

LEAF Linking Environment and Farming: history, aims and achievements

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LEAF is an organisation that promotes Integrated Farm Management. It encourages farmers to consider their business and the environment as an entity, to farm in balance with nature. It recognises that farming has to be a profitable enterprise, yet not exploitative of the natural resources at its disposal.

Why and wherefore

LEAF has grown beyond expectations in the 21 years since its beginning in 1991. Its core objectives were and remain “Building public awareness of food and farming and developing more environmentally friendly farming systems”. The basis of LEAF was aired by David Richardson, its first Chairman, in the first newsletter published April 1992¹. He understood the doubts and concerns that would be raised by farmers and producers about the purpose of yet another organisation, another of those ‘green things’. But he countered by arguing that the objectives of LEAF are ‘sensible and achievable and avoid the extremes’. And he went on to say that LEAF does not take the view ‘that crop protection products should be outlawed, nor that artificial fertilisers should be banned’ but rather that ‘the use of such products should be minimised, consistent with the rules of good husbandry and the vital need to make a profit’.

Caroline Drummond, now LEAF Chief Executive, recalls her first day at LEAF in 1991 running a three year project to promote the concept of integrated management and to improve the public perception and understanding of modern agriculture. “Equipped only with a desk, pencil and paper ... I remember starting my first day at LEAF, taking a deep breath and thinking ‘what do I do now?’”²

LEAF audit and demonstration farms

The basis of LEAF since 1991 has been the development of practical guidance on integrated farm management or IFM³. Central to that guidance was the LEAF audit, which began in 1993 as a self-assessment form to monitor and evaluate farming practices. The IFM ‘wheel’ in a diagrammatic form gives an indication of how the guidance can be applied in farming. The audit has been repeatedly revised over the years to incorporate experience, technical developments and scientific advances in farming.

Further to the audit, LEAF has produced a series of advisory tools for the assessment and management of biodiversity, water, soil and drainage systems. The *Green Box*⁴ is a practical tool for monitoring the environment on farms, allowing farmers to record and keep track of change. The *LEAF Water Management Tool*, available to LEAF members, helps farmers ‘map water use, assess risks, improve efficiency and find new ways of saving money and protecting this valuable resource’.

*Simply Sustainable Soils*⁵ launched in 2011 describes steps to assess and improve the state of an agricultural soil.

But audits and advisory tools are by themselves not enough, and from the beginning, demonstration of best practice was thought essential and came into being through LEAF's network of Demonstration Farms of which there are now more than 40 throughout the country. The farms host events for farmers and agronomists (as well as the public, see below) to explain and explore the principles of Integrated Farm Management.

The audit, advisory tools and demonstration farms form the backbone of the LEAF effort in growing crops on the farm. LEAF has also been active in establishing a quality assurance marque and the means by which the public can experience farms and farming first hand.

LEAF Marque

Given a resurgence of public interest in food during the 1990s, the time was felt right to take LEAF to the next level. A LEAF food label was envisaged that both rewarded farmers for commitment to the environment and gave consumers a choice of buying food that was produced to high environmental standards. So the LEAF Marque was born in 2001. To become LEAF Marque certified, growers have to complete the LEAF audit, implement IFM, comply with the LEAF Marque standard and then enter a certification and inspection scheme. They were expected to be ahead of their peers in issues such as energy efficiency, waste recycling, water and soil management as well as 'social' issues around food production.

By the end of 2003, 150 farmers had signed up to the scheme, while food with the LEAF Marque began to make its way to shops and supermarkets. Waitrose was the first supermarket to get behind the LEAF marque. Today 20% of UK horticulture is grown to LEAF Marque standards. Yet the LEAF Marque is still in its infancy. Only 3% of the total farmed area in the UK is LEAF marque certified.

Getting the message across

Many of LEAF's 40 demonstration farmers hosted public events to bring people on to farms and to show them the principles and practice of integrated farm management. Other initiatives followed. The *Virtual Farm Walk*, launched in 2001 provided the means for anyone with access to the web to get a feel for farming and food production. The *Speak Out* initiative was introduced to offer farmers help and toolkits to get their message over to the public.

However, the idea of having an annual open day for farming brought the message to a very much wider audience. LEAF *Open Farm Sunday*⁶, which began in 2006 with 300 farms opening their doors, has enabled hundreds of thousands of people to visit a farm, enjoy the countryside and learn about crops and farm animals. The event is growing - in 2014, a record 207,000 people visited a farm.

Visits and open days counter the disconnection that many people feel between themselves and the countryside. One particular initiative, *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*⁷, in collaboration with the Sensory Trust, encourages disabled and older people to experience farming and the countryside. It

was funded by a lottery grant, administered by Natural England and aimed to offer a sensory-rich approach to farm visits. To date, the project has enabled visits by almost 12,000 people.

Market opportunities

LEAF has never shied away from engaging with industry and politics. Its ethos has never been confrontational – rather it seeks to encourage people to come on board. And with this attitude it is able to construct partnerships with many companies in the business of growing and processing food. Recently, for example, it has joined with Unilever UK to increase the use of LEAF Marque certified oilseed rape for spreads, margarines and mayonnaise by increasing the amount of oilseed rape farmed to LEAF standards. Among other developments in 2012, AtlasFram – one of the UK's largest farmer-owned cooperatives has joined and is encouraging its 1250 farmers to become members; and Florette, a leading salad brand, is displaying the LEAF marque on its produce ⁸.

The future

There is still much to be achieved by LEAF. Despite successes in engaging the farming community in considering both the economics and ecology of farming, there is a long road ahead. LEAF still represents only a few percent of the farms in the UK. But by targeting politicians, growers, technology companies, food processors and the public, it will change attitudes and change farming practices to the benefit of the countryside and the health of the people.

And LEAF's interests are not confined to the UK. It is an active participant in EISA - the European Initiative for Sustainable development in Agriculture - a network of organisations in France, Luxembourg, Germany Sweden and Austria – that share common aims. The LEAF Marque now operates in 47 countries.

References

¹ From the front page of the first LEAF newsletter, published April 1992.

² *21 Years Linking Environment and Farming*. 2012. LEAF, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, UK

³ LEAF's Integrated Farm Management explained http://www.leafuk.org/leaf/farmers/LEAFs_IFM.eb

⁴ *LEAF Green Box*. <http://www.leafuk.org/greenbox/>

⁵ *Simply Sustainable Soils*, pdf file: http://www.leafuk.org/resources/000/595/601/LEAF-Simply_Sustainable_Soils.pdf

⁶ *Open Farm Sunday*: <http://www.farmsunday.org/ofs12b/home.eb>

⁷ *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*: <http://www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/letnature/home.eb>

⁸ *LEAFletter, June 2012*. The newsletter of LEAF.