

A longstanding member of the Soil Association, organic grower Iain Tolhurst, Tolly to his friends, is never afraid to be critical, always outspoken, farsighted and radical... and has been inspired to action by our recent "Preparing for post-peak oil" conference.

You have chipped into the recent fierce debate over whether the Soil Association should have adopted organic standards for salmon farming. What is your view?

Keeping salmon and other sea fish in cages is like the battery farming of chickens and is far removed from the basic principles of organic farming. Salmon should be roaming the oceans. I'm not concerned about the idea itself of fish farms. Fish, like carp, have been farmed for millennia and there are many breeds of freshwater fish that are well suited to that environment.

The organic movement's horticultural community has also been giving the Soil Association a hard time. Why?

I was on a Soil Association small growers advisory group and we all resigned a few months ago. We felt it was pointless, that our views weren't being taken account of. Growers were the driving force of the organic movement in the 1970s and 1980s but we have had the sense for many years of being left out. We don't own much land and it seemed that the big landowners and big business had the ear of the Soil Association... and were a force for lowering standards. A few of us have got together and kick started a new Organic Growers Alliance. We want a voice.

Is this Alliance in competition with the Soil Association?

Definitely not. We are not a breakaway movement. We want to work closely together. The Soil Association is definitely making an effort to engage with us and to act on what we say. Patrick Holden came to a conference for small growers and producers Cirencester conference last December and took a lot of flak... we did let him have a turn on the platform. We are probably a bit of a pain in the a--e sometimes but I think Patrick and the Soil Association realise that they need us. I think we bring a sense of reality, because horticulture is very hard, and a sense of keeping to core values. Many small producers share our commitment to high standards. I think there will be other small producer groups in future.

You are a champion of stockfree farming... isn't that pretty unorthodox?

Thirty years ago organic farming was seen as right on the fringe. Now we have to persuade people that organic stockfree growing and arable farming using green manures like clovers, cereals and grasses to provide fertility is practical and viable. It's a more sustainable than existing forms of farming. Using animal manure is still using an external input but green manure is nurturing fertility from within the soil. I'm not a fanatic about this. I am not out to convert everyone to vegetarianism but it is essential that people reduce meat, milk and dairy consumption if we are to feed a growing world population on the available land. Using land to grow cereals to feed animals to produce food is very inefficient.

Would you ever keep a livestock... perhaps a horse?

If I could no longer afford diesel as fossil fuel becomes scarcer in future, the alternative would be a horse drawn plough but it would mean lower productivity and much more expensive food. I am a natural optimistic and I've got children and grandchildren so I want to feel positive about the future but when I have analysed the impact of the end of cheap oil it does scare me.

But you have to keep a cheery sense of humour about it. One thing about the growers community is a great sense of humour. You need it to keep going in this business.

Has this January's Soil Association conference made you feel more positive?

Yes, I think that the oil crisis is giving the Soil Association a clearer sense of direction. Coming back on the train I decided to act immediately on two ideas. We are starting rickshaw deliveries in Oxford, linking in with an existing service run by students. That means we can do one 20/30?? Mile trip to Oxford instead of two a week and that will cut our fuel use by 15 to 20 percent, which is quite significant. I am also putting up my prices by 25% so I can invest more in fuel efficiencies and carbon reduction. Obviously I have got to justify that to my customers but I think most of them will support us.

Box out...

Iain Tolhurst, who joined the Soil Association in 1973 and has been a symbol holder since 1976, started experimenting with green manures when farming up a miserable windswept Cornish moorside, because importing animal manure was an added expense and impractical.

Since 1988 Tolhurst Organic Produce has been based on 18 acres on the Oxfordshire/Berkshire border and supplies 400 households in Reading and Oxford with weekly vegetables. Iain is trying to reduce the already remarkably modest annual diesel use per household of 4.5 litres even further and plans to further develop his land as a demonstration farm to inspire others to adopt more sustainable methods.

Iain worked closely with the Vegan Organic Network in developing organic stockfree growing standards. He is vegetarian himself. The Soil Association now administers the standards.

He is co-author with grower Jenny Hall of Growing Green, a new practical guide for organic growing using green manures.