IS RURAL LIFE WORTH SAVING?

BY IVAN EMKE

The third in a series of articles developed from regular public forums sponsored by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. Memorial Presents features speakers from Memorial University who address issues of public concern in the province.

What if rural Canada disappeared? Does it even deserve to stay? What will it cost us to keep our rural areas alive? Can rural society pay its own way?

Dr. Emke, associate professor and program chair of social and cultural studies at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, dissected the urban-rural relationship at a public session held at the College in May 2006.

Rural areas have been represented in media and popular culture in some unflattering ways that we've come to accept.

Some argue that rural values and places are backward; rural culture has been devalued and marginalized. This is true in popular culture, as well as within economic thought. The rural may be the site of raw materials and resources, but it is not seen as the engine of growth or the source of new economic ideas. In this formulation, 'rural' is a backward place, where people are slow of wit.

A second view, much more positive but still unrealistic, is the image of rural as romanticized and idyllic ("a great place to raise kids").

Neither of these stereotypes is accurate, and neither serves us very well.

Rural society is not backward. It has given us some primary concepts of Canadian social life, such as the cooperative movement, the idea of social medicine, and community control of education and healthcare.

Neither is the rural condition entirely idyllic, however.

Why should rural people be able to continue living and working in places that sustained their ancestors if these places no longer can sustain them?

It is true that tradition and heritage can actually be a barrier to development. Those who are not willing to give up an attachment to place may (and often do) suffer economically. However, consumers benefit from the strong tie people have to certain ways of life and to land. Urban dwellers in particular benefit from the willingness of farmers and fishers and other primary producers to work hard, to endure risk, just so that they can break even or perhaps make a small profit.

This truth is so profound that it's the stuff of black humour – like the joke about the farmer who won a million dollars in the lottery. What did he decide to do? To keep farming until it was all gone! We laugh because it's absurd, and yet plausible.

What can keep people doing things that are hard, or dirty, or dangerous, or uncertain, even without high compensation?

What is rural? Statistics Canada offers six different definitions. Under several of these, all of Newfoundland and Labrador outside the overpass is rural. I prefer definitions that do not call cities like Corner Brook rural, but, even so, depending on the definition, rural Canada comprises somewhere between 22% and 38% of the population – perhaps as many as 6.5 million people. Despite what many have come to believe, rural society is not some narrow fringe.

Why would someone be willing to take a boat out onto the high seas even when compensation is unsure and inadequate? Why would someone work 16 hours a day for an entire summer, in heat, in rain, six or seven days a week, to grow some soybeans or raise some hogs?

Tradition, identity, culture.

In a globalized economy, decisions are not based on what a community needs, and certainly not on what a producer needs, but on "market forces." If economic behaviour is based on the market mentality, rural producers are put at a disadvantage.

I value my own pre-globalized market relationships. In the summer, I can buy parsnips from a local farm. It isn't just that I know the folks who grew the food, and I've seen their fields; it's also that, if something happens to them or to their crops, it has a direct effect on me. I can feel connection, empathy – those "old-fashioned" relationships. In a globalized world, our market exchanges do not normally involve relationships.

The French theorist, Jacques Ellul, wrote about the rise of "technique." It was basically machine logic – what runs the computer.

Ellul argued that, as we are surrounded by machines and get them to do more and more of our labour, we start to think like machines ourselves. We make decisions based on black-white binary criteria. We can no longer think in shades of grey, much less fuchsia or aquamarine. And so, he thought, we make bad decisions. We lose a sense of humanity in our decisions. These days, we open and close things on the basis of numbers – just numbers – although political patronage still paves the roads. We end up without flexibility. As Marshall McLuhan has said: "We fashion our own tools, and afterward they fashion us."

If we use only economic indicators, global market-based indicators, then it is hard to understand why marginal communities continue to exist. In the logic of globalization, it makes no sense whatsoever that people continue to insist on living in towns like Burgeo and Burnt Islands. But that's only because we have thrown out some of the major criteria that local people use for staying – the emotional and spiritual connections to a place, a set of people, and a pattern of life.

The fact is that rural and urban Canada are highly interdependent. This is one of the clear messages from the research of the "New Rural Economy." In order to build rural capacity, it is necessary to understand the structures and processes involved in this interdependence, identify where they best serve our mutual interests, and propose options for enhancing those interests.

> At a rural workshop in northern Quebec, a colleague turned to me and, in all seriousness, said, "They should close Newfoundland down, clear the place out and turn it into one big national park."
> In his mind, if an area is not amalgamating, getting bigger, cutting labour and increasing technology, then it needs to get out of the way.

Urban Canada relies on the resources, amenities, institutions, and heritage of rural places. Rural Canada relies on the capital, technology, production, and political power of urban centres. This inter-relationship is – ironically – best seen when problems emerge within it. For example, there are increasing conflicts related to farming practices, especially as large-scale production units expand. Farmers are feeling more conflict from some of their urban neighbours; at the same time, they have fewer community market relationships with them. Relationships are no longer horizontal, but vertical. Farming is just one of the economic activities in the rural landscape in the new economy. In a globalized and specialized economy, farming, or fishing, is nothing particularly special. Globalization destroys roots, because capital and investment is mobile.

Another source of tension between rural and non-rural populations relates to a growth in environmental groups with an interest in preserving the countryside. An interesting irony,

in our modern world, is that the roots of environmental movements tend to be deep in urban pockets. Where is rural environmentalism?

We need to work on urban-rural relations because we are going to need good relationships to deal with the problems of the future – such as where to put the garbage from the cities or where and how to grow the food. We need to find out what urban people think of rural life and to think about urban perceptions of what is valuable about rural. What are urbanites willing to pay for? There is a clear transfer of economic value from rural to urban, but what are urban people willing to give back?

Globalization often refers to networks of interaction: global communications, global markets, global cultural tastes, global currency exchanges, global trading, etc. Globalization is about markets conforming to an international trade regime – a managed trade regime such as the ***North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement***. Some of these shifts have been going on for centuries. What is new is the dramatic concentration of corporate power which is now stronger than that of most governments.

We need strategies to work on rural-urban alliances. There are rural secretariats, both national and provincial. Perhaps these should be changed to *rural-urban* secretariats, in order to stress the interdependence of the relationship. Without a clear focus on the linkages, we end up with policies like the gun registration issue, where addressing a largely urban problem adversely affects rural people.

One of the challenges is to enlighten urban people on the value of rural communities to their own, urban lives. Japanese research on the concept of "rural amenities" – the assertion that rural communities have value in and of themselves, as places for urbanites to escape to, even for short periods of time – sees rural amenities as deserving of protection, and requires that people be there to service the areas.

A key tourism question is: "How do we get people to pay for the rural amenities that do exist?"

Admitting that there is a fiscal imbalance in the context of rural and urban societies, perhaps there should be transfer payments from urban to rural. A crude form of that already exists, as the largely rural provinces generally get more transfer payments than largely urban provinces (although there are exceptions). But there might be a better compromise. The expectation that rural will cost more is part of the equation. Let's take schools as an example. We accept that student-teacher ratios will be lower in rural schools. We keep small-enrolment rural schools open partly because we understand the role they play in the community, and because the public accepts that their children should not have to spend as much time on the bus as in the class room.

On the flip side of the equation, rural schools may not get a broad variety of course offerings; however, on balance, the quality of education can still be equal. Some of the more impressive schools I've visited in this province – like Roncalli in Port Saunders, Jakeman in Trout River, Grandy's River Collegiate, near Burnt Islands – are rural schools.

The same type of accommodation is possible in health care.

The trend across Canada is toward a regional delivery of services. Not every community will have a school, a doctor, an economic development office. That is the trade-off.

As for which communities survive and which decline, that equation is more complicated and seemingly very idiosyncratic. Sometimes key individuals mobilize the support necessary to keep a community going (despite criticism from their neighbours, on occasion). Sometimes it is the development of a resource. Sometimes there is a collective unwillingness to let go of an area, despite the best evidence that money can buy, despite machine logic, and despite all the scales of "bankability" that we can find.

Still, the onus is on rural communities to prove that they deserve to survive, and this playing field works to their disadvantage. Some do not have people with the drive and interest to learn

how to get funding, even to cut some brush from the highway. Some cannot come to a consensus on a way forward – there are too many factions and competing interests. Some are dominated by a few individuals (or kin groups) and this domination is resented by the rest. When we come down to it, the variables affecting which communities survive have less to do with bankability and more to do with social variables, such as cohesion, communication, a common sense of purpose, neighbourliness – call it whatever old-fashioned word you'd like.

To move us forward we need a new vision for urban-rural alliances. Politicians might need a new social movement, a Rural Power movement to light the fire under them. I come from an area that underwent a serious farming crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. People there were so politicized that they acted against the banks that were foreclosing on family farms. During some bank auctions of family farms, the farmers got together and agreed that nobody would bid very much money for anything. Sure, they had to pressure a few people, but that was the price. Tractors sold for a buck and a quarter, balers for eighty-nine cents. A combine went for about the cost of two cups of coffee. The bankers were not amused when the whole lot of equipment went for under $20!

In this province, I think that we are generally too polite in our protests. I don't think we should be disrespectful, but we should squarely stand in the way of those who would dismiss rural areas. I am amazed that the collapse of the groundfish fishery, the decline of the inshore fishery, the depopulation of shoreline rural communities, and so on, has happened since 1992 without widespread protest. Is that a testament to our civility – or to our resignation?

There is a danger that the rural population will give in to the luxury of condemning the urban elite for all of its troubles and miss the boat on that opportunities to make links to urbanites. Environmental movements, for example, get most of their support from urban sources, despite the arguments that rural people have a much closer relationship to the natural environment. Some rural groups are using this to great advantage, however. Organic farmers, especially in metro-adjacent areas, are enjoying strong urban support that may well translate into assistance in fighting developments on prime farmland. If urbanites can link with rural folk against land developers, then rural people are stronger. Rural businesses that show they are sustainable and environmentally gentle may enjoy stronger urban alliances. In locations close to major urban centres all across Canada, there are niche producers selling ice cream, trail bologna, sweet corn and beef, making a living and building links with urban consumers.

What will happen if the slow dissolve of rural community life continues? If the Harbour Deeps and Harbour Bretons of the province continue to close down?

> If our federal government is constrained by global corporations (eg. tobacco control policy or softwood lumber), imagine how much greater is the loss of decision-making powers for rural communities and regions. When the downloading of costs and responsibilities is not accompanied by the power to make decisions, the result is often frustration and failure.

Heading off the Trans-Canada highway to Burgeo, you might encounter a sign saying: "Check your gas. No services for 146 kilometres." Just above Cow Head, will we see: "Check your gas, no services for 350 kilometres"? In Kippens, "Check your gas, no services on the Port au Port Peninsula."

I remember an old commercial for Fram oil filters. It showed a mechanic with an oil filter in his hand. He talked about the importance of changing the oil filter to protect the engine. He pointed out that the filter cost about $4 but an engine overhaul cost about $400. Holding the filter, he said, "You can pay me now." Then, pointing to the sick engine, he said, "Or – you can pay me later."

When it comes to whether we should save our rural communities, it is the same equation. We can pay now, or we can pay later. I, for one, would prefer to invest now. NQ