

Farming in Harmony

John Ikerd
University of Missouri

Presented at farmers' cooperative marketing meeting in Lancaster County, PA, July 11, 2000.

The history of the human race is a history of conflicts – conflicts among people and conflicts between people and nature. While people of all races, creeds, and nations loudly proclaim their desire to live in peace and harmony, their actions invariably promote continuing conflict. We seem to believe, if only other people would come to accept our beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and acting, there would be no conflict. We could live in harmony. If only we could overcome the natural human ills – hunger, thirst, cold, disease, aging, etc. – there would be no conflict with nature. We could live in harmony. We want harmony, but harmony on our terms – and this is the source of our continuing conflict.

In Conflict with Nature

Much of human history has been written as an ongoing struggle of “man against nature.” The forces of nature – wild beasts, floods, pestilence, and disease -- have been cast in the role of the enemy of humankind. To survive and prosper, we must conquer nature – kill the wild beasts, build dams to stop flooding, find medicines to fight disease, and use chemicals to control pests. Humans have been locked in a life and death struggle against “Mother Nature.” We’ve been winning battle after battle. But, we’ve been losing the war.

We humans have killed so many “wild beasts” that non-human species are becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate – except in prehistoric times now labeled as global catastrophes. It's clear that humans cannot survive – nor might we want to survive – as the only living species on earth. How many more species can we destroy before we lose more than we can afford to do without? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

We have dammed so many streams the sediment that once replenished the topsoil of fertile farmland through periodic flooding now fills the reservoirs of lakes instead. Populations of fish and wildlife that once filled and surrounded free flowing streams, and fed the people of the land, have dwindled and disappeared. Floods may come less often now, but when nature really flexes its muscles, as it did in the Midwest in 1993 and 1996, nothing on earth can control the floods. How many more streams can we afford to dam? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

We have wiped out plague after plague that has threatened humankind, and we now lead longer, presumably healthier, lives than ever before. But new, more sophisticated diseases always seem to come on the scene as soon as the old ones are brought under control. We may live longer, but that doesn't necessarily mean we are healthier. Much of the medicine we take today is to treat the symptoms caused by the medicines we take. On average, we Americans spend more money for health care than we spend for food. How long can our new cures keep ahead of new diseases? How many more medical miracles can we afford? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

We can quite easily kill most insects, diseases, weeds, and parasites using modern chemical pesticides. This has allowed us to realize the lower food prices brought about by a specialized, mechanized, standardized, industrialized agriculture. But we still lose about the same percentage of our crops to pests as we did in earlier times. In addition, health concerns about pesticide residues in our food supplies and in our drinking water are on the rise. How many more pests can we afford to kill before we kill ourselves? How many more workers can we displace before we displace ourselves? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

Every time we think we have won a battle, nature fights back. Nature always seems ready for the counterattack. And, people are beginning to lose faith in “man's” ability to ever conquer nature. They are concerned about whether we can win the battle with the next flood, the next disease, or the next pest that we create with our efforts to control the last one. They are concerned with their own safety, health, and well being. But, they are concerned also about the sustainability of a human civilization that continues to live in conflict with nature. They fear we cannot win our war against nature, because we are a part of nature – the very thing we are trying to destroy. They are searching for ways to find harmony with nature – to sustain the nature of which we are a part.

Conflicts among People

Much of human history has been written as an ongoing struggle of “man against man.” The Bible and other great books tell stories of continuing conflict among families, tribes, and nations going back to the beginning of recorded human history. Prehistoric fossils provide scientific verification that people have been fighting and killing other people, for as long as there have been people on the earth. After each victory, there is always another war.

Human history tends to glorify conflict. Warriors are listed prominently among the great figures in human history – Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Kahn, and Napoleon Bonaparte – just to name a few. American history began with the Revolutionary War, but the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam Wars are all prominent in American history. In places like the Middle East it seems that war has been going almost continuously forever. National leaders are almost invariably the heroes of past wars, and each war provides both sides with “justification” for the next war. Wars obviously are destructive, but yet we continue to fight. We rationalize that if we can only win this next war, we will achieve, or at least move closer to, lasting peace and harmony. But, history proves that wars never end wars. After each victory, there is always another war.

War certainly is not the only expression of human conflict – perhaps not the most important or even the most destructive. Conflicts among individuals may take the form of disagreements, arguments, assaults, and even murder. These personal conflicts are more pervasive through society at all times, and thus, may be more destructive than are wars. But, perhaps even more destructive, if in less violent ways, is the inability of people to relate to each other in positive ways within families, communities, and societies. Because of our lack of sensitivity and understanding – our inability to communicate, to compromise, to collaborate, to cooperate – we live lives of continual disharmony. Disharmony is

destructive, yet we continue to live in conflict. After each victory, there is always another fight.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that we have chosen an economic system that is based on conflict rather than cooperation. The foundation of a capitalistic economy is competition – organized conflict. Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, observed that as each businessperson pursued their individual self-interest, competing freely with each other, they also served the greater good of society. Their pursuit of self-interest was transformed into serving the public interest, as if “by an invisible hand.” All they had to do was to compete with each other.

The capitalistic concept of competition is very impersonal in nature. In order for competition to work for the good of society, for example, buyers and sellers must be sufficiently large in number and small in size so that no individual buyer or seller can have any measurable impact on his or her competitors. In other words, any buyer or seller could double their sales or purchases, or drop out of the market completely, and it would have no noticeable effect on market supplies or price. However, even this impersonal kind of competition can be destructive.

Agriculture provides a prime example of the destructive nature of market competition. The number of farmers in the U.S. has dropped by more than two-thirds, from over 6 million to less than 2 million, in the past 65 years. In addition, in the 1930s most farm families relied on farming for a major part of their household income, whereas today those classified as farmers receive far more income from off-farm sources than from farming.

Most families did not leave farming by choice; they were forced off the farm by the impersonal forces of market competition. Even those who choose some other occupation after growing up on a farm, made their decision after comparing their experiences in a farm economy that was continually forcing people off the farm with a non-farm economy that was continually luring people into the industrial workplace. Farming in the U.S. has been an occupation characterized by hard work, undesirable working conditions, low pay, with dim prospects for the future, simply because we have chosen an economic system that gives a higher priority to production than to people and higher priority to competition than to cooperation. After each victory, there is always another battle for survival to fight.

New technologies were designed specifically to allow fewer people to produce more food and fiber at a lower cost to consumers. Farmers adopted these new technologies because they represented an opportunity to reduce their production costs and increase profits. However these new technologies invariably lead to increased production and lower farm commodity prices, erasing any potential for sustained profitability. Lower farm level prices eventually would be passed on to the consumer – the “invisible hand” working for the benefit of consumer. But, for the surviving farmers, there was always another battle to fight.

Historically, agricultural markets have been economically competitive – any individual farmer could have doubled production or have gone out of business without having any noticeable effect on overall supplies or prices. However, as more and more farmers “individually” adopted these production-enhancing technologies, their actions “collectively”

caused prices to fall. Since each farmer could now produce more than before, there was room for fewer farmers than before. Only those who adopted the technologies first realized any profit. Those who adopted later were simply trying to survive. Those who adopted too late were forced out of business. Their farms were bought, combined with other farms, and made into the larger farms needed to realize the full benefit of the new production enhancing technologies. Competition forced some farmers to fail and others to get larger. The forces of a competitive market place had predetermined their destiny. There were always fewer survivors than before and, always, another battle to fight.

While consumers may have benefited from lower prices for food and fiber, farm families and rural communities have had to suffer the negative consequences of disruption and dislocation. Farmers have been forced to abandon the occupation for which they had spent a lifetime preparing – the occupation that many had loved – and to suffer the emotional and financial stress of personal and economic failure. As families were forced off the land, there were fewer people to buy groceries, clothes, and hardware in town, fewer people to go to school and church, fewer people to serve in local government, join civic organizations, and rural communities withered and died. Competition may have improved the economic efficiency of food production but it created conflict and disharmony within families, within communities, within society as a whole, and people suffered. We may have chosen to ignore the suffering, but that doesn't diminish its reality. Conflict leads to suffering, and to still another battle to fight.

More recently, agriculture has followed the rest of the economy, moving beyond capitalistic competition to corporate control. We no longer have capitalism in the U.S.; we have evolved to “corporatism” instead. Large, publicly held corporations have dominated many sectors of the U.S. economy for decades. They are so large and so few in numbers as to make a mockery of Adam Smith's conditions for effective capitalism. None of the critical assumptions needed for the “invisible hand” to transform individual greed into societal good hold in today's economy. Economically competitive markets require not only large numbers of small buyers and sellers, but require freedom to get into and out of business, consumer access to accurate product and price information, absence of superficial product differentiation, and perhaps most important, consumer sovereignty – no efforts to manipulate consumer tastes and preferences. None of these conditions hold in today's corporate dominated markets.

Agriculture today is in the final stage of industrialization – corporate control of decision-making. Increasingly surviving agricultural producers are being forced to resort to comprehensive production contracts to survive – which reduces them to the status of landlords and contract laborers. The one who makes the important decisions ultimately reaps the benefits of any business activity. The corporations are making the important decisions in agriculture today, and the corporations ultimately will reap the rewards.

Conflicts created by corporatization are even more violent and destructive than are those created by capitalistic competition. Corporations compete head-to-head, with individuals and with other corporations. Corporations realize full well that they have to drive others out of business in order to make profits and grow. And profits and growth are the only motives a corporation can have, once management becomes separated from ownership. Corporations are not human. They have no compassion, no sense of ethics, no morality,

in their dealings with others. Thus people who work for corporations, who are compassionate, ethical, and moral in their personal lives, work in continuous conflict with the corporation that pays their salary. Unlike capitalistic competition, corporate conflict is up front, out in the open, it is a “dog-eat-dog” world out there – and corporate executives brag about their “battles” for market share and domination. And, each victory is always followed by still another battle.

Conflicts arising from corporatism promise far more suffering and destruction in the future that we have seen from capitalism in the past. Yet we allow the destruction to continue. We have been “brainwashed” into believing that the only thing that matters, or at least that matters most, is that the economy continues to grow – so there will be more jobs and bigger pay checks, so we can buy more “things.” We have been persuaded, shamed, bribed, and coerced into believing that the only thing that can make human life better, for ourselves and for others both now and the future, is a stronger economy. The rallying cry of recent presidential campaigns has been: “It’s the economy, stupid.” Relationships don’t matter, nature doesn’t matter, all that matters is that we are able to buy more “cheap stuff.”

But relationships do matter and nature does matter. More “cheap stuff” can never offset the destruction that results from a dysfunctional society with no sense of caring and compassion for each other and with no sense of morality or stewardship responsibility for those of the future. Thankfully, more and more people are beginning to awaken to the suffering and destruction that arises from continuing conflict.

Activist groups all across society, both in the U.S. and around the world, are calling for the development of a more sustainable society – a society that is ecologically and socially responsible, as well as economically viable. Some activists may emphasize social justice, others environmental protection, and others economic democracy. But more and more are beginning to realize that focusing on sustainability is the key to the positive transformation of human society. We can’t *sustain* economic progress unless our economic system is also ecologically sound and socially responsible. We can’t *sustain* our natural resource base unless our ecological systems are socially acceptable and economically viable. We can’t *sustain* social justice unless our social systems are also economically viable and ecologically sound. Once we are able to replace tradeoffs and conflict with balance and harmony – among things economic, ecological, and social – we will be able to sustain human life and progress on earth. We will have achieved a victory after which there need be no more wars.

A New Paradigm for Harmony

A new paradigm or model for working and living in harmony with nature and among people is arising under the conceptual umbrella of sustainability. Sustainable systems must be capable of meeting the needs of those of us of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs as well. In simple terms, sustainability means applying the Golden Rule across generations. It’s about short run, self-interest, meeting our needs at present, but it’s also about shared-interest, meeting the needs of others both now and in the future. Sustainability requires that we find harmony between others and ourselves now, as well as harmony between those of us of the present and those of the future. Sustainability requires that we live in harmony.

The sustainable agriculture movement is but one small part of a far larger movement that is transforming the whole of human society. But the sustainability of agriculture is critical to the sustainability of society. A society that cannot feed itself quite simply is not sustainable. Human civilization is moving through a great transformation from the technology-based, industrial era of the past to a knowledge-based, “sustainable” era of the future. Agriculture is moving through a similar transition.

In contrast to sustainability, the competitive economic model is based on the assumption that the welfare of people is in conflict with nature. People have to harvest, mine, and otherwise exploit nature to create more goods and services for consumption, for ourselves. The corporate, industrial model is based on the economic assumption that the welfare of people depends on competition. People and corporations must compete with others for the rewards that come from serving the needs of humanity, and those who win the competition have served humanity best. Human productivity is defined in terms of one's ability to produce goods and services that will be bought and consumed by others. Quality of life is viewed as a consequence of consumption – something we can buy at “Wal-Mart or Disney World.” The more we produce, the more we earn, the more we can consume, and the higher our standard of living. The more we can take from nature and each other, the higher our quality of life.

The sustainable model is based on the assumption that people are multidimensional – that we are physical, mental, and spiritual beings. We have a mind and soul as well as a body. All three determine the quality of our life -- what we think and what we feel as well as what we consume. A life that lacks harmony and balance among the physical, mental, and spiritual is not a life of quality. The industrial model has focused on the physical body, the self -- getting more and more to consume. The sustainable model focuses on finding harmony among all three – the physical, mental, and spiritual – on leading a life of balance and harmony.

Spirituality is not synonymous with religion. Spirituality refers to a felt need to be in harmony with some higher unseen order of things – paraphrasing William James, a well-known religious philosopher. Religion, at its best, is simply one means of expressing one's spirituality. Spirituality assumes a higher order to which humans must conform – if we are to find peace. Harmony cannot be achieved by changing the “order of things” to suit our preferences. Harmony comes only from changing our actions to conform to the “higher order.” A life lived in harmony is its own reward.

A sustainable agriculture must be economically viable, socially responsible, and ecologically sound. The economic, social, and ecological are interrelated, and all are essential to sustainability. The three are as inseparable as are the height, width, and length dimensions of a box. A system that lacks any one of the three is not sustainable, just as an object that lacks a height, width, or length dimension is not a box.

An agriculture that uses up or degrades its natural resource base, or pollutes the natural environment, eventually will lose its ability to produce. It's not sustainable. An agriculture that isn't profitable, at least over time, will not allow its farmers to stay in business. It's not sustainable. An agriculture that fails to meet the needs of society, as producers and citizens as well as consumers, will not be sustained by society. It's not sustainable. A

sustainable agriculture must be all three – ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. And the three must be in harmony.

Some see sustainability as an environmental issue. It is an environmental issue, but it is much more. Any system of production that attempts to conquer nature will create conflicts with nature, will degrade its environment, and will risk its long run sustainability. Our current corporate, industrial agriculture epitomizes a system of farming in conflict with nature. The fundamental purpose of agriculture is to convert solar energy into products for human food and fiber. Industrial agricultural systems use up more energy in the form of fossil fuels than they capture as solar energy from the sun. Nature provides efficient biological means of converting solar energy into living plants and animals. Nature provides the means, by which things come to life, protect themselves, grow to maturity, reproduce, and die to be recycled to support a future generation of life. Agriculture is an attempt to tip the ecological balance in favor of humans relative to other species – that's its fundamental purpose. But, if we attempt to tip the balance too far, too fast, we will destroy the integrity of the natural system of which we are a part. A sustainable agriculture must be in harmony with nature.

A sustainable agriculture also must be in harmony with people. Since people are a part of nature, with a basic nature of our own, a sustainable agriculture must also be in harmony with human nature. A socially sustainable agriculture must provide an adequate supply of food and fiber at a reasonable cost. Any system of agriculture that fails this test is not sustainable, no matter how ecologically sound it may be. But “man does not live by bread alone,” and a socially responsible agriculture must contribute to a positive quality of life in other respects as well.

The industrial system of farming has destroyed the family farm as a social institution, has caused rural communities to wither and die, and has changed the social impact of agriculture on society in general from positive to negative. A sustainable agriculture must meet the food and fiber needs of people, but it cannot degrade or destroy opportunities for people to lead successful, productive lives in the process. A sustainable agriculture must be in harmony with our nature of being human.

Finally, a sustainable agriculture must find harmony with the human economy. The greatest challenge to farming in ways that are ecologically sound and socially responsible is in finding ways to make such systems economically viable as well. Certainly, there are many win-win situations in farming, where the economic performance of a farming operation can be improved by taking care of the natural resource base and providing meaningful employment for people producing things that other people really need. A farm can be profitable and productive without exploiting either the natural environment or other people. But, a producer cannot “maximize” profits in the short run without exploiting the natural environment and exploiting other people. Humans can choose to take care of the environment and show concern for other people, even if it limits their short run profits and growth. But, publicly held corporations cannot. Corporations have no choice but to “maximize” profits and growth. Our current economy favors corporate systems that exploit their natural and human environment for short run gains.

Those individuals who choose to protect the natural environment must sacrifice any economic opportunity that might result from exploiting it. Those who show concern for the well being of other people – workers, customers, or neighbors – must sacrifice any economic opportunity that might result from exploiting them. So it might seem that some sacrifice in short run well being is necessary to achieve long run ecological and social sustainability – but it is not.

Conventional thinking assumes the relationship among the environment, social, and economic wellbeing is a trade-off relationship – that one can have more of one only by sacrificing some of the others. However, this represents a highly materialistic worldview. It assumes if someone gets more of something, then someone else must sacrifice. This materialistic worldview ignores the fact that we can gain satisfaction, for ourselves, right now, by doing things for others and by saving things for future generations – just because we know these are the right things for to do. Our satisfaction is not dependent on realizing the expectations of some future personal rewards – the reward is embodied in the current action rather than the future outcome. There is inherent value in living and working in harmony. Getting more of one thing without having more of the others only creates imbalance and disharmony – making us worse off rather than better off.

However, the necessity for economic viability is a very real concern – even for those who pursue harmony rather than material wealth. If our endeavors are not economically viable, we lose the right to pursue those endeavors. But, how can a person make a living farming without degrading either the natural environment or the surrounding community? Industrial farming sets the standard for dollar and cent costs of production – and industrial farming exploits its natural and human resource base to keep those costs to a minimum. How can a sustainable farmer compete? The answer is not to compete with industrial farming but to do something fundamentally different.

This something different includes letting nature do more of the work of production – working with nature rather than against it. Production costs may be competitive with, if not lower than, industrial systems if you let nature do enough of the work. Organic production methods, management intensive grazing, pastured pork and poultry, low-input farming -- these are all systems that rely less on off-farm commercial inputs and more on one's ability to understand and work with nature. Industrial systems require uniformity and consistency, but nature is inherently diverse and dynamic. Harmony comes from matching what you produce and how you produce it to the unique ecological niche in which you produce. The greater the harmony the more of the work nature will be willing to do.

Finding harmony means reconnecting with the land. . Wendell Berry puts it most succinctly in his book, What are People For, "...if agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well (p. 147)." Sustainable production is possible only if farmers have a harmonious relationship with the land – if they know it, care about it, know how to care for it, take time to care for it, and can afford to care for it – only if they love it.

Something different also means marketing in the niches – giving people what they really want rather than coercing or bribing them to take what you have for sale. The conventional wisdom is that niche markets are limited because individually they are small. The conventional wisdom is wrong. All consumer markets are niche markets, because they are made up of individuals, and we all want and need something a bit different. Industrial systems of mass production and mass distribution treat things as if they were pretty much the same. The cost saving in industrial systems come from doing the same basic thing over and over again – producing uniform commodities in large volume. Niche marketing means giving people what they actually need and want – producing in harmony with the market.

Finding harmony means reconnecting with people – as fellow human beings rather than as consumers, producers, or some other generic economic entity. Joel Salatin, a Virginia farmer and agripreneur recently featured in the Smithsonian Magazine, refers to this as “relationship marketing.” When you have a relationship with your customers, they do not simply represent a market to be exploited to make a few more dollars. They are friends and neighbors that you care about and don't want to lose. When your customers have a relationship with you, you are not just another supplier to be haggled down to the lowest possible price to save a few dollars. You are someone they care about and don't want to lose. When you know, care about, and have affection for each other, you have a relationship that creates value above and beyond market value. You are contributing directly to each other's quality of life. You are creating a harmony that arises only among people who love one another.

Neither land nor people can be sustained unless they are given the attention, care, and affection – the love -- they need to survive, thrive, and prosper. The necessary attention, care, affection, and love come only from lives lived in harmony -- among people and between people and nature.

Finally, as more farmers and customers, sharing common concerns for ecological and social sustainability, develop relationships through the marketplace, their economic communities of interest will expand as well. Customers will be willing to pay more and farmers will be willing to provide more because they are both getting more from the relationship than just money. Those who might attempt to exploit these new economic communities for short run gains – those motivated by economic value rather than ethical or moral values – are destined to find disappointment. Those who join in seeking balance among the economic, ecological, and social dimensions of their lives – among the physical, mental, and spiritual – will be rewarded. They are helping to create a New World in which people may learn to live in harmony with each other as well as in harmony with nature.