

DEFINING A FOOD ETHIC



COMMON VALUES FOR THE SUSTAINABLE FOOD & FARM MOVEMENT

By Judith Redmond and Thomas Nelson

SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF TODAY'S food system is a big job. Many organizations have worked for decades to address environmental, social and economic issues in the food system from a number of angles. There have been some successes, but the trends that measure progress toward sustainability are not hopeful. If we are to turn dominant trends around, we need to rethink the sustainable agriculture/food systems movement in a way that reaches a greater public and assists us in building stronger partnerships and coalitions.

Sustainable agriculture and food system activists are engaged in many significant

activities, but the overall movement in California lacks a strong sense of cohesion, coordination and progress toward change. Coalitions and partnerships exist, but they aren't yet strong enough or broad enough for us to turn the food system around. Additionally, the stakeholders at the table don't always encompass the sustainability trinity of environmental soundness, social justice and economic viability. The breadth of this vision has been daunting to activists and practitioners who may find that achieving sustainability in just one of these areas is all that they can handle.

Our movement will be stronger if we redefine it in a way that encourages strategic partnerships between progressive groups that work on food, agriculture, economic and environmental issues. Groups that should be linked are working on community food security, environmental restoration, organic and sustainable agriculture, pesticide reform, labor, rural economic development, fine food and slow food. Churches, fair trade and human health activists also share many values with the sustainable agriculture movement, although much more needs to be done to build upon those opportunities.

WHO IS THE CONSTITUENCY?

Given that a broader coalition of organizations is needed under the sustainable food

and agriculture umbrella, it is also true that we need to do some new thinking about target constituencies. This is especially true for sustainable agriculture activists who have focused largely on producers and production practices in the past.

In the current food system, the cards are stacked against small-scale farmers, small produce retailers and farm labor. Consolidation and globalization are taking a heavy toll, resulting in the loss of rural culture and artisan cuisine worldwide. The environment is also a big loser, with trends in soil loss, farm land loss, water quality degradation and heavy pesticide use showing few signs of improvement. The ultimate consumer may have access to cheap, fast, mass produced food, but also at a heavy cost in terms of human health and long-term sustainability and equity. A new food system paradigm is needed to reverse these trends. First, the only way for small-scale farmers to survive over the long term is if they remove themselves from direct competition with the McDonald's and Cargill's of the world. Second, agricultural constituencies need to be more closely aligned with a broad urban constituency, educated and activated around food issues.

The current food system paradigm casts the needs of family-scale farmers, small-scale produce retailers and consumers in opposition to one another. For example:

TABLE 1.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMON NEEDS OF FOOD AND FARM MOVEMENT CONSTITUENCIES

	EATERS' NEEDS (Current Paradigm)	FARMERS' NEEDS (Current Paradigm)	COMMON NEEDS (Food Ethic Paradigm)
ENVIRONMENT	Uncontaminated food & water; phase-out of toxic chemicals	Access to effective pest management technologies; streamlined regulations	Alternative pest and fertility management systems; redirecting of institutional research priorities
HUMAN HEALTH & FOOD DISTRIBUTION	Convenient access to healthy, nutritious, affordable food	Farming without undue interference or unnecessary regulations; efficient markets	Decentralized markets; data on human health impact of fast food; relationship between farmer & consumer based on trust
FARM LAND PRESERVATION	Open space with recreational values	Money to retire on (by selling farmland)	Food Belts around municipal areas; Farm Link programs; easement programs
CULTURE OF FOOD SYSTEMS	Sense of connection to food & community; food you can trust, preservation of food as integral part of many cultures	Viability of family-scale businesses, independence and control over future of the business; community respect	Market for artisan and ethnic foods; opportunities for new immigrant farmers

“Consumers need easy access to fresh, low priced food,” but “Farmers need centralized markets for high priced food that stores and ships well.” Similar, supposedly opposing needs can be outlined around several other food system issues (chemical pesticides, farmland preservation, human health).

In fact, these constituencies have many needs in common: a market that provides a fair price, without up and down spikes; food, land and water that isn't contaminated with agricultural chemicals, GMO's, irradiation, antibiotics, hormones, etc; and food that reflects regional culture, ethnic diversity and terroir, etc. (see Table 1). (Note that in this article constituencies are referred to in very general terms. Additional segmenting of the constituencies is obviously needed to complete this analysis.)

A common language and set of values must be adopted to build an alliance between the urban and agricultural constituencies for a new food system. Each constituency equally needs the other. To succeed, the movement must capture the imagination of masses of people and get them to change their behavior.

RETHINKING THE MOVEMENT

When one says, “sustainable agriculture,” it doesn't bring “eaters” to mind. Why would someone living and working in Los Angeles feel drawn to a movement defined around agriculture? Many people living in a non-agricultural environment have no emotional or intuitive reason to think that sustainable agriculture has much to offer them. This needs to change. Eaters are as much a part of the food and agriculture system as farmers.

As a first step in rethinking the movement, we need to adopt a set of common values that speak equally to farmers and eaters. The common values would comprise a food ethic, more universally accessible and compelling than “sustainable agriculture,” but embodying many of the same goals. The food ethic from the start must invite farmers, consumers and many others in under the same umbrella.

Our current food system values centralization, cheap food, cosmetically uniform food, highly processed and packaged food,

and uniformity in food worldwide. All of this is designed for the benefit of businesses that have a global presence. The current system is the result of a huge investment by corporations who are using myriad avenues of influence to tell us from an early age how and what we should eat. Powerful forces within the government and at land grant institutions have aided the corporations in this regard.

A new food system will be based on a fundamentally different set of values. That set of values, called the food ethic, recognizes how all of the stakeholders interact with and impact each other. The goal of defining a food ethic is to encourage all of the stakeholders in the food system to become an active part of its reform through acts both personal and political.

The food ethic, which recognizes the central importance of food in the efforts of activists as well as in all of our lives, helps us to build a common vision that unifies and broadens the sustainable agriculture and food systems movement. The food ethic is analogous to the conservation ethic, which was forged by some of the first great conservationists and which individuals now understand at a gut level (appreciation of wild open spaces, water conservation, car pooling, recycling, etc.).

The conservation ethic is about preserving wildlife on a grand scale and recycling household garbage on an individual level. On a grand scale, the food ethic is about protecting the capacity of our planet to grow food. At the individual level, the food ethic is about buying food from someone you trust.

OUR VALUES

A dialogue by stakeholders in the food system is needed in order to develop and adopt common values that speak to all of us personally as well as politically. For example:


- Access to good food and water is a basic human right.
- We value the breaking of bread as a cornerstone of culture in our society.
- Opportunity for ethnically diverse farmers is critical to the survival of California's communities.
- Agricultural laborers should be compensated with a living wage and should enjoy healthy and safe working conditions.

- The consumer-food relationship should be based on knowledge and trust.
- A thriving, diverse and unpolluted ecosystem is fundamentally important to those of us now living, as well as to the food supply of future generations.
- Family-scale agriculture has intrinsic value to all stakeholders in the food system.

PRACTICE OF THE FOOD ETHIC

The food ethic can be practiced on many levels: economic, social, spiritual and political. The point is that just like the conservation ethic, it needs to touch people in many ways – at home, at work and in the schools. Here are some examples of ways that the food ethic is being practiced by individuals:

- Through appreciation and preparation of meals as a meaningful part of our lives.
- In a marketing relationship that allows the consumer to know the farmer in some way. This includes eco-labeling, Community Supported Agriculture and farmers' markets.
- When a family makes a New Year's resolution to eschew fast food.
- Through care for the land in urban gardens, in edible landscaping, in permaculture, and in organic, biological and biodynamic agriculture.
- By teaching children where their food comes from and in visiting nearby farms.

At an organizational level, the food ethic can guide actions by nonprofits, businesses, and institutions. For example, a corresponding set of more political and activist activities can be adopted by nonprofit organizations in practicing the food ethic. Businesses can also be part of the food ethic. Produce departments can provide education to customers about food. Restaurants can describe how the values associated with their menus reflect the food ethic. Because a common set of values are guiding all of the players, progress towards environmental and social goals will be more achievable. Once the organizations that are part of the sustainable agriculture and food systems movement adopt the food ethic, a more coherent and strategic set of organizational priorities and measurable goals will follow. 

The authors can be reached via e-mail at: jt@yolo.com