

Understanding the way farmers see their farm

Farmers and CSG workers may come from different backgrounds and this can impact on communications between them.

The CSIRO Shared Space project has shown that the aesthetics (visual aspects) of a farm is quite individualised and specific to the farmer and potentially a cause for a lack of understanding from others.

KEY POINTS

- Farmers feel that the issue of place identity is not well understood by many CSG workers from non-rural backgrounds.
- Landscape impacts can be difficult for farmers to communicate to CSG workers because of differing underlying value systems.
- Involving people from rural backgrounds as part of the CSG workforce could improve communication of the things that are important to farmers.

For the farmer, understanding the way in which he or she sees their farm is the first step to being able to communicate this to others.

There are two reasons why communication can be difficult.

Farmers identify with their farm

Farmers have a close relationship with their farm. Researchers refer to this as place identity. Four aspects to place identity have been suggested as being important:

Distinctiveness: A 'place' has symbolic meaning for people. It helps to describe someone and set them apart from others. Farms can be an expression of who we are.

Continuity: Memories of a place can link a person to their past or heritage. Farmers may have a long family history on a farm.

Self-esteem: A person gets positive feedback from a place with which they identify. Just as gardeners feel best in their garden, many farmers get personal strength from their farm.

Self-efficacy: A place facilitates a person's lifestyle and personal goals. The farm is the basis for the farm business, the family and much of what farmers want to achieve from life.

Farmers see their farm in a different way

We all see and enjoy different landscapes in different ways and this also applies to farming landscapes. For example, a flat treeless paddock may look perfect to a farmer yet big and boring to someone from a non-farming background. Scientists refer to this as *Landscape Aesthetics*.

We often see things differently because of our different experiences and value systems. The way farmers see their farms has been studied across the globe. Many farmers like their fields to look "neat and tidy". Research has shown that this reflects the farmers understanding of what such tidiness means in different contexts. For example, straight, neat rows can indicate technical proficiency with farm machinery.

Example: Why do farmers like to keep things tidy?

"Tidy is healthy" (*Grazier from Roma*)

"Tidy is efficient" (*Mixed cropping, Dalby*)

There are often personal values that underpin the way a farmer sees a farm landscape. Others may not see the farm the same way.



These same underlying values can sometimes cause us to find some landscape features unattractive.

When farmers see CSG infrastructure they sometimes describe it as “this looks wrong” or “it looks untidy”. This may not necessarily reflect the style or design of a CSG well, but the way a farmer interprets the impact of that well on the farm. “Untidiness” on a farm may also relate to a perceived weed or erosion threat, or an impact on farm machinery. A fellow farmer may see this the same way and understand what you see, whereas someone from a non-farming background may not.

Bridging the gap

Our research showed that many farmers felt that a lack of understanding and appreciation by CSG companies of these differences in the way a farmer and a non-farmer might see the same thing made communications difficult.

Those farmers who thought their CSG liaison did understand the way they saw their farm felt that this was because their contact was a local person or somebody from a rural background. This highlights one way to bridge this communication gap.

What does this mean for me?

This research highlights the potential for misunderstanding when a farmer is trying to explain things that are important to them. Requesting that their liaison person is someone who has a good understanding of farms, or who understands the way farmers see their farm and can “talk their language”, would be beneficial when negotiating with a CSG company.



What do you see here? Would others see this picture the same way?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How did you conduct the research?

We conducted a series of workshops with farmers in Roma, Chinchilla and Dalby to explore farmers’ perceptions of some of the issues arising from CSG, farming and farm families now occupying a shared space.

When did you conduct the research?

We conducted the workshops in early 2013.

What did you investigate?

The workshops explored a range of topics including:

- The importance of place identity and landscape aesthetics for farmers (reported here)
- Farmers’ acceptance and coping with change
- Possible benefits from off-farm income.

Where do I find more information?

A complete report of the Shared Space project can be found at the GISERA website: “*Farmer’s perceptions of coexistence between agriculture and large scale gas development, 2014*” at gisera.org.au.

ABOUT GISERA

The Gas Industry Social and Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) is a collaborative vehicle established to undertake publicly-reported independent research. The purpose of GISERA is to provide quality assured scientific research and information to industry, government and communities, focusing on social and environmental topics including: groundwater and surface water, biodiversity, land management, the marine environment, and socio-economic impacts. The governance structure for GISERA is designed to provide for and protect research independence and transparency of research. Visit www.gisera.org.au for more information about GISERA’s governance structure, projects and research findings.

FURTHER INFORMATION: 1300 363 400 | gisera@gisera.org.au