

## Linking the Future of Farming with the Past: Through Educational Farms<sup>1</sup>

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Things are not going well in farming today. In fact, American agriculture is in crisis. People will continue to eat, and someone will continue to produce their food. But farming, at least as we have known it for the past fifty years, is coming to an end. As agricultural production has become increasingly specialized and standardized, control has been consolidated among a handful of large agribusiness corporations – mostly through comprehensive contractual arrangements. As farms continue to become larger in size, fewer in number, and increasingly under the control of these large corporations, at some point farming is no longer farming, but instead becomes agribusiness management. Farming is associated with agriculture, not agribusiness. If farming is to survive, we must somehow “rediscover agriculture.”

Prior to the past half-century, farming had been about working with nature – about finding harmony with the unchangeable, uncontrollable order of nature. Harmony was a means of ensuring productivity – of allowing nature to be more productive. But, farmers also benefited *directly* from living and working in harmony with nature. Historically farmers valued stewardship because they felt a moral and ethical responsibility to take care of the earth – “to leave the land as good as they found it.” They cared for the land even if they never expected to live to see the return on their investment. They practiced stewardship because it gave purpose and meaning to their lives – not because it was profitable to do so. And, this kind of farming made sense, because it was the “right” way to farm.

Prior to the past half-century, farming had been about working with other people – in families, communities, and nations. On a family farm, the farm and the family were inseparable parts of the same whole. The farming operations were designed to build character and self-esteem in children as they grew up. Farm work kept the family together, not simply because employing the whole family improved the bottom line, but because building a strong family was a valued purpose for farming. Farm families valued the sharing of equipment and labor with neighbors beyond just getting the work done quicker and at less cost. Farmers also knew the people who bought their products and the people who provided them with supplies. There was value in being a member of a farming community. States and nations also had strong agricultural identities. People realized that changing occupations and shifting production among regions and nations do not occur without large costs in terms of social well-being. Historically, agriculture

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placed a high value on human relationships. This kind of farming made sense, because it was the “right” way to farm.

Many speak of the farm of the future as a high-tech, bottom-line agribusiness. In reality, there is less reason to place our faith for the future in agribusiness than in the future of agriculture. Agriculture has been around for centuries, while agribusiness is less than sixty years old. Only in the past half century or so have we allowed the economics of individual self interest to dominate, degrade, and ultimately destroy the ethical and social values arising from farming. Farmers have been coerced, bribed, and brainwashed into believing that the only thing that really matters, or at least the thing that matters more than anything else, is the economic bottom line. But, farmers at last are beginning to realize that their blind pursuit of profits is the root cause of their financial failure. American agriculture has never been more productive or efficient than it is today, and farmers have never been confronted with more financial difficulties. The two are not coincidental.

So what's the real difference between a farm and an agribusiness, and why does it matter? First, farmers historically have attempted to tip the ecological balance to favor humans over other species, but they still worked *with* nature. Farmers recognized that the laws of nature must prevail over the laws of “man.” Farmers were dependent on unpredictable weather and worked with living systems that they could manage but never expected to control. Farming always was as much a way of life as a way to make a living. A farm was a good place to raise a family and farming was a good way to be a part of a community. The benefits of farming were never solely, or even predominantly, economic in nature. Farming always carried with it a set of beliefs, behaviors, and customs that distinguished it from any other occupation – a culture of agriculture. This “culture” of agriculture defines what it meant to be a farm, and culturally, a farm quite simply is not just agricultural business.

Certainly most farmers have had times when they wished they could control the weather and longed to be more independent. If they could gain more control they could reduce risks, improve production, and make the farm more profitable. It always seemed easier to achieve the social and ethical rewards of farming than to keep pace with other occupations in terms of income and return on investment. Down deep, most probably knew that if they were to succeed in achieving independence and control, they would lose some of the things they valued most about farming. But little did they realize that they would lose the ability to continue being “farmers.”

As new technologies gave producers more control over production – commercial fertilizers, pesticides, livestock confinement, and now biotechnology – they took the physical culture out of agriculture as they abandoned the natural production principles of the past. As new farming methods made farmers more independent – mechanization, hired labor, and financial leverage – they took the social culture out of agriculture as they abandoned their personal connectedness with others. As farmers gained control over nature, they took the spiritual culture out of farming as they abandoned their respect for the higher natural order of things. As farmers took the culture out of farming, they transformed agriculture into agribusiness.

As new technologies and methods succeeded in freeing farming from the constraints of nature, community, and morality, agricultural production became attractive to corporate investors. Corporations place no value on working in harmony with nature – instead they must control nature to reduce risks and to ensure profitability and growth. Corporations place no value on relationship within families, communities, or nations – instead they must separate people to ensure that each produces to their full economic potential. A corporation is not human – it has no heart, it has no soul. When management becomes separated from ownership, the corporation takes on a *life* of its own. The people who choose to work for corporations are powerless to change their fundamental nature. The corporation has no sense of ethics or morality. The only thing it can possibly value is profit and growth.

If there is to be a future of farming in America, farmers must rediscover agriculture. This does not mean that farmers should go back to technologies and methods of the past, although some may have merit for the future. Instead, they must choose technologies and methods that respect the fundamental principles of farming, the culture of agriculture, regardless of whether they are old or new. Certainly, farming in the future must yield an acceptable economic return to the farmer's resources – land, labor, capital, and management. But an acceptable economic return does not mean the same thing as maximum profits and growth. Farmers of the future must regain the realization that there is value in relationships among people – within families, communities, and nations. Farmers of the future must regain the realization that there is value in living an ethical and moral life – in being good stewards or caretakers of nature and of human culture. These things still make sense, because they are the “right things” to do.

Thankfully, the growing crisis in American agriculture has given rise to the rediscovery of agriculture, through the development of a post-industrial paradigm for farming – sustainable agriculture. In its most basic sense, a sustainable agriculture is an agriculture that will last – an agriculture that can maintain its value to society, indefinitely. A sustainable agriculture must meet the needs of people of the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. To meet the needs of the present and future, a sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.

If a system of agriculture destroys the productivity of its natural resource base -- water, air, or soil -- it eventually will lose its ability to produce, it can't last, and thus, is not sustainable. If a system of agriculture can't survive financially, the farm business can't last, and thus, it is not sustainable, no matter how ecologically sound it may be. And, if a system of agriculture doesn't meet the needs of society, as consumers, producers, and citizens, it will not be supported by society, it can't last, and it is not sustainable. All three dimensions of sustainability are necessary -- like the three dimensions of a box. A box without height, width, and length, is not a box, and a farm that is not ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible is not sustainable – it can't last.

Sustainability is rooted in a philosophy fundamentally different from that of industrialization. Industrialization views the earth as a set of natural, economic, and human resources to be extracted and exploited for the benefit of humanity. Industrialization recognizes no limits to growth, and thus, doesn't address long run resource issues of conservation, regeneration, or renewal. Industrialization relies on the “invisible hand” of the “market economy” to allocate

natural and human resources among alternative uses and to allocate goods and services to meet the needs of consumers.

Sustainability, on the other hand, recognizes an appropriate role for a “competitive” free market economy in meeting the needs of people as individuals. But, sustainability views the earth as a living system that must be nurtured and cared for, not exploited, if it is to sustain human life. Sustainability recognizes that humans must limit their claims to the resources of the earth, and that its limited resources must be continually conserved, renewed, and restored. Sustainability recognizes that families, communities, and societies are more than just a collection of individuals – that social relationships among people matter. And, sustainability recognizes that each human life has purpose and meaning that transcends self, that we, in fact, are connected with those of past and future generations through some *higher order of things* – that ethics and morality matter.

In essence, the pursuit of sustainability requires that we apply the Golden Rule both within and across generations. We should take care of ourselves, if we are able, but also must care for others, as we would have them care for us were we not able to care for ourselves. And, we should care for those of future generations, as we would have them care for us, if we were of their generation and they were of ours. As Ben Franklin once said, philosophical and religious "commandments" such as the Golden Rule "are not good for us because they have been commanded of us, but are commanded of us because they are good for us."

To farm, work, or live sustainably, we must recognize that caring for others is not a sacrifice, but instead, is a privilege. The positive relationships that result from mutual concern are valuable, even essential, to a desirable quality of life. To farm, work, or live sustainably, we must recognize that stewardship of nature, for the benefit of future generations, is not a sacrifice, but instead, is a privilege. Stewardship of the earth enhances our quality of life because it adds purpose and meaning. To farm, work, or live sustainably, we must pursue a more enlightened self-interest, which recognizes and values the individual, interpersonal and spiritual dimensions of our lives. Sustainability, ultimately, is about sustaining a desirable quality of life.

Thankfully, a new breed of American farmer has emerged to lead the way in transforming the philosophy of sustainability into a practical, tangible reality. Literally thousands of these new farmers, scattered across the continent and around the world, are creating new and better ways to farm. They may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, practical, innovative, or nothing at all; but they are all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are on the frontier of a new and different kind of agriculture, an agriculture capable of meeting the needs of the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future – a sustainable agriculture. These farmers face struggles and hardships and there are failures along the way. Life is rarely easy on any new frontier. But, a growing number are finding ways to succeed.

And, while there are no “blueprints” for the *New American Farm*<sup>3</sup>, some basic characteristics are emerging.

First, these farmers see themselves as stewards of the earth. They are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They have a deep sense of respect for things of the earth. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farming operations tend to be more diversified than conventional farms – because nature is diverse. Diversity may mean a variety of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or managed livestock grazing systems, depending on the type of farm. By managing diversity, these new farmers are able to reduce their dependence on pesticides, fertilizers, and other commercial inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, because they farm in harmony with nature.

Second, these new farmers build relationships. They tend to have more direct contact with their customers than do conventional farmers. Most either market their products direct to customers or market through agents who represent them with their customers. They realize that as consumers each of us value things differently because we have different needs and different tastes and preferences. They produce the things that their customers value most. They have a strong sense of respect for people. They are not trying to take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create long-term relationships. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. – and, they receive premium prices by producing foods their customers value. Their farms are more profitable as well as more ecologically sound and socially responsible.

These new farmers challenge the stereotype of the farmer as a fiercely independent competitor. They freely share information and encouragement. They form partnerships and cooperatives to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do together the things that they can't do as well alone. They are not trying to drive each other out of business, so the survivors can farm more land; they are trying to help each other succeed. They refuse to exploit each other for short run gain; they are trying to build long term relationships. They buy locally and market locally because they value community. They bring people together in positive, productive relationships that contribute to their economic, ecological, and societal well-being. They value people, for personal as well as economic reasons, and want to build and maintain good human relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> For 50 real life examples, see “The New American Farmer – Profiles in Agricultural Innovation,” the SARE Program, USDA, Washington DC. (\$10 US – call: 802-656-0484 or e-mail: [sanpubs@uvm.edu](mailto:sanpubs@uvm.edu) , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer> )

Third, to these new farmers, farming is as much a way of life as a way to make a living. They are “quality of life” farmers. To them, the farm is a good place to live – a healthy environment, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to become a part of a caring community. Many of these farms create economic benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to any reported net farm income. Their “quality of life” objectives are at least as important as the economic objectives in carrying out their farming operations. Their farming operations reflect the things they like to do, the things they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as much as the things that might yield profits. They are connected spiritually through a strong sense of purpose and meaning for their lives. However, for many, their products are better and their costs are less because by following their passion they end up doing what they do best. Most new American farmers are able to earn a decent income, but more important, they have a higher quality of life because they are living a life that they love.

The purpose and principles of sustainable agriculture are completely consistent with the historic culture of agriculture. This is no coincidence. The industrialization of agriculture over the past half-decade was but an aberration in the historical development of agriculture – an aberration that was a sharp break with the past, but which has no future. The industrial paradigm of development, quite simply, is not sustainable. The fundamental purpose of agriculture is to support a more desirable quality of life for people – farmers, rural residents, and society as a whole. The exploitation of natural and human resources to maximize profits by producing quick, convenient, cheap food has not enhanced the quality of life of farmers, rural residents, or society, and it is not sustainable. The fundamental principles of long run sustainability are those of ecological integrity, economic viability, and social responsibility. An industrial agriculture clearly violates all three. Sustainable farming, i.e. a real farming, must take care of the land, be a good neighbor, and earn a decent living by producing good food. An agribusiness does none of these things. The purpose and principles of sustainability link the future of farming with its cultural past. The culture of agriculture is being rediscovered through sustainable farming.

Educational farms, farms that serve as education centers, would seem to provide the ideal setting in which Americans can rediscover agriculture, and in the process, can discover a better way of life. People are no less dependent upon the land today than in the days when we were all hunters and gathers, or farmers; our dependence is simply less obvious. All of life depends on the soil. Life requires air and water, but nothing can live with air and water alone. Things that are not directly rooted in the soil – that live in the sea, on rocks, or on trees, for example – still require minerals from the earth. Living things other than plants get their food from plants or from other living things that feed on plants; and plants feed on the soil. By one means or another, all life is rooted in the soil. And, farmers are the people who nurture the life in the soil and bring life from the land that ultimately supports all human life. So, the seeds for a sustainable agriculture must be sown in the earth. An educational farm, with its roots in the soil, provides an ideal environment in which to teach and demonstrate the critical linkages between the sustainability of the land, the sustainability of agriculture and the sustainability of humanity.

The purpose and principles of sustainable farming also can be demonstrated on educational farms. Educational farms can be developed to demonstrate how ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable systems of farming can enhance the quality of life of farmers, rural residents, and society as a whole. Such demonstrations can show how principles of good farming from the

past – such as, diversification, relationship marketing, and cooperation – can be used in developing sustainable farming systems for the future. The farming practices and methods of the future – and the associated farm machinery, equipment, buildings, etc. – may be very different from those of the past, but the fundamental principles must remain the same if farming is to be sustainable.

A good demonstration farm need not have chickens, hogs, dairy cows, beef cows, and a half-dozen different crops, but it must be sufficiently diverse so as to function in harmony with nature. A good demonstration farm need not market all of its products to its neighbors, but it must depend on personal relationships with customers, rather than convenience and price, to sustain the farm economically. A good demonstration farm need not completely support a farm family, but it must demonstrate that it can enhance the quality of life for a family – economically, socially, and spiritually. The farm enterprises, methods, and practices may be different, but the purpose and principles of farming in the future must be the same as those of the past.

The new American farms and farmers, as mentioned previously, are scattered all across the country. Such farms can provide real world, local examples of the types of sustainable farming operations that are feasible in a given location. Managers of educational farms should visit as many such farms as is practical and visit with as many such farmers as possible, to gain as much insight as possible into how to develop an effective sustainable educational farm. The new vision for the future of farming is not being developed in the universities or government agencies, but instead, on real farms by real farmers. These new farmers will be the most valuable advisors in creating effective educational farms.

It is difficult to imagine an effective educational farm that is not operated, day-to-day, by an individual or family who has a long-term commitment to the farm. In real farming, sustainable farming, a meaningful, personal bond must exist between the farmer and the land. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate the principles of sustainability without this bond.

It is also difficult to imagine an effective educational farm that does not produce products for sale to customers who have a personal relationship with those who operate the farm. Obviously, educational farms incur costs that are not incurred on actual farms, but a sufficient amount of income should be generated by the farm to demonstrate the economic viability of the concepts. And, direct marketing to customers who care about sustainability, and about sustainable farmers, are the only logical source of such income. The marketing demonstration should be appropriate for the location and farming situation, and might involve a roadside stand or a community supported agriculture (CSA) organization, or sales to farmers markets, local restaurants, or independent food retailers. Farms should attempt to maintain contact and build long term relationships with their customers, regardless of whether they visit frequently, living nearby, or only visit once, coming from halfway around the world.

It is difficult also to imagine an effective educational farm that doesn't demonstrate the value of personal relationships, stewardship, and ethical behavior, not only in the operation of the farm, but in all aspects of its educational programming. An effective educational farm must exist for the purpose and function by the principles that it is attempting to demonstrate.

Educational farms can attract people through public interest in farms of the past. Most people today still at least have a curiosity about farming, although most no longer have any personal connections with farmers. Most consumers realize that their food comes from a farm somewhere, somehow, although know little about anything beyond the supermarket or restaurant. Few people will make the effort or take the time to tour local food processing and distribution centers to learn more about the industrial food system – and such tours are increasingly less available to the general public. And, most industrial farming operations are too dangerous to accommodate visitors – liability insurance costs are a consideration for those who might choose to do so. But, educational farms, specifically farms that farm by the principles of sustainability, are rapidly growing as tourist and educational destinations. Many people are curious about “real farms,” which they perceive to be farms of the past, and many will be willing to learn how these “real farms” can be, and should be, the farms of the future.

If they are to be effective, educational farm programs must convey the reality of agriculture today. Most information regarding today's agriculture is little more than propaganda designed to support the continued industrialization of agriculture. Educational farms must convey the truth about the ecological degradation, social decay, demise of family farms, and growing insecurity of our national food system – obvious consequences of relentless agricultural industrialization.

To be effective, educational farms must make people aware of the opportunities for the future and their responsibilities for helping create sustainable food and farming systems. While the initial interest of many visitors may be in farms of the past, effective educational programs must convey the logical linkage of the future of farming with its past. Visitors should leave an educational farm with a clear concept of why our industrial food system of today is not sustainable and why farming must return to its historic purpose and principles to ensure its long run sustainability. They should also leave with a clear understanding that human life on earth is only as sustainable as are our systems of food and farming.

Those who learn from their experiences at educational farms quite likely will begin seeking out more local sources of sustainably produced foods – once they return to their homes. They will frequent local farmers markets or roadside stands where they can buy fresh, local produce. They may join a CSA, where they contract for a share of “their farmer's” produce for a season. They may seek out local restaurants or shop at independent food stores that buy from local farmers. They may or may not start buying organic foods, but they will most certainly care more about how their food is grown, who grew it, and how the earth and people were treated in the process of production. As people become more conscious of issues affecting the sustainability of agriculture, they will become more concerned about the sustainability of human society in general.

Things are not going well in American agriculture today, and will not go well, until farmers rediscover the culture of agriculture. The industrialization of agriculture was but an aberration, an abrupt break with the past, which has no future, because it is not sustainable. A new vision for the future of agriculture is emerging from growing concerns for the sustainability of agriculture. Thousands of new American farmers are finding ways to translate the purposes and principles of sustainability into reality. Although the enterprises, methods, and practices may be different, the purpose and principles of farming sustainably are the same as those of the past –

before industrialization. The sustainability of agriculture depends on our understanding this linkage of farms of the future with farms of the past.

Educational farms provide unique opportunities to provide a conceptual bridge between sustainable farms of the future and farms of the past. People may be drawn to educational farms by their curiosity about the history of farming, but once there, may be willing to learn about the present and future of agriculture, and its implications for the future. Effective educational farms can demonstrate, and not just teach, the purpose and principles of sustainable farming and of sustainable living. The educational experiences of farm visitors can be life changing, and ultimately, world changing. Lessons of a farm are lessons of life. As people rediscover the culture of agriculture, they will learn life's lessons of sustainability. As we reconnect with the past, and with sustainable farming, we will discover our future.