle as the government go on and on giving them empty promises and piecemeal assistance for political expedience each time an election is approaching.

Zimbabwe has lost a huge opportunity to come up with an indigenous commercial agriculture programme which could be the envy of the world had the government chosen to embark on a deliberate, transparent and fair programme to set up an indigenous commercial farming sector. The country has an abundance of indigenous people with the zeal, skills and knowledge to take up commercial farming, but all government has chosen to do is throw spanners in the works to frustrate these educated, talented, hands on experienced and entrepreneurial indigenous people in fear of political challenge from those among its people who are genuinely economic empowered, hence resorting to pretend to be concerned with those poor souls who know nothing about farming and would never pose a threat to government's stranglehold on political power.

In Mozambique and Rwanda indigenous people felt that conditions for investment in commercial agriculture are more in favour of large foreign corporate investors than indigenous people. More is done to protect security of tenure of foreign investors than indigenous people. This is the case in other countries as well. A serious indigenous investor can be evicted to pave way for large foreign corporate's, but never the other way around.

In South America whenever I talked about our countries histories, I was told on a number of occasions although we were both colonised, we were colonised in different ways. This point was emphasised before and during my visit to Uruguay. People asked me why I was visiting Uruguay to study Indigenous peoples, there aren't any left!

Education

This was a question I always asked. The answers varied from agreeing that education was important to, we do not get the opportunity.

In some countries driving around and seeing what the farmers were doing to their land was very disheartening. The damage that was being done to soils and the flow on affects this would have to the environment and subsequent generations were hard to watch. I was told they know no other way.

In many countries with land reform, small parcels of land are given to individuals. These are farmed in a 'traditional' manner, unfortunately over time and with subsequent generations these 'plots' of land are not big enough to support the families. As a result you see an urban drift and it is these people who loose 'touch' with their land. It is something that has happened all over the world.

In some cases education did not always solve the problem. When talking with an elder from the Dakota Sioux First Nation people in Canada, he explained they encouraged their young people to further their education. However the 'Reservation' system always seemed to pull them back, after becoming educated and finding work they always came back as they were not comfortable in the 'outside' world. As a people they 'owned' large areas of land; however they did not have the people to farm it and it was normally leased out.

Getting young people to look at agriculture as a career was a worldwide problem from China to Canada and England to Ecuador.

Opportunities

History shows that farmers will adapt to new techniques that will benefit their business. However sometimes, these techniques although they bring a short term benefit will have long lasting detrimental consequences for future generations.

Interest was always shown when I talked about how Maori Incorporations functioned. Due to language barriers, I kept it as simple as possible. I tried to explain how a similar approach may be possible in the particular country I was in.

The concept of amalgamation of smaller plots to give some size and scale to a business, although not foreign, was not a common practise.

In a lot of countries, the focus has been on accessing land or 'giving' it back to the people but there has been no proper plan to utilise the land productively and in a commercial sense. In the long run this is not sustainable.

A problem with a lot of land reform in many countries is that they are donor driven and the donors set the agenda. The donors support the pro poor approach but it is easy to see that as long as land reform is not commercially orientated people settled on these small pieces of land will not get anywhere.

The poor economy of small producers is linked to three conditions:

1. Little technical knowledge of production processes and management of their business.
2. Limited bargaining power for resources and products.
3. Limited investment capacity.

LOOKING AHEAD

Indigenous peoples around the world have a passion and a desire to look after their land; they have been doing so for a long time. In the modern world of farming they are being left behind for a number of reasons.

Could the Maori Incorporation model be used as a template for other Indigenous peoples?

People I spoke to were very keen to learn more about the model and it was discussed at great length. It had many concepts that were appealing to other indigenous people, none more so than the fact that tribal land was farmed for the benefit of the people.

Most realised that the way they were farming their land was not sustainable and for them to continue farming their land they needed to find alternative solutions.

I was told that in Ecuador only 20% of people consider themselves indigenous. From an outsider looking in I thought the percentage would be more like 80%. I was told that depending on the government at the time it was not 'beneficial' to be considered indigenous. As an indigenous person it was sad to hear that people would be ashamed of their heritage or they would consider themselves something else to be able to apply for government benefits.

Summary

I have looked at numerous Nuffield reports and they have been fantastic in what they can and have done for New Zealand agriculture.

I think what I have seen is only the tip of the ice berg with regards to indigenous peoples. However I believe this is not a situation where ideas or practices from overseas being brought back to New Zealand to benefit New Zealand agriculture.

In discussions with various people we always got back to our respective histories, where we came from (trying to explain where Hawaii was on the world map was interesting!), how many of us are there, how we were colonised, where did our colonisers come from, and what religion did they bring, education, the Treaty of Waitangi, Moko, the All Blacks, everything you could possibly think of. These discussions were with people from countries as diverse as Ireland to Ecuador.

Nearly every conversation was a history lesson on that particular country or that particular people. Now I consider myself a fine student of history but I was amazed at some of the things I learnt on this journey.

It was an interesting aspect of my journey that I always had to go back to come forward and look into the future.

We as a farming country have so much to offer other indigenous peoples. I still feel that education is a key driver of this. Perhaps exchange programmes can be initiated to encourage potential future leaders to broaden their knowledge and also to take back ideas that will ultimately benefit their people.

As mentioned earlier, this is a case of not so much New Zealand agriculture benefiting, but other countries benefiting from New Zealand agriculture.

This is an opportunity for New Zealand and Maori farming in particular to share ideas and practices that would benefit other indigenous peoples from around the world.