

The organics iceberg and the tyranny of organic certification

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The existence of an 'organics iceberg' is a hypothesis rather than a fact. Nevertheless, reports in *The World of Organic Agriculture* that there are 37,245,686 certified organic hectares worldwide and that this accounts for 0.86% of global agriculture (Willer, Lernoud & Kilcher, 2013) are lower bounds, in fact underestimates, of the size and the achievements of the organics movement. While such statistics are seductively precise, they are merely the countable manifestation of a larger phenomenon, and perhaps a much larger phenomenon, which may be - an organics iceberg.

Just how large is the uncounted 'world of organic agriculture', as compared to the counted world of certified organic agriculture, is a matter of speculation, but its existence is doubtless. In a study in India comparing the experience of organic farmers (N=350) and chemical farmers (N=200), all of the organic farmers lacked certification (Sudheer, 2013). The reasons given for that absence of certification were the cost of certification, the lack of information to achieve certification, and the size and scale of the operation (Sudheer, 2013).

My favourite tea, at least for the moment, is Rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*), from South Africa, and the packet states that it is "organically grown" (Just Roibos, 2013). Such a claim is usually code for falling at the last hurdle to certification - being packed at a facility that is organically certified. A local bottle of Pinot Noir wine carries the narrative: "We nurture our vines with a focus on soil health and biodiversity following biodynamic and organic principles" (Roberts & Roberts, 2010). On their website, the Moorilla Winery of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) declares that "Our winery focuses on a small, very high-quality output ... to make boutique, ultra-premium wines from sustainable, organic and bio-dynamic estate-grown fruit" (MONA, 2013). These are three examples of the non-certified world of organic agriculture.

What has passed as reportage of the worldwide organics movement over the past fifteen annual reports (beginning with Willer & Yussefi, 2000) takes advantage of the uptake of organics certification, the infrastructure of organics certifiers, and the attendant auditing and data gathering. Yet, organics certification is a relative latecomer to the organics movement, a movement that dates back to Rudolf Steiner's call, in 1924, for an agriculture differentiated from chemical agriculture (Paull, 2011; Steiner, 1924).

There are reasons to be organic and there are reasons to be certified organic - and they are different reasons. Organics certification generally postdates the 1972 founding of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) (Paull, 2010). In Australia there has been active and structured advocacy of organic agriculture from the founding, in 1944, of the Organic Farming and Gardening Society (Paull, 2008), but organics certification in Australia dates from the founding of organics certifiers beginning

from 1987 (Paull, 2013). Certified organic food and agriculture is a subset of organic food and agriculture.

Africa appears skeletal on a map of the world of organic agriculture where territory sizes are presented according to their reported organic agriculture hectares (Paull & Hennig, 2013) since Africa accounts for less than 3% of global certified organic hectares (Willer et al., 2013). However as Bouagnimbeck (2013) points out “it should be noted that much organic production ... takes place in Africa without certification. There are many African organic farmers for whom formal certification does not have any advantages: this is true for farmers who practice subsistence farming and do not engage in the market at all, and for farmers for whom the organic claim has little or no marketing value. These groups engage in organic agriculture because of benefits such as increased productivity and resilience, lower production costs, a healthier working environment, and other social, environmental, and economic sustainability considerations. Non-certified organic agriculture might also be a first step on the way to certification. There are no statistics on this type of organic production” (p.167).

Historically, the organics sector has been a broad church and variety has been embraced. However, the development of organics certification has fostered an exclusionary approach and disengagement with some of the organics family. This reaches an apotheosis in the USA where, for example, it has become illegal to label produce ‘organic’ unless it has the imprimatur of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This encroachment denies that organic has been part of the commonwealth of agriculture in the USA since at least the first issue of Jerome Rodale’s periodical *Organic Farming and Gardening* (Rodale, 1942) and it ignores the brutal experience that historically the USDA could hardly be characterised as either friend or advocate of organics (Gross, 2008). The USDA in control of US organic standards and certification may seem to some to be akin to putting Dracula in charge of the blood bank. As a response to the disenfranchisement of the grassroots organics movement there has been “a backlash against the federal takeover of the organic program in 2002, Certified Naturally Grown has expanded over the past decade to include more than 700 farms in 47 states” (Reighart, 2013).

Circling the wagons in an ever tightening defensive formation is not a means for the organics movement to conquer the world. There are diverse reasons for being certified organic, including health, environment, market opportunity, and profit. But a fortress organics mentality denies the reality that there are many reasons to be non-certified organic, and they include cost, access, and size of operation (Sudheer, 2013), lack of market advantage (Bouagnimbeck, 2013), and there is a plethora of other reasons including independence, privacy, bother, paper-work, intrusion, bio-security, and farm sovereignty. Black-letter organics has its place, but it is a place at the organics table and it is not the whole table. There are organics fellow travellers, and the diverse kith and kin of the organics movement, that can and do advocate and innovate practices and ideas.

Consumers can differentiate between ‘organic’ and ‘certified organic’. In a study of Australian consumers (N=221), consumers valued food labelled ‘organic’ at a premium of 8% and food labelled ‘certified organic’ at a premium of 16%. So, for consumers, half of the organics price premium is attributed to the ‘organic’ claim and half is attributed to the ‘certified’ claim (Paull, 2009).

The organic spinach in my front yard and the organic cherries in my back yard are foreseeably never destined to be certified organic. Jerome Rodale, after the first issue of his periodical *Organic Farming and Gardening* (May 1942) promptly inverted the title to read *Organic Gardening and Farming* (for the December 1942 issue), having realised that there were potentially far more organic gardeners than organic farmers. The success of the world's longest running organics periodical testifies to the wisdom of Rodale's insight. Much urban agriculture is organic and much of the world's food is from backyards (Benson, 2012) although the numbers are elusive.

It has been observed that "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (Cameron, 1963, p.13). While the certified organic world can be counted, since each entity has been audited by a certifier, the metrics of the non-certified world of organic agriculture is a greater challenge since it is not amenable to the collation of any existing data. Population measurements in ecological studies typically resort to strategies other than a full population census, and for the world of non-certified organics we likewise need to be content with population estimates, rather than full population counts. There is also the issue of where to 'draw the line'. For example, a study of the effectiveness of poultry manure on crop growth (Shiyam & Binang, 2013), while reported appropriately in the Journal of Organic Systems, might fail commercially to achieve organic certification because the manure may need to have been sourced from certified organic chickens, and applying urea may preclude certification (OISCC, 2013). Organics in Korea avoids the typical dichotomy of organic/non-organic by having four categories of organics certification.

The development of a rice bred specifically for organic farming (Vanaja, Mammootty & Govindan, 2013) is an example of the kind of research that needs to be expanded if the organics movement is to achieve its destiny as imagined by its founders and pioneers. Reported at just 0.86% of global agriculture, the organics sector is a precariously and insecurely positioned niche.

The captain of the Titanic, Edward Smith, may have wondered "Perhaps there is an iceberg?" In *The World of Organic Agriculture*, we may be getting a good view of the tip but how much 'berg' are we disregarding? It is time to move beyond the tyranny of certification to embrace, celebrate and foster the diversity of the organics diaspora. A fuller and broader metrification of the world of organic agriculture will be a challenging enterprise and would undoubtedly introduce a greater degree of fuzziness into the metrics, nevertheless, accounting for a world of certified and non-certified organic agriculture would be a timely enterprise that can lay the basis for warranting more organics research, more organics research funds, greater recognition for organics, greater consideration for the organics enterprise, and more shelf space for organics produce.

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