

**Heartland
Strong**

How rural New Zealand can change and thrive —

Heartland Strong

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The Wairoa River, in northern Hawke's Bay.
Beautiful landscapes and natural recreational
assets, such as rivers, are seen by locals as some
of the benefits of living in rural communities.







Rural towns are central to the resilience of New Zealand's agricultural communities. The general store at Ongaonga has been trading since 1899.

Introduction

The future of New Zealand's rural communities is unclear. Empty shops, depopulation and lack of jobs are all offered as signs that many towns are dying. However, the strength of social ties and development of digital technologies, the innovations in rural entrepreneurship and the functioning informal economy suggest that some rural communities are in good health.

As researchers, we wanted to know what people in these towns thought about their own resilience, so we went and asked them. In 2016 we held a series of workshops in several small North Island towns and asked residents how their communities were doing. To some extent, what they said wasn't surprising. They pointed to businesses and government offices that had closed, to environmental issues that needed addressing, to schools and clubs that didn't have enough members, and to difficulties accessing services such as healthcare, post offices and banks.

At the same time, they talked about what they did have. They had good schools with excellent staff. They had natural resources such as rivers, lakes and bush for locals and tourists to use. They spoke of strong Māori culture with proud whakapapa and diverse iwi. Most of all, they talked about living in places where they knew people on the street and could stop for a natter and a cuppa. They identified strong rural communities and a sense of belonging.

Those discussions suggested an underlying resilience that isn't captured in some of the ongoing debates about the future of rural communities. They also echoed some of the research that the authors of this book have been undertaking for the past 10 years or more. Our research has investigated resilience on farms and in communities, as well as the links between the two. We thought it was time, therefore, to summarise what we have learned.

There are many definitions of resilience. In our research, we define it as *the ability of a social system to adapt*. This does not necessarily mean adapting to return to the way things were; it can also mean transformation and renewal within a community. In this way, we see disturbances to rural communities as sometimes negative, but also as opportunities for positive change.

While most resilience literature has focused on natural disasters or traumatic events, this book looks more at adaptation to gradual change, such as the depopulation of rural areas. This approach to resilience means we consider it to be a) ongoing, b) both positive and negative, and c) part of a wider system change.

We see this book as a part of a conversation with other writers and researchers who are interested in rural communities. We also think it fills gaps in the New Zealand literature on the resilience of rural communities. Some examples may help.

Economist Shamubeel Eaqub led New Zealanders to talk about 'zombie towns' — towns that won't die but are left to shuffle along as people and businesses leave.¹ He raised provocative questions: should New Zealand have an active policy of putting 'dying' towns out of their misery? How much responsibility does the rest of the country have for towns that no longer serve a clear function?

Massey University's Paul Spoonley undertook research on shifting demographics and the inevitable impacts on New Zealand regions.² As he pointed out, changes are already largely locked in: future demographics

are mostly the result of past birth patterns and the passage of time. The expected result is fewer people in rural areas, with many of them being older.

These two examples show how the New Zealand literature tends not to explore the elements that make for vibrant or successful rural communities and tends to focus on one topic at a time: economics or demography or the environment. Our approach is to consider economics *and* demography *and* the environment, aiming for a holistic description of rural communities.

There is no getting away from the pressures, drivers and trends that are challenging the rural sector. The view popularised by Eaqub and Spoonley is that these trends will ultimately bring about the end of parts of rural New Zealand.

An alternative perspective

There is another view, however. Rural areas represent the bulk of the land mass of New Zealand, and therefore the bulk of its natural resources. These areas contribute significantly to the economy and have been growing in productivity. Rural communities contain quite a few of New Zealand's people — families and organisations who contribute to the social and cultural make-up of the country. Many of our rural communities represent what New Zealanders love about their country. They are friendly and tight-knit and provide a place to reconnect with the rural environment — the rivers, the mountains, the small-town New Zealand feel. Rural areas also have a large proportion of tangata whenua, as well as their physical resources: marae, culture and tūrangawaewae (places to stand). Rural communities have shown themselves to be resilient over many years; that is likely to continue.

Based on many years of working with rural communities, we wanted to emphasise several aspects. Most importantly, people in rural communities, whether living in townships or not, do have options.

On farm, there have been a lot of changes over the past 20 years and farmers continue to adapt and innovate. A few key facts summarise some of the changes. The number of sheep in New Zealand has fallen from more than 70 million in 1982 to almost 28 million in 2016, a decline of around 60 per cent. Nevertheless, the amount of sheep meat exported from the country has barely changed. Farmers have learned to produce roughly the same amount of meat from less than half the number of animals. The production techniques have changed accordingly, and Chapter 1 describes some of the differences, including the impacts of irrigation and intensification. There is also significant interest in new crops and new techniques.

Farmers have expanded into entrepreneurial businesses, as described in Chapter 11, including niche, value-add farming operations. Examples include organic farms, tourist-destination farms and farm-level diversification. Farmers are demonstrating adaptability in the face of a changing economic, social, environmental and cultural scene in New Zealand. In fact, the New Zealand Productivity Commission found that the primary sector, including agriculture, had the highest rate of labour productivity growth of any sector since 1985 and was above average between 2000 and 2011.

It is also important to recognise that people are resilient. People exercise some control over their lives, something psychologists and sociologists call ‘agency’. They make choices and strive to do as well as they can. Language that focuses on ‘zombie towns’ has the side effect of making the residents seem like victims. Similarly, focusing on demographic trends can threaten to turn people into bystanders.

When we talk to people in rural areas, they are well aware of the challenges they face and can make a list of them as well as anyone. However, they also know that the rural economy has ups as well as downs and that they have collective social capital to draw on when necessary. Chapter 4 describes what happened when the floods hit

Manawatū in 2004. Many farmers initially managed the effects on their farms and rallied to help their neighbours get up and running in the short term. They then took the opportunity to work out how to manage their properties better, leading to the Sustainable Land Use Initiative. Farmers worked with Horizons Regional Council to create balanced farm plans that encouraged them to retire challenging terrain and focus on the productive parts of their farms. The result was improved environmental resilience because of less erosion from steep land.

Resilience is complex

These communities continue to function partly because resilience isn't just about jobs or ageing populations or environmental impacts or social connections; it's a combination of these things, in ways that aren't fully understood. This notion is supported by research in Wairoa, in Hawke's Bay, as discussed in Chapter 2. Wairoa has several indicators of vulnerability: few jobs and low incomes, and the recent closing of one of its supermarkets. Our research showed, however, that its informal economy is strong and contributes significantly to people's well-being.

One last thing to point out about resilience: it is more than local — it is 'local and larger'. We see this repeatedly with policies that operate at both the national and the local level. One example is freshwater policy. The aim and the direction of the policy were set at the national level, with the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management. The statement starts with objectives about safeguarding the life-supporting capacity of water and enabling communities to provide for their economic well-being. By the end of that very same page, the national-level statement describes how the objectives will be achieved: 'By every regional council making or changing regional plans to the extent needed to ensure the plans'. All such national-level policies require regional-level change, so the well-being of the regions depends partially on national-level policies. In addition, achieving overall goals for the country depends on having regional

communities that are resilient enough to contribute to those goals.

When we held workshops in rural communities, as detailed in Chapter 3, the participants were well aware of the interaction between local resilience and decisions made elsewhere. In Taumarunui, for instance, participants talked about the decision made by KiwiRail to cancel the regular stop at the town, and the impacts on residents and tourism. Across the communities, residents talked about central government facilities that were once located in the regions and had since been shifted to cities. They pointed out that these decisions, which are made to help the ministries and state-owned enterprises and their employees, result in hurting the towns that are left behind. Local residents are clear that they have to contend not just with the impacts of local decisions on their resilience but also with the impacts of decisions made far from their communities.

A bit about us

The authors of this book are researchers focused on agriculture and rural communities. There are two things we would like you to know about us.

The first is that we come from different specialities. The social researchers have backgrounds in rural sociology, community development, education, geography and economics. The physical scientists have backgrounds in ecology, farm systems, animal nutrition and more. This allows us to take different perspectives on the same issue. That's important, because a problem in a rural community is never 'just' an economic problem or a social problem or an environmental problem. More to the point, the solution to a problem is never simply from one speciality or another. An environmental problem may have a technical solution, but that solution needs to fit within the farm management methods being used and the economics of the operation. Solutions must also be socially feasible. If a solution is technically accurate but farmers will not implement it, it is not really a solution.

This brings us to the other important thing about our team: we have figured out how to work together as an interdisciplinary team. Gabriele Bammer, a professor at Australian National University, has researched interdisciplinary teams and wrote an influential book on the topic.³ She found that learning to work together is one of the biggest challenges of interdisciplinary research. Disciplines have different sets of priorities and assumptions; they use different language and techniques and they can be difficult to understand from the outside. Learning to work beyond those difficulties and share knowledge without ‘dumbing it down’ has been part of developing our research team. Indeed, one member of our team researches interdisciplinary teams and uses us as subjects for that research. We don’t always get it right, but we have had some successes with our approach that make us keen to continue.

This book is based primarily on our work in two projects that have been running consecutively since 2007: Rural Futures and Resilient Rural Communities. Rural Futures was originally funded through New Zealand’s competitive funding system by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST). Later, funding for the two programmes came from AgResearch’s core funding and has also become part of the Our Land and Water — Toitū te Whenua, Toiora te Wai National Science Challenge. AgResearch has been the lead organisation over that whole period and has involved Lincoln University, the University of Otago, and several other organisations and independent researchers. More than 30 researchers have been involved in the work.

Rural Futures focused on supporting the New Zealand pastoral industry to adapt and remain sustainable in response to the future pressures it faced. Those pressures haven’t really changed in the more than 10 years since the programme was conceived. Farmers are working to compete in global markets, where a combination of prices, consumer demands and supply chain requirements continues to challenge them. Societal and policy changes that operate at local, national and

international levels create additional demands for farmers on how they operate and how they measure and manage the effects of these changes. The agricultural sector also faces several constraints. Energy, soil, water and skilled labour are vital to agriculture but are also limited. New Zealand farmers and the agents who advise them must learn, plan and innovate around these constraints. Rural Futures therefore focused on developing tools, processes and systems to help farmers, advisors and industry groups respond to risks and opportunities in ways that are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable.

Resilient Rural Communities has shifted that focus a little. It started from the perspective that farms need rural communities and those communities need healthy farms. It seeks to understand the drivers of community resilience, and to help communities improve this resilience. There is also a strong mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) component in our resilience research.

An important part of Resilient Rural Communities is outreach to stakeholders in the rural sector. It is working to create connections to people and organisations who have stakes in rural community development, in order to ensure that the research is useful and relevant. That makes it both a research programme and an extension programme — an unusual combination in this country. The focus is on the widest group of stakeholders possible: farmers, rural residents, social and community groups, local and central government, industry groups, rural businesses and allied businesses such as banks and agribusiness suppliers.

A bit about this book

This book takes what we have learned about rural community resilience to a wider audience. We have published academic papers and reports over the past decade, for which the references and links can be found on our website.⁴ We have engaged less with the public about our science — until now. Throughout this book, we explain the technical aspects of

our research and show how it is relevant to rural communities and New Zealand generally.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section outlines key changes in agriculture over the past 20 years. It then describes a few rural communities in New Zealand in which we have undertaken research. The aim of the section is to make these places and changes real for the reader. The second section moves away from specific places into general concepts; it presents the frameworks we have been using to guide our research. It also describes some of the tools we use to amass a broad range of information and make it understandable.

The second half of the book is more forward-looking. Section Three considers different drivers of change and how they might affect rural areas. The drivers include Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) in their tūrangawaewae, increasing environmental pressures on farming, and future technologies that are changing all of society. Section Four then returns to the idea of integration. It considers how agriculture and its connections to the environment and communities could be managed in the future, from both Māori and Pākehā perspectives.

In the concluding chapter, we come back to the idea of visiting the countryside. This time we consider what might change in the future and the impacts on communities' resilience. The conclusion also considers the role that people's decisions could play in creating a resilient future.

We have written this book for a wide range of people with an interest or a stake in resilient rural communities: the people who live there, the businesses that operate there, local and national government and, ultimately, New Zealanders in general. We hope it provides useful insights into the ongoing process of change in rural communities and the resources on which they draw to support their resilience.