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Resilience: a Lived Experience.

Keith Andrew Noble

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Extended Abstract

Northern Australia is vast, over 40 percent of the mainland continent. It is a unique part of the tropics, with an enormous natural resource base yet remarkably small human population operating in a democratically governed first world economy. This situation is at odds with international trends: almost half the world's population live in the tropics and tropical economies are growing 20 percent faster than the rest of the world.

Contemporary Australia is seeing a renewed national focus on northern development, with agriculture as an important component. The history of agricultural production in northern Australia is one of constant perturbations. Therefore, it was seen as essential to seek the views of those with lengthy experience in the industry to determine what factors might contribute to their resilience.

Change is unpredictable, and communities are unlikely to have full knowledge of the kind of changes to anticipate, or the intensity or ultimate impact of those changes. Recent years have seen increasing interest in and invocation of the notion of resilience within communities to better manage such change, and the concept has entered national, regional and local policy discourse. While acknowledging the resilience concept suffers from imprecision of definition and conceptualization which weakens its purchase as an analytical or explanatory tool, the study of regional resilience can bring together multiple disciplines and understandings. Also, this attention to resilience could be a response to a generalised contemporary sense of uncertainty and insecurity and a search for formulas for adaptation and survival; perhaps because processes associated with globalisation have made places and regions more permeable to the effects of what were once thought to be external processes. People look for a safe (imagined) past where they knew the rules – because they don't know the rules of the future.

This thesis was first about achieving a meaningful understanding and appreciation of an individual's

resilience processes; and second, examine how this understanding might contribute to northern development. Direct involvement of stakeholders was important because they possess knowledge of the local environment and their management strategies have been developed and adapted, often over generations; then shared and re-adapted between families and across industries. Such forms of knowledge might fall outside formal science frameworks, but are demonstrably effective and useful when applied in the local context by experienced practitioners.

The broad aim was to determine whether a study of the context, personal strategies, perspectives and operating environment of individuals within Northern Australian agriculture, both now and in the past, could identify and help understand the factors and strategies that contribute to or enhance an individual's chance of achieving what they perceive as successful outcomes. A further aim was to determine whether these factors and strategies might be used to improve planning and policy outcomes, particularly in the consideration and reduction of industry risk. Because it was an understanding of how farmers think about and interact with their situation and of the inter-relationships around this thinking that was required, it was particularly important that this knowledge was sourced directly – the individual's lived experience - rather than filtered through a pre-existing theoretical construct.

A qualitative Grounded Theory approach through two distinct (but non-sequential) processes - the first literature-based, and the second in-depth semi-structured interviews, addressed these objectives. A series of vignettes illustrate the concepts being discussed, and also illustrate the humanity of agriculture. When agriculture is being discussed, it is often in the context of yields, production schedules, contribution to GDP, seasonal forecasts, return on investment. The vignettes illustrate specific points, but they also remind the reader that farming is carried out by people.

The context in which Northern Australian agriculture has operated was considered in order to understand the nature of industry perturbations, and to identify and understand the factors and operational environment that both influence and contributes to the ability (or otherwise) of individual industry participants to survive and prosper. Phenomenographic analysis of 66 interviews, conducted across a range of farms and related agencies, identified four themes of (1) Situational Awareness, (2) the Ability to Plan, (3) the Ability to Adapt, and (4) Social Connectedness: which illustrate resilience strategies farmers used. Inter-twined through these was the Perception of Fairness, which relates these attributes to a broader sense of agency, and which acts as an enabler of the resilience individuals derive from the implementation of their strategies. It is proposed that this sense of fairness needs to be fostered through ensuring a deliberate process of engagement, consideration, and inclusion of impacted communities during policy development, particularly for policy that bonds communities and cultures within their environment.

The identification of the Situational Awareness, the Ability to Plan, the Ability to Adapt, Social Connectedness and perception of Fairness through a Grounded Theory Approach contributes a new understanding of resilience. This understanding is from the perspective of those who have lived the experience, rather than predetermined notions of what constitutes resilience. In different ways, these factors may also apply for those who have left the industry, and for people in other contexts.

The study was necessarily broad. I came to it with a breadth of relevant experience: as a farmer, a marketer, an industry advocate, an active NRM regional body participant, a researcher who had provided both government and industry policy input; and as a land use planner and northern resident who had worked with and been interested in the people of Northern Australia and its agriculture for a very long time. Yet still I had only a superficial understanding of why farmers stuck to such a hard game – what made them resilient. In consideration of all the above, a grounded theory approach was selected because of its potential to portray fullness of experience, reveal taken-for-granted meanings, and because it had the grab to help people explain what they see.

The thesis is not an attempt to predict the agricultural future of Northern Australia - that will manifest in its own time and way. Agriculture is, and will continue to be, an important component of the North's economy and identity, though its scale, ownership, and focus could develop in myriad and possibly unexpected ways.

That Northern Australia will not develop in the same way as the more populated south is a reasonable assumption - it is so different geographically, climatically, and demographically; and Australia now operates in a globally connected and informed era very different from the colonial expansion in which the south of Australia was settled and developed. Nevertheless, it was important to consider and understand the region's history and development context as a significant influence on past and present aspirations for northern agricultural expansion; in the same way that an understanding of contemporary global trends and influences was also required. It was important, not to understand agriculture, but to understand the operational context and perspective of the farmers presently involved in Northern Australian agriculture.

That agriculture will continue to be a part of this landscape is also a reasonable assumption - Northern Australia is vast, and capable of accommodating a breadth of development scenarios including intensive and extensive agriculture, along with the *light* touch of conservation management. Australian agriculture is an industry with an impressive track record of speedy and successful technology adoption, and will continue to change with advances in genetics, sensory systems, remote sensing, and internet/device connectivity; while automation and customers' ability

to trace food from farm-to-fork will change supply chains.

While no one group is likely to determine Northern Australia's ultimate destiny, this thesis presents the case to consider and include the imaginings of those already living and working there. It is important because of the specific regional knowledge and understanding that they hold, and it is important if Australia is to maintain its reputation as a fair and compassionate society.

Farming requires farmers, and successful farming requires a connection with and understanding of the country, the community, and the business environment. In so far as farming is a lifestyle, it is one in which the participants are aware of the associated hardships and risk that the lifestyle can impose; and farmers prepare for and work their way through these using a variety of interconnected and hard-won strategies. This interaction between farmers, their industry, and their broader operating environment is well-developed, and its consideration as a lived individual actor experience in this study has contributed the four described themes of Situational Awareness, Ability to Plan, Ability to Adapt, and Social Connectedness. These themes illustrate some of the resilience strategies farmers use to survive in what can still be described a hard game.

The real risk for Northern Australia's farmers though, and particularly for an agricultural expansion, comes from agents that are largely beyond individual farmer's personal resilience processes and strategies. These are the global perspectives and influences of an urban population with diminishing understanding of agriculture, and particularly agriculture in a Northern Australian context. Farmers cannot hope to control these influences, but they can appeal to their sense of fairness to increase the likelihood of endemic knowledge being valued and not over-looked. The very real risk of not including regional understanding in policy is that processes are vulnerable to hijack by sectoral lobby groups with strongly held views, as demonstrated by the 2011 live cattle export ban. The future of a region and its residents should not be jeopardised through a policy-maker's failure to properly understand, or even worse, to operate on assumptions. This thesis does demonstrate that it is possible to understand the context through the perspective of those currently involved in the activity rather than assuming an understanding exists. To achieve this understanding though requires deliberate effort.

In reality, the question of a community's resilience is an old and enduring one, and individuals understand that their individual ability to successfully respond to change is enmeshed with this collective resilience, which in turn is a composite of the numerous heterogeneous entities and individuals that compose the community, and their interaction. Through their own words, and describing their individual lived experience, interviewed farmers in this study understand resilience

as not an immutable characteristic that an individual or a community has or does not have, but as a process that emerges from malleable resources.

Whilst documenting, considering and understanding these tangible contributors to individual farmer's resilience, the critical importance of fairness to farmers became apparent as a connecting concept and translational instrument between their personal worlds and their relationship with the broader community. It is proposed that an understanding and consideration of fairness from the perspective of those directly impacted could be an enabler of analytical insights into social ecological systems, and therefore should be an essential consideration of policy development relating to northern development.

What is unique to today's era is the enhanced opportunity to consider and debate development options before their adoption - should Australians as a community choose to do so. Such a debate should be informed and guided by the lessons of history, along with the contemporary wisdom and experience of others around the world, and facilitated by communication technologies and social media enabling whole-of-community participation to collectively agree on a shared future. T

he big risk in this opportunity is that the voices of the few with direct experience and practical understanding of the reality of agriculture in the north could be lost, overwhelmed, or disregarded in the conversation. This risk needs to be recognised, and actively addressed.

This research indicates that success in agriculture is rarely achieved overnight, and it is not usually a job someone can just do for a couple of years as part of a career smorgasbord. But a core finding of this thesis is that individual success can be assisted by tying analysis of adaptability, resilience, and vulnerability in the biophysical systems to a better understanding of these same features in social and economic systems, and by considering this information in situ.

This study has established a credible association between the academic resilience text and the applied practices of Northern Australian farmers. The value of doing so is not so much a furthering of resilience theory, but a demonstration of the importance of relating theory to people coming through adversity: both the processes they use, and what resilience looks like on the way through, particularly when there is unlikely to be an end-point to the process.