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COMMENT

'No wonder today's youth have lost interest in farming'

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Capturing the imagination

THE farming industry can be perceived as old-fashioned and unexciting to children, an image not helped by the fact we do not use every opportunity to promote the cutting-edge technology of our industry.

I recently visited the Science Museum in London and was very impressed by the diverse exhibitions on show. One in particular, sponsored by the Wellcome Trust, grabbed my attention.

It has a totally balanced display 'Pro-GM' and 'No GM'. It seeks to educate the museum's young visitors about the questions surrounding GM usage.

The interactive exhibition brings the issues to life: children can move genes between crops, some of which are failures and others make new 'supercrops', such as a blueberry gene added to a tomato to create a blue tomato high in vitamin C.

There is also a display teaching children about how to save energy and using art to raise the profile of energy and waste.

It varied from a challenge to determine the most energy efficient way to do everyday activities using circular wheels to choose the answer (I was relieved to get full marks), to a piece of art which had a tall pillar surrounded by a yellow circle on the floor stating 'Do not touch': most of us did and got an electric shock.

On the same floor there is an exhibition of white goods from the 60s and 70s and I saw hairdryers like I had as a child. Needless



CHRISTINE TACON

We need to bring farming to life for these children with interactive activities

to say, my 11-year-old son took no interest in this section, having been dragged from the computer games on the energy exhibit.

Then, of course, we came to the farming exhibition. I was ashamed. No wonder today's youth have lost interest in farming.

The exhibition shows different types of cultivations and cropping scenes in models behind glass and like the hairdryer, every single implement is something from the 70s and 80s.

How can any child relate to this? There is not a single tractor with an enclosed cab and there

are people all over the fields. No GPS mapping, self-guided combines, nitrogen sensors and nothing, I noticed, on the issues of different farming systems and environmental impacts.

I defy any child going round the museum to entertain entering a profession stuck in the Dark Ages. It is little wonder the average age of a British farmer is over 58 if our industry is not showing how it has moved forward over the past 30 years.

Around 100,000 children visit the Science Museum each year. Isn't this an opportunity for us to show them the excitement and passion within the farming community? We need to bring farming to life for these children, with interactive activities, modern, shiny machinery and fast-moving technology.

The 20,000 schoolchildren who have spent a day on the Co-operative's From Farm to Fork project this year have all left with a new enthusiasm for farming. It's not difficult, we just need to show them how it really is.

It is our duty to educate the next generation on why farming matters and what a great industry it is to be in. I am determined to do something about this exhibition.

Is there somewhere local to you that needs checking out?

■ *Christine Tacon is general manager of the 24,291-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. She was awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004.*