

The Social Life of Pesticides: the Future of Urban Agriculture and Biodiversity in the Hawkesbury-Nepean River

Seminar Series 2011

When: Wednesday 15th June 2011, 4pm - 6pm

Where: Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, UTS City Campus
Level 3, Mary Ann House, 645 Harris Street, Sydney
(a short walk from Central Railway Station)

Presenters:

Roel Plant, Jeremy Walker, Scott Rayburg, Jacqui Gothe, Teresa Leung, Richard Lim, Yin Phyu and Frances Parker

Convenor :

Dr Jeremy Walker , Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract:

While they reduce crop losses, synthetic agrochemicals ultimately threaten the ecological basis upon which agriculture depends. Since Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), efforts have been made to minimise the hazards of chemicalisation, while retaining the benefits of industrial agriculture, through a logic of licensing individual chemicals on the basis of 'acceptable risks' to citizens. Yet the scientific and institutional uncertainties confronting risk assessment, monitoring and regulation of the environmental effects of the sheer number of synthetic chemicals in use – thought to be between 45 000 and 100 000 – remain dauntingly complex, especially when we confront the largely unmeasured risks to biodiversity and ecosystem functions. Building on a recent study into the combined toxicity effects of three pesticides on a range of freshwater species native to the Hawkesbury-Nepean River (Phyu, forthcoming), this seminar addresses the 'social life' of pesticides in the Hawkesbury region at Sydney's western fringe, where land use is dominated by small-scale horticulture. These farms provide a substantial portion of Sydney's fresh vegetables and contribute to our enviable food security. Due to its marginal profitability, insecurity and labour intensity, horticulture in the Hawkesbury region has often been carried out by the more recent immigrants to Australia, and while a majority of horticulturalists are unable to read English, almost all technical information on pesticide use is available only in English.

This seminar will report on a cross-disciplinary effort, involving researchers working in toxicology, environmental science, social science, design and applied sustainability research, to come to grips with the state of knowledge of the condition of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River and the social causes of its chemicalisation. To this end, we interviewed a range of stakeholders and professional actors working in various governmental institutions, whose efforts to exercise their responsibilities ultimately effect the human geography and biodiversity of the river basin, the better to understand how these stakeholders believe our system of chemical regulation is supposed to work, and the extent to which it is effective. After highlighting the institutional factors we believe contribute to a systemic underinvestment in the sustainability of farming and the ecological wellbeing of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, we conclude by suggesting ways forward.

The seminar offers these interviewees an opportunity to engage with our findings and each other, and we would invite all interested parties to join with us in discussing possible avenues for reform such that the ecological resilience of the Sydney basin can be enhanced and the contribution of peri-urban farming communities to our way of life can be appropriately recognised and supported.

Presentations will be followed by wider discussion. Refreshments will be provided.

REGISTRATION

Please send registration details to: ccs@uts.edu.au & please include name, group or organisational affiliation & e-mail address

THIS SEMINAR IS A FREE PUBLIC EVENT
PLEASE RSVP AS PLACES ARE LIMITED