If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.¹

This is the second time that an edition of Local–Global has focused on the outcomes of collaboration between researchers at the Globalism Institute at RMIT University and people living in the Hamilton region in south-west Victoria. That research partnership began in June 2004, and an earlier Hamilton region edition of Local–Global was published in mid-2005 with the subtitle ‘Community Life in the Regions’. This second edition focuses on food, farming and community.

We dedicate this edition to Keith Warne, a well-loved community leader who played an integral part in the development of the RMIT Southern Grampians Shire community partnership and, later, in the establishment of the Local-Global research program, of which this journal is a significant component. We also remember Graham Pizzey, the well-regarded ornithologist and natural historian who continued his spectacular work on Australian birds while living near Dunkeld. Both Graham and Keith had an extraordinary work ethic and they both had the character to bring out the best in the community in which they lived. We want to honour their work.

We begin this edition with a set of papers based on presentations given at an International Food and Thought Mela held in Hamilton in February 2006. Mela is a Sanskrit word for a large gathering, festival, fair or celebration, and it relates to a long tradition of strengthening communities by bringing people together in a festive atmosphere to enjoy food and music, as well as to discuss issues that are important to their everyday lives. The Mela was a particular expression of the collaboration between the rural communities of the Hamilton region and researchers of the Globalism Institute. The festival created an opportunity to relate the experiences of the Hamilton community to other local communities around the world with whom Globalism Institute researchers are working. It was a unique attempt at establishing a ‘collaborative community of inquiry’, to bring theory and experience
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into convivial conversations around a dining table. The *Mela* provided the setting for a form of public social inquiry that enabled participants to enjoy the sensual pleasures of good food while discussing the ways in which the flows and processes of globalization influence everyday life. It allowed the researchers some insight into the ways that communities seek out more sustainable ways of living within a complex globalized world, while it introduced new possibilities— informed by international experience and theory—for responding to globalizing tendencies. Rethinking the sustainability of our communities is not an easy task. The purpose of the *Mela* was not to produce answers but to create an engaging space for questioning and learning from one another about living more sustainably in a changing world.

The centrepiece of this gathering was a large international feast, with food prepared by international students at RMIT University, mainly using Hamilton region food products. Before and after the feast, talks and workshops were offered by a wide range of people interested in the local and global dimensions of food production and consumption. The opening address, on global movements that are pushing for a stronger emphasis on local food, was given by the founder and director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture, Helena Norberg-Hodge. An edited version of her talk is presented here. We also include papers given by renowned Australian food-writer Richard Cornish and by a prominent member of the Slow Food Movement in Victoria, Mary Ellis. When the Mela was being planned, there was talk around Hamilton of starting a farmers market to get more local produce directly to consumers in the region, so the initiator of a very successful farmers market in South Australia, Zannie Flanagan, was invited to speak about that success. Flanagan spoke about the Willunga Farmers Market on the same day that Hamilton had its first experience of a farmers market. While much discussion at the Mela focused on strengthening and diversifying food production in rural Victoria, Peta Christensen shifted the focus to community gardening in the city, and her paper is also included here.

While there have been some efforts to diversify agricultural production in the Hamilton region beyond its traditional reliance on wool and beef cattle into areas of food production (including wine), the biggest new agricultural industry has been built around the development of blue gum plantations. The district already had large areas of pine plantation when, in the mid-1990s, generous tax concessions were put in place by the federal government to encourage new investments in hardwood plantations. The investments were aimed primarily at producing woodchip for an export market. By 1997, large areas of land once used primarily for pastoral farming were given over to plantations of Tasmanian blue gums (*Eucalyptus globulus*), which had been used successfully in Western Australia. Initially, it was hoped that blue gum plantations could be used to supplement farm incomes by focusing on some of the more marginal land not suitable for grazing. However, the incentive
to sell rather than lease farmland to the plantation companies proved very attractive to many struggling farmers, and the plantations expanded across all the local landscapes. This edition of Local–Global includes a discussion—in a special ‘Forum’ section—on the emergence and likely impacts of the blue gum industry, with contributions from two people who were early advocates for the industry: Rod Bird and Don Jowett. A balanced analysis of how the blue gum industry emerged and what its long-term impacts will be is critical for discussions about the further development of agriculture across the region, especially in the face of predictions that global climate change will create a drier climate and put more demand on groundwater supplies.

Production of this edition of Local–Global was well advanced when the news came through that the Gunditjmara people had finally won their native title claim to over 140,000 hectares of Crown land centred on the old Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission between Hamilton and Portland. Eleven years after the claim was first lodged with the Native Title Tribunal, the decision was announced when a special session of the Federal Court was convened on Gunditjmara land in March 2007; hundreds of people subsequently attended a celebration of this historic development. Members of the Globalism Institute’s Critical Reference Group in Hamilton—Olive McVicker, Cicely Fenton and Sue Pizzey—had carried out research on the fate of the old church that once stood at the heart of the Lake Condah Mission. The story they were able to compile, with assistance from the Windamara Aboriginal Corporation community—Denise Lovett and Darryn Rose, as well as Jim McCarthy, who has farmed in the land adjoining the Mission—helps to show why the success of the native title claim was so sweet for that community. We also include a lengthy interview with Gunditjmara community elder Ken Saunders, who played a key role in the long campaign to reclaim Lake Condah as an important national and international Aboriginal heritage site. The native title victory is a great example of community resilience, and the announcement of the decision by Justice Tony North triggered a celebration of that resilience.

Another local community in the Hamilton region with cause for celebration is the community centred on Coleraine. The community bank that was established in the town in April 2003 has exceeded all expectations, and the story of that success is recounted by the chairman of the bank’s board of directors, John Kane. The article following, by Martin Mulligan, draws out some lessons about ways of creating community in a changing world. It is based on a four-year study of linkages between community arts, celebrations and community wellbeing, which the Globalism Institute conducted with VicHealth as a research partner. That research includes case studies of creative community-building activities in the Hamilton region—including Hamilton’s 2004 Top of the Town Ball, Dunkeld’s 150th anniversary, and Macarthur’s way of purging the legacy of being labelled ‘the most boring town in Victoria’.
The Local–Global research project in the Hamilton region is keen to demonstrate that local communities can learn much through direct linkages with other local communities in the world. The Hamilton and Alexandra College has pioneered a way of forging such local-to-local linkages by creating a ‘strategic alliance’ with the Gaoyou Middle School in the Jiangsu Province of China. An account of how that relationship works has been provided by a senior teacher in the Hamilton school, Elizabeth Cummins. Next, Yaso Nadarajah presents an account of what she has learnt about the fragility and resilience of a local community in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, facing the challenge of radical dislocation to make way for ‘modernization’ of the city. As a researcher, Nadarajah found it challenging to align herself within such ‘in-between’ geopolitical spaces while carrying out research on issues related to the struggle to resolve sharp tensions. This is the kind of challenge that can generate profound scholarship and shared understanding.

In this edition, we are pleased to be able to present a carefully documented essay by Gyorgy Scrinis on global trends and alternative ideas in regard to food production systems. It complements the papers based on talks given at the Mela and, hopefully, demonstrates how research expertise can complement local knowledge, as well as highlight how critical reflection on practical experience can help to make sense of complex issues and articulate alternatives to global practices that are manifestly unsustainable. We are also pleased to present a research paper by Melbourne University researcher Ruth Beilin on ways in which local farmers and their families are trying to come to terms with a legacy of unsustainable practices in the ‘Heartbreak Hills’ of Victoria’s Strzelecki Ranges.

Perhaps we can echo the theme of the 2006 Mela in saying that we are confident that readers will find much ‘food for thought’ in this second Hamilton region edition of Local–Global.

Endnotes


Martin Mulligan is Deputy Director of the Globalism Institute at RMIT University and a member of the Local–Global project team for the Hamilton region. Together with Stuart Hill he was author of Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001.

Yaso Nadarajah is a senior researcher in the Globalism Institute at RMIT University. She is the project manager for research sites in Chennai (including tribal Kolli Hills) Kuala Lumpur (including Penang) and the rural Victorian centre of Hamilton. Her work seeks to understand more thoroughly the processes of community sustainability, with a particular focus on community-engaged research.