

## Getting beyond ‘scratch and sniff’

The *Des Moines Register* recently carried an interesting article by Mike Martendale of the Detroit News headlined “City dwellers get chance to scratch and sniff farm life” (Sept. 4, pg. 4). The story was about a Michigan county official who had designed a brochure to inform city dwellers about the realities of rural living. The brochure was intended to “open the eyes—and nostrils—of folks looking to move to the country.”

Perhaps such brochures serve a useful function but they miss a larger issue: the need for rural and urban citizens to decide what kind of food and farming system they want for our current and future needs.

Whether or not city dwellers can live comfortably in rural areas is only a small part of the issue. Informing city dwellers that life in the country may not be as idyllic as they imagined is simply a “buyer beware” warning. To get past rural/urban tensions, we must negotiate a more fundamental social contract that the majority of citizens can support. This requires a deeper rural/urban conversation that is more than a “need to educate” urban dwellers about farming. In a democracy, citizens decide together how to constitute their social life through “free argumentation and debate,” as Thomas Jefferson wrote. Such debates must include discussions about food and farming systems.

Rural/urban conversations are desperately needed. We have not had a national dialogue on this topic for at least half a century. Furthermore, as

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our society has become increasingly urbanized, most citizens lack even the most elemental understanding of agriculture. They are largely ignorant about where food comes from, what is involved in producing it, or what hardships farm families face as they try to survive in today’s agriculture marketplace.

Stuart Higgins, an Australian farmer and radio show host, has attempted to address this information vacuum by designing a web site that invited the public to help him make decisions on his farm. He set aside six acres of cotton and asked web visitors to help make management decisions on that acreage—when to plant, what inputs to use, how to control pests, etc. He received an enthusiastic response, and was pleasantly surprised at how much people learned about farming in the process. His approach may not direct us to a genuine conversation about the social contract for agriculture, but it begins to move us beyond “scratch and sniff.”

A dialog that leads us to agreements about the kind of food and agriculture system we want will require a media that is more engaged with food and farming issues. In July, the Leopold Center in cooperation with the Glynwood Center in New York, hosted a meeting with several nationally recognized journalists who write about food and agriculture. The purpose was to develop ways in which we might begin to foster meaningful rural/urban conversations around food and farming issues.

A report, “Telling Our Story: Partnering with the Media,” grew out of the meeting. We learned that establishing better communications between rural and urban communities around farm and food issues requires us to think carefully about a number of issues and strategies, and that there are enormous opportunities for fostering such conversations through the media.

Focusing primarily on sustainable agriculture, the report outlines how food and agriculture groups can successfully involve the media to encourage rural/urban conversations. The report reminds us that “plight of the farmer” stories don’t play well in the urban press (especially with news of large farm subsidies), chefs are perceived as leaders of social change, “farm-to-restaurant” stories are particularly appealing, ongoing relationships with journalists are important, and much more.

We hope that this report can be the beginning of a rural/urban dialog that eventually will lead to a common understanding and commitment to make agriculture a vital and supported part of our national life – and move us well beyond “scratch and sniff.”




The Australian Broadcast Corporation’s “Grow Your Own” web site project with farmer Stuart Higgins is at: [www.abc.net.au/rural/grow/](http://www.abc.net.au/rural/grow/).

The report, **Telling Our Story: Partnering with the Media** is on the Leopold Center web site: [www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubinfo/papersspeeches/media0703.pdf](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubinfo/papersspeeches/media0703.pdf).