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Current Challenges for the Pick Your Own Market – Health and Prosperity

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Introduction

Pick Your Own (PYO) farms hold nostalgic memories for many of us. In the 1980s there were thousands of them in the UK, but now there are only a few hundred (Sukhadwala, 2014). In their heyday they offered easy access to sources of soft fruit for urban communities and a reconnection of urbanised communities with sources of food. Pick Your Own allowed those disconnected with primary food production to reconnect, and in addition offered a cheaper source of essential nutrients. In recent years we can note their decline. This contribution explores, on the basis of primary research, the reasons behind the decline in PYO numbers, since the 1980s. The findings are interesting in that the work here suggests that increasing opportunism amongst consumers – the something for nothing ethos, has significantly impacted on the viability of such initiatives, playing into the hands of the more powerful players within supply chains. The work reviews the core product of PYO: fruit retailing or family day out, and suggests that whilst cultural and ethical changes challenges the nature of traditional Pick Your Own, those who have survived have developed mitigation strategies to ensure this.

Recent trends in the Pick Your Own market

In the 1980s there were over 4000 PYO farms in Britain, but by 2010 there were only 600.

Jemima Lewis (2009) of the *Telegraph* wrote:

“The closest I ever got to nature during my London childhood was harvesting fruit for my mother’s jam. Those memories – ... the smell of warm earth and straw, and the startling sweetness of contraband berries whipped straight from plant to mouth – still linger on the palate..”

This quote, in praise of the PYO farm also contains the seeds of their decline, as eating and not paying for fruit is shown to be a major threat to their financial sustainability. PYO farmers face several challenges, which if not addressed could result in the closure of the PYO business – factors like weather, liability and risk assessment, pricing, promotion, waste and theft.

Under the Common Agricultural Policy, there is still encouragement for farmers to develop multi-functionality of their land, and hence multi-income streams. Commercial pressures caused by economic structural changes, changes in consumer spending habits, international competition, weather uncertainty, specialisation, price pressures and market instability all act as push factors to diversify incomes.

The growth of ‘agri-tourism’ – a secondary business on the farm and based on agricultural activities (Tew and Barbieri, 2012) – is a response to the need for alternative income streams. As income from farming has varied and in some sectors is not profitable without subsidies, agri-tourism (Forbord *et al.*, 2012) contributes more to the farming household income than mainstream agricultural activity. (NFU, 2016) PYO is such a diversification – on farm but non-farm and involving the welcoming of ‘visitors’ onto the farm, for a retail or a recreational activity. As agri-tourism has grown, the agri-tourist has had a greater choice of activities, and the nature of agri-tourists has evolved over time, in line with changes in mainstream tourists. Their age, cultural, educational and occupational profiles have not remained static.

Threats faced by PYO farms

■ Waste

PYO increases the wastage of fruit, due to careless picking and children playing amongst the fruit. Lefort (2010) quotes a PYO farmer bemoaning the fact that pickers sometime leave half full baskets of fruit in the field after eating their fill.