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Public support for agriculture: perceptions of farming and environment among the British in 2012

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ABSTRACT

Farming and the countryside are viewed by the British public as important, to a much greater degree than suggested by their economic significance. This may indicate deep insight about the importance of food supply and ecosystems, which could in turn manifest itself through the Common Agricultural Policy, and legitimise the CAP.

KEYWORDS: Common Agricultural Policy; Environment; Farm subsidies; Public opinion; Britain

1. Introduction

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) represents the largest single policy expenditure of the European Union, accounting for 40% of the EU budget (European Commission, 2012). This has the objectives of maintaining food supply, promoting environmental quality and supporting farm incomes.

The rationale and justification for the CAP are matters of contention. A major consequence of the CAP through the 1980s and 1990s was the generation of commodity surpluses that had then to be taken off the market at considerable expense. However, more recent turbulence in world commodity markets is promoting some rethinking as to the importance of food security and domestic production.

With a growing world population, improving diets and finite land, food production is likely to become a more serious concern as time passes. Agriculture has both positive and negative impacts on the environment. Intensification and specialisation of farming systems had adverse impacts on the environment, especially since the 1970s (Pye-Smith & Hall, 1987) and arguably these continue now, as reflected in declining indices of farmland birds (Donald *et al.*, 2001) and bees (Goulson *et al.*, 2008). But at the same time, it is argued that in other circumstances the CAP maintains agricultural land uses against abandonment and so protects cultural landscapes (Renwick *et al.*, 2011). There is demand for protection of the rural environment (for example: Greenpeace.org; FoE.org; or CPRE).

Many environmental attributes have the property of 'public goods' (Samuelson, 1954), so it is argued that farmers should be paid to protect the environment, both because providing environmental goods has costs to farmers, and because they cannot charge for the environmental benefits enjoyed by the public (Hart *et al.*, 2011). This philosophy can be summarised in the phrase 'Public Goods for Public Money'. While the European Commission argues that farm household incomes lag behind those in other sectors (according to the European Commission (2012), the EU average of farmer income is 40% of average wages in total economy per full-time equivalent), in the UK farm incomes are often relatively high (Defra, 2013). So, according to the EU Commission [the role of agriculture] "is not only to produce food, but also to guarantee the survival of the countryside as a place to live, work and visit".

In the context of the severe pressures on public finances within the European Union and the CAPs mid-term review in 2017, political support for the maintenance of the CAP will be critical. Hence perceptions of farming, among the general public, are important, both to legitimise current state support, and to motivate beneficial changes. Thus, to gauge broad support in Britain for farming and the environment, a survey of the British public was carried out by YouGov in cooperation with the author. Results are contrasted with Eurobarometer surveys in 1982 and 1987, which examined ecology and the CAP.

2. Data

The survey was undertaken of 1,736 adults from an internet omnibus panel over 29–30 July 2012, and weighted to be representative of the UK. The survey was conducted by YouGov.

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Table 1: Perceptions of UK farming, among the British general public (July-2012)

		Voting intention			2010 Vote			Know about farming		Gender	
	Total	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Great deal/ fair bit	Other	Male	Fem.
Weighted Sample	1736	443	586	119	548	459	378	453	1283	844	892
Unweighted Sample	1736	426	562	108	531	444	394			795	941
Question	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Generally speaking, how much would you say know about farming in the UK?: TOTAL NOT VERY MUCH / NOTHING AT ALL	μ=72	70	75	** 62	69	** 77	71			*** 67	** 75
Farming is important for the economy in the local area where I live: TOTAL AGREE	μ=57	60	** 52	* 65	* 61	* 53	57	*** 73	*** 51	56	57
Farming is important for the UK economy as a whole: TOTAL AGREE	μ=85	***90	83	87	*** 89	85	87	*** 92	** 83	85	86
The share of the UK economy based on farming will get significantly smaller over the next 10 years: TOTAL AGREE	μ=62	62	62	62	65	61	59	** 67	** 59	60	62
Farming plays an important role in protecting the environment in the UK: TOTAL AGREE	μ=74	* 78	73	* 81	** 78	** 69	73	*** 85	*** 70	73	74
TOTAL DISAGREE	μ=4	4	5	5	** 2	*** 7	** 6	6	4	*** 6	4
How important to you, is it to live near countryside or other green spaces?: TOTAL IMPORTANT	μ=82	**86	* 79	86	** 86	* 79	85	*** 93	*** 79	80	** 85
TOTAL NOT IMPORTANT	μ=13	11	** 16	13	11	** 17	12	*** 6	*** 16	*** 16	*** 10
How often, if at all, do you visit the countryside or other green spaces? (e.g. public gardens, parks, forests, hills, nature reserves): Visits More than Once per month	μ=65	***72	*** 59	* 73	*** 72	*** 59	68	*** 83	*** 59	* 62	* 68

***p<0.01
**p<0.05
*p<0.1

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Table 1 extended

Age				Social grade		Region				
18–24	25–39	40–59	60+	ABC1	C2DE	London	Rest of South	Midlands / Wales	North	Scot-land
210	443	594	490	990	746	222	564	372	427	151
115	503	640	478	1162	574	320	562	324	383	147
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
68	71	** 76	** 67	71	71	74	70	** 67	* 76	71
*** 47	*** 49	60	*** 65	55	58	*** 30	*** 66	** 63	* 53	56
*** 71	*** 80	** 88	*** 94	85	86	** 80	** 88	85	84	* 90
** 55	*** 56	62	** 67	*** 58	** 66	60	61	64	60	62
*** 65	*** 68	74	*** 84	74	73	70	75	74	75	70
4	** 6	5	4	5	3	5	4	4	** 6	4
*** 65	*** 77	*** 87	*** 89	83	82	*** 73	*** 88	85	80	78
*** 21	*** 18	** 10	** 10	14	12	*** 22	*** 9	* 10	14	** 20
*** 49	65	65	*** 72	67	63	*** 50	*** 75	** 70	*** 56	67

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Table 2: Perceived threat to green spaces in the UK (July-2012)

Now thinking more generally about green spaces in the UK...Which, if any, of the following do you think are serious threats to the UK countryside? (Please select a maximum of two)	Total%
New houses being built	**42**
The dumping of rubbish	**38**
Damage to special areas or 'reserves' in the countryside, such as woodlands, marshes, wetlands and places where rare animals or insects live	**24**
New roads being built	**22**
Leaving land uncared for as 'wasteland'	**17**
Other types of new building (e.g. factories, offices, warehouses and shopping centres)	**14**
New or bigger airports being built	**12**
Farming	**4**
The countryside is not under threat	**2**
Other	**2**
Don't know	**7**

3. Results and discussion

A clear majority of respondents regarded farming as important for the economy - in the local area in which they live, and to the economy as a whole. We might contrast this with the contribution that agriculture makes nationally to Gross Value Added, at about 0.75% in 2007. Clearly, people may well see food production as having an importance beyond that financial measure.

Farming is thought to be important in protecting the environment in the UK by 74% of adults in Britain, and 85% think that it is important for the UK economy (Table 1.). More specifically, conservative voters were marginally more positive about farming's contribution. However, there is a clear relationship with age. People under 40, particularly the 18–24 age group, were rather less positive about farming, the farm environment, living near green spaces, or visiting the countryside. Social grades differed little, with only the perceived likelihood of diminution of the farm economy being somewhat smaller in ABC1 ('upper/professional/managerial' class). Only 4% disagree that farming is important for protecting the environment (Table 1.).

Those who state that they know 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about farming were more positive about across all measures. And females were more positive than males (Table 1.).

A majority of Londoners thought that farming is important for the economy (80%), and for the environment (70%) - but the proportions with these views were lower than in the other parts the country. This is as might be expected, given that London is so urban and that the countryside so remote from it. But it is perhaps surprising that only 22% of Londoners (the greatest proportion of any grouping) think that it is not important to live near the countryside or green spaces. Thus as 73% there think it is important to live near countryside or green spaces, this would seem to indicate very great significance to the limited green spaces that are available in London.

It may however be of concern that only 65% of 18–24 year olds think that being near countryside or green space is important - the fewest of any group. The relative lack of importance for the rural environment among the young could be an effect of age, or it may be the effect of younger generations adopting different lifestyles from older people.

Young people in the 1980s were somewhat inconsistent in the extent to which they expressed 'pro-environmental' sentiments. So perhaps the younger cohorts just reflect the issues of the day to a greater

Table 3: The Common agricultural policy as viewed by the EC and GB publics in 1987.[1]

	Age group					
	15–24	25–39	40–54	55 OR>	Total	n
The CAP can be supported, if it takes into account environment/nature	%	%	%	%	%	
GBR						
AGREE	85	82	89	88	86	603
DISAGREE	15	18	11	12	14	100
EC						
AGREE	88	89	91	92	90	7,780
DISAGREE	12	11	9	8	10	885
We should cut back on farm chemicals, even if produce is expensive						
GBR						
Total AGREE	73	91	94	93	89	624
Total DISAGREE	27	9	7	7	11	79
EC						
Total AGREE	85	90	90	89	89	7,672
Total DISAGREE	15	10	10	11	11	993

[1]Source: EuroBarometer 27, GESIS 1712, Mar-May 1987

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Table 4: Ecological issues as viewed by the EC public in October 1982.[1]

	Age group							
	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65 AND OVER	Total	n
Do you have reasons to complain about 'Loss of farmland'	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
A GREAT DEAL & A FAIR AMOUNT	21	21	23	21	22	17	21	1,823
NOT VERY MUCH & NOT AT ALL	79	79	77	79	78	83	79	6,903
Do you have reasons to complain about 'Damage done to the landscape'								
A GREAT DEAL & A FAIR AMOUNT	28	27	28	25	25	19	26	2,383
NOT VERY MUCH & NOT AT ALL	72	73	72	75	75	81	74	6,866
How concerned or worried are you about 'Species extinction'								
A GREAT DEAL & A FAIR AMOUNT	71	71	73	71	67	61	69	6,468
NOT VERY MUCH & NOT AT ALL	29	29	27	29	33	39	31	2,864

[1]Source: EuroBarometer 18, GESIS 1209, Oct 1982

extent. In 1987 fewer EC & GB residents aged 15–39 years felt the CAP could be supported if it provided environmental protection, or expressed support for incurring farming costs from less chemical use (Commission of the European Communities, 2012a) (Table 3.) - indicating less favour towards the environment. However, contradicting the idea of a youth disconnect from environment, in EuroBarometer in 1982 (Commission of the European Communities, 2012b) more EC young (15–44) felt that they had reason to complain about damage to the landscape than other age groups, and more of the young expressed concern about loss of species (Table 4.). Similarly more 18–34's, than other age groups, in Britain in 2000 and 2010 said that climate change is dangerous to the environment (Taylor, 2012).

Building works (for homes; roads; other building; & airports) are seen as the biggest threats to the UK countryside, in this GB survey. Otherwise the British public frequently mentions concerns about dumping, and threats to special areas or 'reserves' (Table 2.). Perhaps surprisingly, only 4% saw farming as a threat to the countryside in this survey, as between 1985 and 1999 in British Social Attitudes overall 65% to 74% agreed that 'modern methods of farming have caused damage to the countryside'. However, agreeing with the results here, only 5.1% of respondents did mention farming or agricultural pollution as threatening or spoiling the countryside in the British Social Attitudes survey in 1995.

There was also a surprising level of ignorance about the extent and contribution of farming in the UK. A majority of people (72%) felt that they do not know much, or know nothing, about the sector. That appears to be substantiated by the fact that most people dramatically underestimated the proportion of land used for farming, while overestimating its economic contribution.

Thus only 10% of respondents knew, to within plus or minus 10 percentage points, the actual amount of land that is farmed nationally in the UK. The mean estimation put forward by those taking part in the survey was about 35%. In fact, farming takes up about 75% of available land in the UK. On the other hand, the mean contribution of farming to the national economy was reckoned to be about 24% by most participants. In truth, farming contributed 1.5% of employment and 1.0% of GDP in 2011.

4. Conclusion

These data reveal evidence of a clear and widespread passion - or profound concern - for the British countryside, along with specific findings about the agricultural sector. A majority of people still visit the countryside more than once a month and 82% said it was either fairly important, or very important, for them to live within 30 minutes' striking distance of rural green space. Significantly, 73% of Londoners - many of whom do not live within easy reach of such areas - also felt this way.

Large numbers of the British people believe that farming is important for both the environment and for the economy, visit the countryside regularly and appreciate living near rural green space. Typically between 65% and 85% of the public hold these views. Levels of support were somewhat lower among those aged under 40, particularly the 18–24s and higher for those over 60 - which could be a concern if the trend continues. However, perhaps the smaller emphasis on farming and environment among younger people in GB reflects greater emphasis on current information among youth - as views of farming and environment, among younger cohorts, changed between EuroBarometer surveys in the 1982 and 1987.

The survey generally indicates a relatively high degree of support for farming and the countryside amongst the British public. They also overstate its economic importance. This might suggest a degree of acceptance of policies designed to give the sector support.

About the author

Mark Reader trained in Agricultural Science and Plant Physiology at the University of Western Australia, and worked, over the next 25 years, in a variety of posts in applied agricultural research in the UK, Australia, Peru and South Africa. His interests include: wellbeing; values and faith; farm performance; and public goods.

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