

Sustaining People Through Agriculture: Opportunities for Graziersⁱ

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Sustainable agriculture is not just a passing fad. Questions of sustainability are not going to go away - ever. Sustaining agriculture is about sustaining people - not just sustaining agriculture. People will never again have the luxury of ignoring the impacts of their decisions on other people, including those of future generations. More people are becoming concerned about the safety, healthfulness, and their overall food security as they become increasingly reliant on a corporately-controlled, impersonal, global food system. They are concerned about the ability agriculture to meet their needs and the needs of all people today without compromising opportunities for future generations.

People are increasingly concerned about an agriculture that is dependent of fossil energy in a world that is confronted by the twin challenges of declining fossil energy and global climate change. They are concerned about an agriculture that is driven by the economic bottom line in a world of increasing disparity between the overweight affluent and the hungry poor. They are beginning to realize the consequences of a food system controlled by global corporations rather than real people. These corporations are incapable of concern for people - for farmers, rural residents, or even consumers, in any other sense other than producers or consumers.

Sustainable agriculture first became a public issue during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s. Farm families were caught up in an economic squeeze between declining prices for agricultural commodities and rising prices for fertilizer, pesticides, fuel and other farm inputs. Farmers with economic concerns were joined by organic farmers with concerns about the environmental and food safety implications of a chemically dependent agriculture. These conventional and organic farmers were joined by rural advocacy groups who were concerned about the impacts of industrial agriculture on the people of rural communities. The resulting USDA Low Input Sustainable Agriculture program (LISA) was designed to help people - farmers, consumers, and rural residents - during a time of crisis.

The corporate agribusiness community rejected the LISA program out-of-hand. They resented the fact that USDA and the Land Grant Universities were even considering a program that challenged the energy-intensive, chemically-dependent industrial model of modern American agriculture. USDA responded to the political pressure by shifting the emphasis of the LISA program from reducing inputs to natural resource management and renamed it Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE). SARE seemed less a threat to agribusiness than did LISA, but it still met continuing resistance from the agricultural establishment.ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱⁱⁱ Agribusiness firms, USDA, agricultural universities, state departments of agriculture, most commodity associations and some general farm organizations, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation.

After 20 years, the agricultural establishment has been forced to accept the fact that a significant segment of American consumers are concerned about the negative ecological and social impacts of conventional American agriculture. The rapid and persistent growth in consumer demand for foods grown by organic and other “natural” methods is a clear indication that a growing number of American consumers want something fundamentally different than they are finding in the mainstream supermarkets and franchised restaurants today. Sustainable agriculture has become increasingly profitable and the prospect for profits has lent it at least an element of legitimacy in the agricultural establishment.

The sustainable agriculture movement has been driven primarily by concerns of people as consumers. For nearly two decades now, organic foods have been the fastest growing segment of the American food market. However, local foods have recently replaced organic foods as the most dynamic, if not the fastest growing segment of the retail food market. The local foods movement is being driven in part by a desire for fresher, more flavorful, high quality foods. Local foods simply taste better. The mainstream industrial food system gains much of its economic efficiency by producing foods that can be harvested mechanically, packed, shipped long distances, while retaining a long shelf-life in mainstream supermarkets. For industrial foods, quality clearly means appearance, but consumers increasingly are opting for the freshness and flavor of local foods.

However, concerns for food safety are also drivers of the increasing consumer demand for local foods. The local food movement is made up primarily of those who drove the earlier natural and organic food movements; they were rejecting commercial fertilizers and pesticides used in conventional agriculture primarily for reasons of food safety. Even if they are not certified as being organic, most local foods are marketed as naturally grown, pesticide free, hormone & antibiotic free, humanely-raised, GMO free, or in general, foods less risky to eat. Many people buy locally because they are concerned about foods contaminated with E-coli H7:157, salmonella, or mad cow disease. Most people who buy locally expect local foods to be free of the risks they associate with many conventionally grown foods, even if their primary motivation for buying is freshness and flavor.

Most consumers who begin buying local foods for reasons of food quality and safety eventually become interested in other aspects of today's mainstream food system, including the public health, environmental, social, and political consequences of their food choices. Best-selling books, such as *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan, have helped to raise the consciousness of many American consumers. These books describe how the industrialized food system has resulted in foods that are deficient in virtually everything, except calories, deceptive in every aspect from advertising to artificial flavors, and degrade virtually everything and everybody involved in the system. Increasing food awareness brings increasing skepticism.

Recent scientific studies seem to confirm the suspicion of many consumers that deficiencies of industrial foods are as much about what has been taken out of as what has been added to our foods. Nutritional research is beginning to reveal that industrial foods are lacking in nutrient density, meaning they lack essential vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients necessary for a

healthy diet. Such deficiencies are logically linked to diet related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Comparisons of nutrient density between conventional foods and organic foods, and pre-industrial foods of the 1950s, link nutrient deficiencies to the changes in farming practices that supported specialization, standardization, and consolidation - industrialization - of American agriculture.¹

The people in the local food movement obviously don't trust industrial farmers or the corporate food system to provide them with good food. The "industrialization of organics" by large agribusiness corporations has also shaken the confidence of many consumers in the willingness of government to even be a responsible partner with farmers in helping create a new sustainable food system. People are increasingly turning to people they know and trust, including local farmers, to ensure the integrity of their foods.

The next major phase in food retailing could well be a *food ethics* movement. The ethical foods movement began with concern for humane treatment of animals, with calls to free chickens from the crowded cages and hogs from the cramped crates typical of large-scale confinement operations. Other ethical concerns have related to the economic exploitation of farm workers, many of whom are migrants with limited access to legal protection. With the recent growing diversion of food grains into fuel production, the ethical food movement seems likely to embrace those who are concerned with turning food crops into automobiles fuel rather than using it to feed an increasingly hungry world. The food corporations lack the capacity for compassion and respect for the less fortunate, which people ultimately will demand.

Sustainable farming is also about meeting the needs of people as citizens, as members of a civil society. Concern about national food security is destined to become a major driver toward a new sustainable food economy. For the past several decades, the USDA has been promoting international trade, rather than domestic production, as a means of ensuring national food security. U.S. farmers were encouraged to focus on their comparative advantages in producing feed grains and other bulk commodities for export to global markets, while relying on imports for foods that could be produced more efficiently elsewhere in the world.

Following decades as the world's largest exporter of agricultural products, however, the United States is now on the brink of becoming a net food importer. Since we have gone from being the world's largest moneylender to the world's largest debtor, we conceivably could also become the world's largest net food importer. We live in uncertain times. We face major threats from dwindling fossil energy, global climate change, exploding federal budget deficits, international trade deficits, growing disparity between the rich and poor, and endless military conflicts in global natural resource and cultural wars. Our dependence on a global food economy is clearly placing our national food security at greater risk.

Ultimately, the food security of any nation depends upon the productivity of its agricultural land and upon the commitment of its farmers to produce adequate quantities of safe and nutritious food, not just for this generation but for generations of Americans to come. Food security can only be found in systems of food production that are ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable - in a sustainable agriculture. Farmers must be willing and able to pass their land to the next generations as healthy and productive as when it was passed to

them. As Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer and writer put it, “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.”² To maintain national food security, we must have farmers and ranchers on the land who not only care about the land but also who care about people - their customers, neighbors, fellow citizens, humanity - and are committed to ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

There are no blueprints or formulas for sustainable agriculture because each farm or ranch must be individualistic, dynamic, and site specific to achieve sustainability. However, some fundamental principles of sustainable agriculture are beginning to emerge. First, sustainable farmers value diversity. They must fit their farming operation to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm and nature is diverse. Some farmers integrate a variety of crop and livestock enterprises, spatially and sequentially, to maintain soil fertility and manage pests. Others achieve diversity through crop rotations and cover crops. Some farmers and ranchers rely on diverse species of forages and animals in intensively managed livestock grazing operations. Through diversification, these new sustainable farmers and ranchers substitute management of on-farm resources for the off-farm inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the natural environment.

Sustainable farmers also value diversity among people. Many sustainable farmers and ranchers market directly to individual customers at farmers markets, through buying clubs, or other forms of direct marketing. They realize that as consumers each of us values things differently because we have different needs and different tastes and preferences. They produce the things that their customers value most, rather than try to convince their customers to buy whatever they might prefer to produce. These higher values are reflected in premium prices for their products. They also 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. By respecting differences among people sustainable farmers and ranchers are able to make a profit without exploiting their land, their animals, their neighbors, or their customers.

Second, sustainable farmers value relationships. They make their own decisions but they have learned that to farm sustainably they must build lasting relationships with other farmers, with their customers, and with their land. Their relationships are interdependent relationships of choice, rather than relationships of dependency or necessity. They share ideas and information with other farmers and with their customers. They are not trying to drive each other out of business; they are trying to help each other succeed. Some 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 take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create long term, dependable social and economic relationships of trust. They buy locally and market locally, helping to bring people together around a common interest in food and farming.

Finally, sustainable farmers value their quality of life. Sustainable agriculture is not just about meeting the needs of people as consumers and citizens but also about meeting the needs of the people who farm and ranch. It is not simply about making a living but also about a way of life. Sustainable farms and ranches reflect the things farmers and ranchers like to do, the things

they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as well as the things they think will be profitable. However, their products are often better and their costs less because by following their passion they end up doing the things they do best. They 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.

A sustainable farm or ranch is a good place to live and raise a family. Even a small farm or ranch is a large “residential lot,” with open spaces, fresh air, scenic landscapes, and an opportunity to live in a natural setting. A good farm or ranch is a place that nurtures life - plants, animals, and people. Farm parents can have more influence on their children, because families spend more quality time together - work and family life happens at the same place. A sustainable farm or ranch is not only a good place to live on but also a good place to be around. They make good neighbors and provide a means for farmers and ranchers to become a part of caring rural communities. Rural communities are not as close as they once were but they are still places where everybody has an opportunity to be “somebody.” Many of these quality of life benefits would cost tens of thousands of dollars to even approximate in an urban environment and others are truly priceless. They are just a normal part of life on a sustainable farm or ranch

Sustainable agriculture is about people. It's about the pursuit of happiness, rather than the pursuit of ever greater productivity or wealth. Happiness has been accepted historically as the ultimate goal or purpose of life and people throughout history have understood the difference between the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of wealth. It's only in the past few decades that Americans have tended to define happiness as synonymous with *material* well-being or wealth. Certainly, some level of material well-being is necessary for happiness, but both philosophers and ordinary people have always understood that happiness is also about relationships, within families and communities, and happiness is about ethics and morality. Happiness is a consequence of a way of life. Sustainable agriculture is not just about meeting the basic food and fiber needs of people as consumers, citizens, or farmers; it's also about sustaining the physical, social, and spiritual well-being of people. Sustainability is about the pursuit of happiness.

University psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman reviewed more than 150 scholarly studies relating wealth to happiness.³ Their 2004 report confirmed a growing consensus that beyond some very modest level of income - around \$10,000 per person in Western society, they suggest - increases in income do not necessarily bring greater happiness. A 2003 British cabinet office report also confirmed, “Despite huge increases in affluence compared with 1950, people throughout the developed world reported no greater feelings of happiness.”⁴ These studies consistently found that personal relationships - friends, family, and community - are necessary for happiness, as is a sense of being treated with equity and justice within society. And perhaps most important, they concluded our happiness depends on our having a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life to define what is right or wrong and good or bad - our sense of ethics and morality. Sustainable agriculture is about people and their pursuit of happiness.

Farmers and ranchers in America today are being forced to choose between two very different paths to the future. The national “Agriculture of the Middle” project, coordinated by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, identifies one path as that traveled by giant corporate agribusinesses forming comprehensive contractual arrangements with large, specialized producers to produce bulk commodities, supplying both domestic and global

markets. On the other path, small-scale, diversified farms are thriving by successfully adapting to producing and marketing food products directly to local customers. The traditional full-time family farm or ranch has been left with little choice other than to choose one of these two paths - or the path out of agriculture.⁵

The agricultural establishment has not, and will not, full embrace the ecological and social dimensions of agricultural sustainability because corporate agribusiness is motivated by the pursuit of profits and growth. The inherent conflicts among economic, ecological, and social sustainability arise from the fact that economic value is inherently individualistic; it accrues to individuals, and thus, must be expected to accrue during the lifetime of the individual decision maker. Market interest rates are a reflection of the priority that economics places on the present relative to the future. It makes no economic sense to invest anything for the sole benefit of someone else, certainly not an unknown someone of some future generation. Based on everything we know about nature and society, economics alone will not sure sustainability.

Some farmers are betting that ethanol will be the economic savior of *first-path* agriculture. With government subsidies and protective tariffs of more than a dollar a gallon to protect U.S. farmers from foreign competition, ethanol plants have sprung up all across rural America. However, as critics point out, biofuels are very energy inefficient in comparison to other alternative to gasoline and diesel fuel. Perhaps more important, rising food prices have made people increasingly aware that biofuels production inevitably competes with food production. The agricultural establishment has responded by emphasizing the potential of biofuels from non-food crops, including dedicated energy crops and forages, such as switch grass. However, forages are food for livestock which are food for humans and dedicated energy crops invariably compete for land that could be use to produce some form of food for humans instead. The food-versus-fuel issue is ultimately a matter of ethics, not engineering or economics.

In addition, our current food system requires about ten kcals of fossil energy for every kcal of food energy it produces.⁶ Much of this energy is used in food processing and distribution, but even at the farm level about three kcals of fossil energy are required for each kcal of food energy. In a world that is running out of *cheap* fossil energy and is confronted with global climate change, society eventually will conclude that producing food for humans must take priority over producing fuel for our SUVs.

Most successful graziers, thus far, have found ways to avoid choosing either path - most have remained in the middle. Many grazing operations are not very diverse and many sell their meat or milk to large processors, but most clearly are not willing to stake their future on being the lowest cost producers in the world. In the past few years, however, an increasing number of graziers are being lured onto the *first-path* of large-scale, contractual production. By focusing narrowly on the economics of grazing, on the promise of greater total profits, they are moving to larger, more-specialized operations. Large corporations are now becoming involved in producing grass-based milk and meat, as they have in organic milk production. For many, “grass-fed” is becoming just another promotion gimmick for the mainstream food industry. We could well see the industrialization of grazing, much as we saw the *industrialization of organics* after the USDA national organic standards were put in place.

Once national standards are in place, grass-fed beef from Oklahoma will be no different from grass-fed beef from California or Australia in the marketplace. The grass-fed market will then go to whoever in the world can meet the minimum standards at the lowest cost. Graziers may soon have the opportunity to manage large herds of livestock for giant agribusiness corporations, producing bulk commodities for both domestic and international markets. But, someone other than the graziers will be making the important decisions and making the profits. Once consumers begin to understand what's happened, as they did with organics, grass-fed meat and milk will join the ranks of ordinary industrial food products.

Fortunately, many graziers understand that they have natural ecological, social, and economic advantages in following the *second path* of sustainable farming. Graziers can meet the needs of consumers who are concerned about food safety, nutrition, and ethical issues. They can avoid the growth hormones and antibiotics that are commonplace in confinement animal feeding operations. Grass-based production also minimizes the risks of E-coli O157:H7 and eliminates the risk of "mad cow" disease. Grass-fed meat and milk also offer distinct nutrition and health benefits over grain-fed animal products. The natural land stewardship advantages of grazing has allowed an increasing number of grass-based dairy and beef operations are make the transition to organic production. From an ethical perspective, it's far easier to treat animals humanely in pasture-based systems than in large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. Increasingly, grass-farmers are processing, packaging and marketing their own meat, milk, and animal products directly to consumers who choose to buy their food from people they know and trust.

Livestock grazing also has distinct advantages in meeting the needs of people for long run food security. Through intensively managed grazing, valuable nutrients are returned to the soil and the pollution of surface and groundwater by agrichemicals is kept to a minimum if not eliminated. By keeping the land covered with perennial grasses, soil erosion and compaction can also be minimized. Grazing not only reduces use of non-renewable fossil energy by about one-third,⁷ but also utilizes grasses and forages that cannot be utilized by humans, reducing reliance on energy-wasting, water-polluting confinement animal feeding operations. Graziers also have advantages over cattle feeders in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. According to animal science professor, David Tisch, a 12-ounce beef steak from a grain-fed animal results in about 1.6-pounds of emissions - including emissions from grain production but not transportation.⁸ The same steak from a grass-fed beef animal results in about 0.3-pounds of CO₂, only about one-fifth as much. A shift from grain feeding to grazing of livestock will be essential not only in meeting the future protein needs of society in a world of declining fossil energy but also in maintaining a health natural ecosystem. Grazing will play a key role in future food security.

Grazing is also good for the people who farm and ranch. Most grazing operations are smaller than otherwise similar confinement operations simply because planned and intensively managed grazing systems require hands-on, eyes-on, thinking management, which doesn't fit well with the corporate contract approach to agricultural production. Grass-based operations provide an aesthetically pleasing and safe environment in which to raise a family, with children taking on increasing responsibilities as they mature. Grass based livestock operations make good neighbors and, unlike confinement animal feeding operations, can help build stronger local communities, economically and socially. Sustainable grazing is management intensive grazing, which

increases the challenges, but also returns the economic rewards to the decision maker, the people on farms and ranches, rather than to investors in some global agribusiness corporation.

The opportunities for graziers are virtually unlimited, as people seek ways to confront the ecological, social, and economic challenges of the future. The food security of our nation, as well as the future of humanity, ultimately depends of the sustainability of agriculture. Animals are essential to ecological sustainability, and animals on grass have distinct advantages over animals in feed lots in meeting the challenges of agricultural sustainability. However, graziers should never forget the fundamental purpose of agriculture is to sustain a desirable quality of life for people, as producers, consumers, citizens, and members of global society. An agriculture that cannot sustain people - economically, socially, and spiritually - will not be sustained by the people who must sustain it. Livestock grazing can be profitable as well as ecologically sound and socially responsible. Sustainable grazing requires that farmers and ranchers make conscious, purposeful decisions to care for other people, including those of future generations, as well as to care for themselves and their families. Graziers should never forget that sustainable agriculture is about sustaining people through agriculture.

End Notes

¹ For a list of peer review scientific studies documenting the health benefits of natural foods, see *The Organic Center*, <http://www.organic-center.org/>

² Wendell Berry, "Nature as measure," in *What are people for?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990): 206-207.

³ Ed Diener and Martin EP. Seligman, "Beyond Money. Toward an Economy of Well-Being," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (1), 2004, 1-31.

⁴ Oliver James, "Children before cash; better childcare will do more for our wellbeing than greater affluence," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2003.

⁵ Fred Kirschenmann, Steve Stevenson, Fred Buttel, Tom Lyson and Mike Duffy, 2003, "A White Paper for Agriculture of the Middle Project. Available at www.agofthemiddle.org .

⁶ David and Marcia Pimentel, *Food, Energy, and Society* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado), 1996.

⁷ Pimentel, *Food, Energy, and Society*.

⁸ David Tisch, in an interview with Bruce Gellerman, host of radio program, "Living on Earth, February 8, 2008, Tisch is a Professor in the College of Agriculture and Technology, State University of New York, Cobleskill, NY, <http://www.loe.org/shows/shows.htm?programID=08-P13-00006#feature4>