

# Harvest trails in Australia: Patterns of seasonal migration in the fruit and vegetable industry

Jayde Hanson, Martin Bell\*

*School of Geography, Planning and Architecture, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland 4072, Australia*

## Abstract

Against a background of declining employment in agriculture, a mobile workforce plays a crucial role in meeting seasonal labour demand in Australia. The dynamics of this labour force have received surprisingly little attention. We situate seasonal migration within the rising diversity of present-day mobility, and capture images of its early history in Australia. Statistical and documentary sources provide a basis to illustrate patterns of demand for seasonal labour and estimate the size of the workforce. Drawing on fieldwork in three case study regions of Queensland, we then seek to establish the composition of the seasonal workforce, identify their motives for undertaking seasonal work, and discover their harvest trails. Combining these data generates a typology that distinguishes key groups. Our results point to a fall in the numbers of Permanent Itinerants compensated by a sharp rise in Retirees and Working Holiday Makers from Overseas, each with distinctive spatial circuits. We argue that consumption motives play a growing role in the dynamics of seasonal labour mobility, and identify an emerging organisational apparatus that shapes and controls the industry. Drawing on the experience of other developed countries with more open labour markets, we anticipate continuing transformation in seasonal labour dynamics.

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Among the myriad social transformations that gathered pace during the late twentieth century, few have been more far-reaching than the growth in personal mobility. Movement intensities have increased rapidly, accompanied by a growing diversity in forms of spatial behaviour. New types of movement have emerged and taken shape, some oriented to consumption (Hall and Williams, 2002), others driven by production and the changing needs of business (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001). The new mobilities have a strong urban focus, but population movement has long been integral to the functioning of rural areas (Samuel, 1976), and this reliance is intensified in sparsely settled countries such as Australia (Davison, 1979). As in the urban setting, however, rural mobilities have been radically transformed by the changing social and economic context (Ball, 1987).

This paper examines one of the most prominent and enduring forms of population movement in rural areas of Australia: the seasonal migration of labour in the fruit and vegetable industry. Employment in agriculture has been declining in developed countries over the past half century (Findeis, 2002) as the number of farms has fallen and technology has substituted for labour (Lewis, 1990). At the same time, hired labour has risen as a proportion of the agricultural workforce (Findeis, 2002), and one reason for this is the persistence of seasonal variations in demand (Ball, 1987). While total farm employment has fallen in Australia, the fruit and vegetable industry remains dependent on a large number of workers for harvesting, thinning and pruning of crops due to handling requirements and grading demands that cannot yet be met by machinery. Local workforces in harvest regions are generally not sufficient to meet this demand, so seasonal workers migrate to these areas to fill the shortfall, mostly in picking and packing at harvest time, but also in smaller numbers for pruning and thinning of crops in the off-season. Fruit and vegetables display the most pronounced seasonal peaks of all agricultural crops (Ball, 1987). What

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 7 33653880.

E-mail addresses: jaydehanson@hotmail.com (J. Hanson), martin.bell@uq.edu.au (M. Bell).

renders the industry unique is the way labour demand is fragmented across time and space.

As with all forms of circular and temporary mobility, understanding of seasonal labour dynamics is hindered by the multifaceted nature of the movement, and by the dearth of data that capture its complexity (Bell, 2001). The agenda is daunting. Understanding needs to encompass not only the space-time sequences traced by seasonal migrants but also to measure the overall prevalence of itinerant labour within the industry. Equally important is an appreciation of labour force composition, and of the motives that encourage people to join the harvest trail. The evidence to date, on all these dimensions, is at best partial and fragmentary.

This paper aims to augment contemporary understanding by coupling documentary sources with official statistics and a survey of workers, growers, and key informants in three harvest localities dispersed across the north-eastern Australian State of Queensland, a region which hosts a diverse array of horticultural enterprise. By way of introduction we briefly review previous studies of seasonal labour mobility, sketch the physical and human settings within which such movements occur in the Australian context, and estimate the size of the workforce. Our focus then turns to the characteristics of the workforce. A demographic profile helps reveal the selective nature of seasonal migration and identify the population segments most inclined to embrace what *Olwig and Sorensen (2002)* term a “livelihood” of seasonal migration. Combining these characteristics with data on spatial patterns provides the basis for a typology of seasonal migrants. The makeup of the workforce also helps reveal the motives that attract particular population groups to an itinerant lifestyle. Background assists us to decipher motives but our analysis underlines the significance of institutional influences on the spatial and temporal dynamics of seasonal labour mobility.

## 2. Research on itinerant labour

Seasonal mobility has been a persistent feature of the Australian landscape. *Fox (1991, p. 5)* notes of the first inhabitants that “Aboriginal life and labour was tied very closely to the seasons,” and seasonal migrations remain an intrinsic component of traditional indigenous culture today (*Taylor and Bell, 2004*). New patterns of movement emerged following European settlement, as the advent of intensive agriculture called for mobility among farm labourers to service crops harvested at different times of the year and at widely spaced locations (*Davison, 1979*). The outcomes are celebrated in an extensive historical literature which has fashioned a series of romantic visions in Australian folklore: the fruit picker (*Langley, 1942*), the canecutter (*Balanzategui, 1990*), the shearer (*Kelly, 1981*) and the swagman (*Evans, 1975*), all ranging freely across a “wide brown land”.

Our images of mobility in nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia owe much to these biographical ac-

counts. According to *Davison (1979)*, the earliest statistical data on seasonality in agriculture are estimates for the late 1930s, produced by the then Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, and reproduced in *Keating (1973)*. Derived from monthly workforce counts coupled with information on the timing of operations in selected industries, the estimates show how the seasonal variation in employment differs between Australian states: the data suggest (rather than trace) a southward migration down the east coast of Australia from August to February, following the peaks in labour demand. *Bean’s (1925)* classic account of the wool industry provides a more graphic description of the way shearing advanced steadily across the country, likening it to a wave constantly in motion that proceeds from western Queensland to southern Australia, then rises again in the centre to start another cycle. *Laut (1969)* provides a more formalised account, tracing the circuits between company holdings followed by shearers in one New South Wales cooperative during the mid 1960s. Two key features emerge from this work. First is that the aggregate spatial pattern of the crop cycle is not necessarily reflected in the movements of individual workers: the composite picture is comprised of many overlapping circuits of varying intensity and spatial extent. Second is the early recognition that organisational structures play a pivotal role shaping the patterns and timing of circulation. Both these observations resonate with the empirical findings presented later in this paper.

Compared with shearers, itinerant labour in horticulture has attracted little attention in the Australian literature. Studies of the rural workforce routinely recognise this segment of the labour market, and one consistent finding is of the poor working conditions endured by hired farm labour (*McAllister, 2002; McIntyre, 1948*). However, itinerant workers are difficult to distinguish from other employees and rarely form the primary focus of inquiry. *Ruben’s (1992)* study of fruit pickers in Victoria’s Goulburn Valley provides a rare exception. Her description of working conditions also defies the romantic image: “Picking is undisputedly an unattractive job... work is hard and low paid [with] inadequate accommodation, lack of efficient transport, poor working conditions and deficient work organisation.”

Seasonal work appears to attract a heterogeneous population, but the relative size and significance of individual workforce segments is not well established. *Ruben (1992)* classified her sample of 236 fruit pickers into three broad groups based on geographic origin—locals, other Australians, and overseas workers, and estimated their proportions at 18%, 62% and 20%, respectively. However, only 15% of the total were seen as true itinerants who followed a regular circuit. Based on fieldwork in citrus growing areas of Queensland, *McAllister (2002)* recognised greater segmentation in the seasonal workforce, distinguishing locals, itinerants, immigrants, backpackers and retirees, though no attempt was made to indicate their relative numbers or spatial behaviour.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92831>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92831>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)