The Success and Failure of Australia's Organic Agriculture

Dr John Paull[1]

Two recently published maps of the world of organic agriculture reveal Australia's bold success as well as its disappointing failure.

Firstly there is the 'Fat Australia' map that shows the leadership position of Australia in the world of organic agriculture (Fig.1). Australia has more certified organic hectares than any other country. It accounts for 32% of the world's total. In the organic projection of the world, country areas are proportional to reported certified organic agriculture hectares. Argentina holds the second place. Europe is well represented, as are China and India, while Africa shrinks in the organics projection (Fig.1).

Historically, Australia took off to an early start in the organics project. Australians joined the Agricultural Experimental Circle in the 1920s and 1930s to test Rudolf Steiner's farming ideas and to develop the practices of biodynamic agriculture. The Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society was the earliest society in the world to dedicate itself specifically to the advocacy of organics. It was founded in 1944 and its journal the 'Organic Farming Digest' was a pioneering organics publication. Australia has a long history of organics achievements, and leading the world in certified organic hectares earns Australia some bragging rights.

But the 'Slow-grow Australia' map shows Australia lagging the world in the rate of growth of the organics sector (Fig.2). Australia has been overtaken in terms of growth of organic hectares by the fast learners, China and India, and by the rest of the world in general. On the map, in red, are the fastest growing organics nations, followed by countries coloured orange, such as New Zealand, and yellow, such as Canada. The nations in green, including Australia, exhibit below average growth (Fig.2).

Of the total of 71 countries where there is data spanning the last decade, Australia, with an organics hectares growth of 57% over the decade, is in the bottom twenty five percent and is in fifty-sixth position. The world growth rate over the same period has been 123%. Meanwhile, China, India, Uruguay, the Philippines have each grown their organic sector by thousands of per cent over the past decade, while near neighbour, New Zealand, has grown its area dedicated to organic production by 982%.

Australia has 2.8% of its agricultural land as certified organic, so there is plenty of room for the growth of the sector. Consider, Austria has 19% of its land as organic, Liechtenstein has 27%, and the Falklands (Malvinas) has most recently surged to 36% organic.

Most countries are actively encouraging and supporting their organic sector, including through research, extension services, public policy and goal setting. This includes important food producers such as China, India, Europe and South America. Australia remains a standout exception, with its governments, by and large, deaf and blind to the health, environmental and

[1] john.paull@mail.com

ecological solutions of organics, while they are seemingly in the thrall of a failing chemical/ industrial agriculture model that is by now past its use-by date.

There is plenty of room at the top and Australia has so many natural advantages which could put it, and keep it, at the forefront of organic production with clean green food which is, after all, what consumers want. Consider the alternative. Australia can not conceivably win a race to the bottom, and why would we want to try? Whatever the product, someone, somewhere can always make it worse and cheaper. An Australia aiming to produce the world's cheapest food is set for a thrashing, but it could grow the world's best food and enjoy the price premium.

Let's face the brutal fact that there is no clamour from consumers for pesticided food. The day that the truth-in-labelling movement achieves the listing of the plethora of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, biocides, genetically modified and nanomaterial inputs on each food label is the day that we see the crash of chemical agriculture. In the meantime, Australian food labelling conceals more than it reveals.

There is a cause for congratulations that Australia leads the world in organic hectares. But on other indices of organics leadership, Australia is a laggard rather than leader (see for example Organic Olympiad 2011). Furthermore, Australia's leadership position for organic hectares is eroding as the leadership margin contracts, and most other countries move forward faster with organics than Australia.

France and Brazil have set goals of achieving 20% organic, the Indian state of Kerala has set the goal of achieving 100% organic, while Chinese regional governments are proactive in supporting the conversion to organic production. Is there the will to set an organics goal for Australia, or do we just wave as the world passes us by?

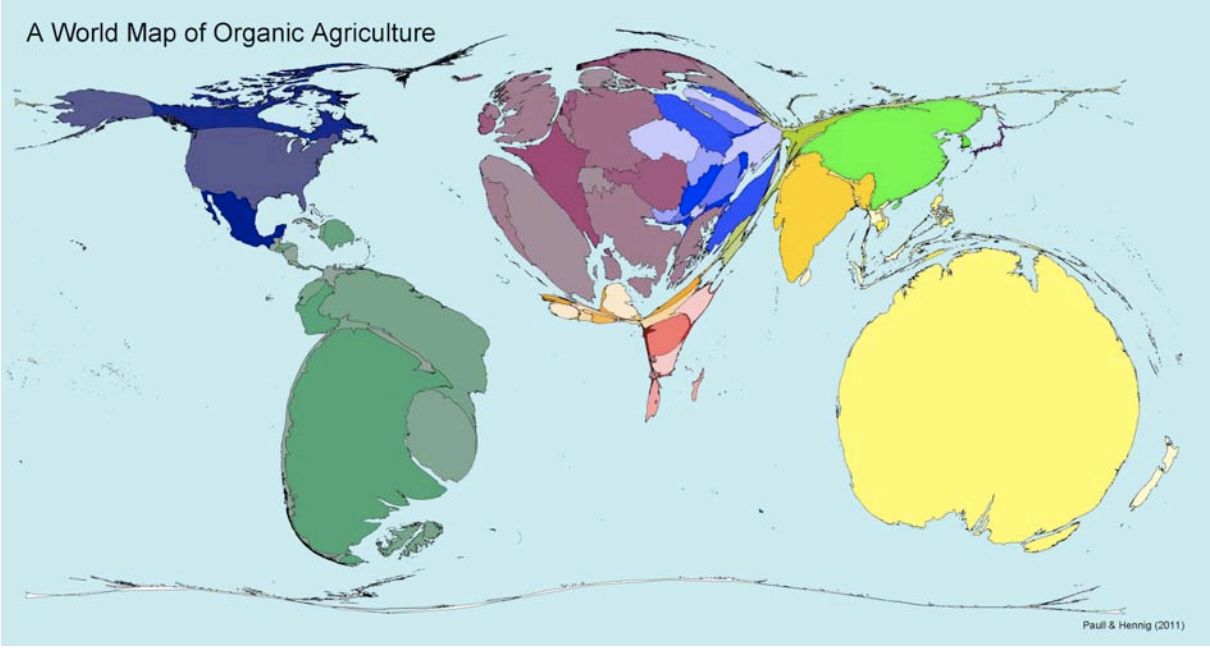

Figure 1. World map of organic agriculture with territorial sizes shown proportional to the certified organic hectares for 160 countries (source Paull & Hennig, 2011).

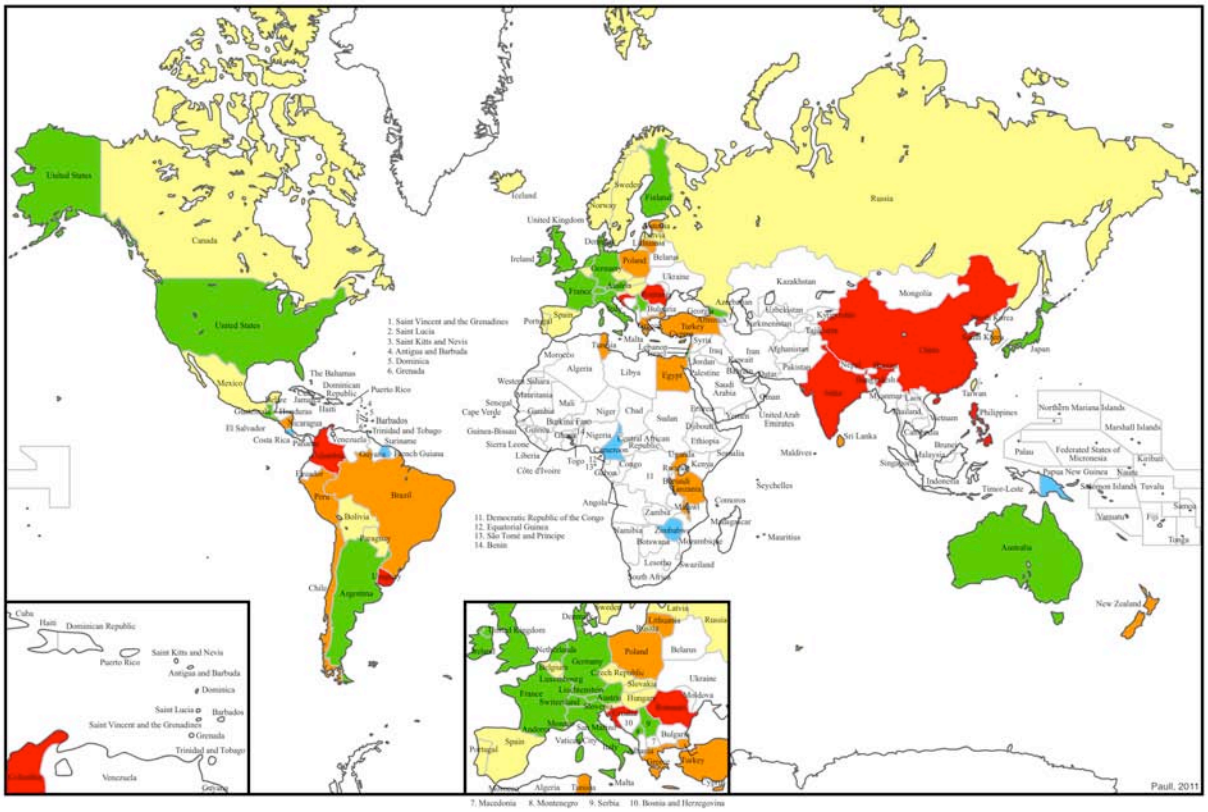

Figure 2. World map of organic agriculture growth rates for 71 countries over a decade (2001- 2011). Colour code: Red = Triple digit growth; Orange = Double digit growth; Yellow = Single digit growth (above average); Green = Single digit growth (below average); Blue = Negative growth (source Paull, 2011).

Further information:

1. A World Map of Organic Agriculture, 2011, EJSS, 24(3): 360-369. <http://orgprints.org/19535>
2. The Uptake of Organic Agriculture: A Decade of Worldwide Development, 2011, JSDS, 2(3): 111-120. <http://orgprints.org/19517>
3. Organics Olympiad 2011: Global Indices of Leadership in Organic Agriculture, 2011, JSDS, 1(4): 144-150. <http://orgprints.org/18860>
4. The Secrets of Koberwitz: The Diffusion of Rudolf Steiner's Agriculture Course and the Founding of Biodynamic Agriculture, 2011, JSRP, 2(1): 19-29. <http://orgprints.org/19518>