

## FANTASIES OF MR. AVERY'S HIGH-YIELD AGRICULTURE

John Ikerd  
Sustainable Agriculture Systems Program  
University of Missouri

The May, 1996 issue of Today's Farmer included a centerfold article in "Defense of High-Yield Farming." Farmers need to be exposed to a wide range of viewpoints on important issues -- of which Mr. Avery's is but one. There are at least as many fantasies in Mr. Avery's defense of High-Yield farming as there are the positions he attributes to the "eco-activists."

Farmers need to realize that Mr. Avery's fantasies are no more capable of saving wildlife, feeding people, or generating farming profits than are fantasies of "eco-activists."

Fantasy #1: A sustainable agriculture won't sustain people.

Mr. Avery dismisses all credible definitions of sustainable agriculture and chooses his own: "low-yield farming." He infers that sustainable agriculture advocates would consider starvation of half the human population to be an acceptable strategy for sustainability. He is wrong. All of the many credible definitions of sustainable agriculture include statements such as: "a sustainable agriculture must be productive, must provide for the food and fiber needs of society, must meet the needs of the current generation, must be economically viable and socially just, or must be capable of maintaining its productivity and value to human society." Avery chooses to ignore all these credible definitions of sustainable agriculture and instead creates his own definition -- one which he can easily attack.

Fantasy #2. High-yield technologies have no limits and organic technologies have no potential.

Avery refers to "sustainable" as a euphemism for "organic." Again, he is wrong. Organic farming may or may not be sustainable. The sustainability of organic farming, or any system of farming, depends on whether it is ultimately found to be economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially responsible. He has stated, without any credible supporting evidence, "the best yields on field crops grown using organic methods are roughly half those of mainstream high-yield farms." He considers documented cases of organic farmers who attain yields equal-to-or-higher than their high-input neighbors to be aberrations rather than examples of what can be achieved even with today's knowledge of organic farming methods. He seems to have a blind faith in the ability of high-input farming methods to expand production, seemingly without limits, but will not concede that organic farming could ever be any more productive than it is today. Neither position is consistent with either current scientific evidence or good common sense.

Fantasy #3. Nature can be protected only by segregating people, wildlife, and farming into separate spaces.

Avery's whole case for "high-yield" agriculture as a necessity for feeding people and protecting wildlife is built upon this fallacy. It appears that in Avery's world, specialization is "good," diversification is "old fashioned," and integration is "impossible." He would have us believe there is no alternative to setting aside space for agriculture and forestry, separate from spaces for wildlife, and presumably separate still from spaces for people to live. He has no apparent realization that everything on earth is ultimately connected. We may well have to learn to farm, harvest timber, and live in harmony with wildlife all in the "same" spaces -- if we are to sustain the global ecosystem of which we are a part. The necessity of separating people from agriculture and agriculture from wildlife may be a condition for Mr. Avery's "high-yield" farming. But, learning to live as part of nature, not separate from nature, is a primary goal of most who are working seriously toward agricultural sustainability.

Fantasy #4. Population, consumption, and production are the results of separate and largely independent decisions of human societies.

Mr. Avery projects human population trends, consumption trends, and production trends as if there were no relationships among the three. In fact there is abundant evidence that such trends are highly interrelated if not inseparable. When people give no conscious consideration to future generations, history suggests they will exploit their resource base -- either through increased per capita consumption or increased population. There is no conceivable way the earth can support as many people as humanity might choose to procreate at any level of consumption to which they might aspire. No one can possibly know with any degree of certainty how many people the earth can sustain or what level of per capita consumption is sustainable. The one thing we do know is that population and consumption cannot expand indefinitely. Avery's "high-yield" agriculture, at best, can do no more than delay the inevitable day when we must find acceptable ways to balance production, population, and consumption. At that time, the earth may be capable of sustaining far fewer people than it could sustain with today's resource base.

Fantasy #5. Research on High-Yield Farming is the best bet for a sustainable agriculture.

The successful pursuit of a "high-yield" agriculture might allow humanity to ignore its responsibility for conserving our resource base, protecting our environment, and building a more responsible society for another 50 years. If so, at that time we quite likely will be faced with twice as many people, a seriously depleted natural resource base, and an exploding world population. If we wait 50 years to get serious about agricultural sustainability, it just might be too late. Desperate and starving people, historically, have destroyed their resource base and in so doing have destroyed their civilizations. Apparently, such is the nature of being human. The current period of agricultural plenty gives us a window of

opportunity to develop new and better ways to farm. We need to explore a wide range of alternatives for sustaining "people" through agriculture -- including the people who farm and live in rural communities. We can't afford to bet our scarce public research dollars on any single approach to the future agriculture, certainly not on the fantasies of Mr. Avery's High-Yield Farming.

Finally, the fundamental questions of agricultural sustainability are more about people than about ecology or economics. Will we exercise our uniquely-human capability for self-discipline and make the ecological, social, and economic investments needed to sustain people on the land and human life on earth? Or will we continue to contrive self-delusional scenarios of "the supremacy of man over nature" and, thus, justify our continuing greed?

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