Once upon a time, Vermont was the breadbasket of New England. The Champlain Valley was an important wheat-growing region, and modest hill farms amidst the foothills of the Green Mountains grew much of the region’s oats, barley, and rye.

Today, Vermont is a net importer of food. Bill McKibben reported in these pages last October that Vermont’s food imports are worth half again as much as what we export, and two-thirds of these exports are dairy products. Even foods we can grow in Vermont are largely imported. A Rodale study of food self-sufficiency across the United States back in the early 1980s showed that Vermont was even importing 70-80 percent of its carrots and apples. A forthcoming UVM study reports that only 10 percent to 15 percent of our food budgets are spent on locally grown products.

How did it come to this? And, even more important, in an era of rising fuel prices and Middle East wars, how do we begin to change the situation?

Many factors contributed to the loss of Vermont’s traditional agricultural base. From the westward migrations of the mid-19th century, to the coming of the railroads and the creation of a national grain market, the huge surpluses generated by Western agriculture drove down prices and rendered New England growers economically marginal. Expanding commodity-based agriculture increasingly trumped the ethic of self-reliance that this country was nominally built upon.

During the 1950s, when Americans spent an average of 30 percent of their household income on food, policymakers decided that food had become too expensive for the emerging consumer lifestyle, and that too many people were trying to make their living in agriculture. Subsidies were structured so as to sustain export markets for agricultural commodities, and to encourage people to sell their farms and migrate to the cities to find work.

This policy has reverberated many times over the past half century, with repeated “farm crises” through much of the country, and prices declining to where we now spend only 15 percent of our income on food. A vanishing share of our food dollars actually goes to farmers, and food items are traveling an average of 1,200 miles from farm to table. Vermont lost nearly 90 percent of its remaining farms during this period, and some areas of the central United States faced significant depopulation. Transnational chemical companies, food processors, and grain traders, rather than farmers, came to decide how our food was to be grown, shipped, and processed. Today, the United States has more people in prison than are earning their livelihood growing food.

Today, a shrinking number of transnational corporations control the world’s supply of seeds and...
Celebrating Our First Year

One year ago this month, we published the very first issue of Vermont Commons, a monthly newspaper and multimedia forum championing Vermont independence — political, economic, social, and spiritual.

Ian Baldwin, our publisher, began our debut editorial last April with this prophetic observation, one that holds more true now than one year ago:

“Vermonters, Americans — indeed, all the world — stand at a widening divide.

“Not between red and blue, right and left, conservative and liberal, capitalist and socialist, and other such worn political coinage.

“No, we stand at a truly immense divide: that between our past and our future.”

Indeed, our future will look very little like our past, and we founded Vermont Commons to be a voice in the wilderness, a fiercely independent publication willing to peer into the unknown and speak clearly and honestly about what we see in front of us.

Looking back over our past year, the Vermont Commons community has much of which to be proud. From our humble roots, we’ve grown into a multimedia presence with a salaried staff of three, working with the Vermont Guardian to circulate 9,000 of our newspapers around Vermont each month, and have developed a global subscriber base of 300 readers and growing. Our monthly “Free Vermont” e-newsletter reaches 1,000 subscribers internationally, while our website draws thousands of unique visitors each month, many of them filling up our blog with suggestions, comments, and concerns. We were one of the first journals in the country to publish James Howard Kunstler’s thoughts on “the long emergency,” one of the first to break the story of “global peak oil,” one of the only newspapers in the country to devote an entire issue to exploring 9/11’s unanswered questions, and one of the few Green Mountain gazettes where one can read the work of such widely divergent thinkers as Donald Livingston, Bill McKibben, John McClaughry, and Peter Clavelle in the same issue.

While we are proud of our beginnings, we have much work ahead of us, as we look to our future together. We pledge to continue to bring you the most hard-headed news and commentary we can — honest and fearless musings, tempered with humor and hope.

All of us — Vermonters, Americans, and citizens of the world — need to prepare ourselves for an unfolding 21st century future that will bear little resemblance to our past. We will continue to devote Vermont Commons to our ongoing exploration of some basic questions of human civilization — food, energy, currency, transportation, education — with the hope that we can help re-invent ourselves for a 21st century world that is already beginning to look very different from the 20th.

Long live Vermont independence and the (dis)United States.

Rob Williams

Contributors

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Letter to the Editor

Challenging the National Animal ID Program

(An open letter to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, NAIS Subcommittee.)

Dear NAIS Subcommittee:

Last week I learned about the National Animal Identification System from a commentary and an article published in Small Farmer’s Journal. I have since read through your entire NAIS website, and have also studied that of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture.

I can hardly express adequately my dismay and anger at your plan to implement a mandatory animal ID system. It demonstrates unlimited and conscience-less contempt for rural citizens, and for our traditions, independence, and liberties. It shows once and for all that the national agricultural bureaucracy (i.e., the USDA) is, with the active encouragement of the ID-advocacy, and material support of “the [corporate part of the] industry,” bent on the final destruction of the small family farmer and homesteader.

Certainly the citizenry has a right to expect reasonable government safeguards against the spread of disease in livestock populations. But your plan to require the registration of every livestock animal in the United States, and every premises that keeps animals – even down to the family that has three laying hens, or two dairy goats, or a riding horse – is madness. In my view, it is despotic, tyrannical, and will irrevocably harm our democracy – which, I would like to remind you, was founded in large part by farmers.

So, in reading your Draft Strategic Plan and other information on your website, what are some of the things we discover, or can infer? Well, to start off with, the NAIS was developed with the cooperation of “industry,” e.g., the NIAA (National Institute for Animal Agriculture), and others. And who are they? The biggest players in meat production, and the developers of high-tech animal ID equipment. Their concern for the small farmer is, of course, well known.

And my neighbor with 100 dairy cows, or the fellow down the road with 150 dairy goats, or my friends with 50 meat birds raised for their own personal consumption? Have you made known your plans, in good faith, to them, to all categories of ‘stakeholders’? Have you sincerely sought comments from all interested parties?

I doubt it. You confidently cite numbers from “listening sessions” (held in 2004, long before the general public began to become aware of the NAIS). So, 59 out of 60 comments indicate support for NAIS, and 35 out of 47 support a mandatory program. Is this supposed to be representative of all livestock owners and other “stakeholders,” and statistically sound enough to proudly present as “broad support” for your plans? That’s nonsense (and intellectual dishonesty). And I suspect that the unidentified participants in these sessions included rather a high proportion of the biggest players in animal agriculture, and rather few of the rest of us, and not because we’re not interested.

The aim of the NAIS is to facilitate the identification and tracking of – and, it is hoped, the control of – chronic animal diseases and sudden disease outbreaks. Will it accomplish this? Certainly it may help. But at what cost, both monetarily and socially? How will the costs balance with the gains?

Where is your analysis of this? Can you show that existing safeguards of animal and public health (and there are many) are inadequate, and that a system on this scale will produce sufficient gains to be worthwhile? Where is your careful assessment of the possibilities for serious disease outbreak, and the likely efficacy of the NAIS in slowing or preventing that?

Asking the citizenry to accept huge costs (loss of democratic freedoms and privacy), further erosion of the people’s capacity to feed themselves, further debt accumulated by the federal government in order to fund this, etc.) for very uncertain returns is not acceptable. The case of brucellosis, which you cite, is not support for the oppressive and undemocratic animal ID system you plan. Quite the opposite. As you state, that disease has been nearly eliminated through a much lower-tech, less expensive, and less intrusive program of identification and vaccination. You also note particularly BSE. I’m not very familiar with that disease’s epidemiology, but offering up one case in the United States as part of the support for such a sweeping program as you propose seems a flimsy rationale at best. (Of course, you have already shown yourselves, right here in Vermont, ready to destroy any animal ID program on the basis of flimsy, highly questionable evidence.)

What of my neighbors who take maybe half a dozen beef cattle to the slaughterhouse (the only one remaining anywhere around here) each year, then sell the meat at their farm stand to an exclusively local clientele? Have you done any careful thinking on how a mandatory NAIS will affect them economically? And what of their customers, who now can buy good meat locally grown by people they know, thus supporting the local farm economy? They will be forced (if they still choose to eat meat) into participating in a huge, unsustainable, dangerous, inhumane system of meat production.

And the inclusion of non-food animals raised on a small scale seems particularly ridiculous. Friends of mine here have a llama farm. They have told me that disease is practically unknown among cameldids. What is the sense, then, in including those animals – placing a financial and practical burden on their owners, and adding to the general cost of the NAIS? My friends should have to register their animals and their premises with the federal government so that they can take a walk in the woods (off their own property) on a Sunday morning with a couple of their animals? And then there’s my friend who keeps four sheep, two angora goats, and a llama, for her own spinning and knitting. Thank God the federal government will soon know about her.

It is very clear, also, that the costs will fall most heavily on the small producer, who will be forced to register every animal, tag every animal, and so on, and that the large-scale animal industry has already made sure that it will not be so burdened.

And you write “...it is important to ensure that this effort does not unduly increase the size and scope of Federal or State governments.” Could anyone with the slightest analytical powers not realize that a system which will require the registration of every livestock animal in the country (how many tens or hundreds of millions are there?) cannot fail to “unduly increase...” This is surely one of the most absurd statements in the entire Draft Strategic Plan.

You suggest that the full implementation of the NAIS will help protect us from “an intentional introduction of an animal disease,” presumably by terrorists foreign or domestic, and you cite the 9/11 attacks to suggest that this is a real possibility. Sure, someone could contrive to do this. But that ignores the more important question of where true food security comes from.

In my view, the implementation of the NAIS is itself an attack on food security. It will force countless small farmers and homesteaders to abandon animal agriculture, owing to the burdens it will impose on them (direct costs they will have to absorb, time they will have to spend on meeting the NAIS requirements); production of animal products will inevitably be concentrated in fewer, and bigger, hands. It should be entirely obvious that such a concentration in fact makes us more vulnerable to terrorist attacks on our food supply: it’s a lot easier to hit your targets when they are big, and in only a few locations, than when they are small and spread out over a large (continental) area.

The continued existence of small farmers and homesteaders is absolutely necessary for food security, but the NAIS will do irreparable harm to them. (And, it should be noted, concentration of food animals in huge numbers also promotes the transmission of disease, not to mention the horrors of animal waste disposal, such as accidental spillages at huge hog farms, etc.)

I leave the final word on this (quoting approximately) to Mr. Benjamin Franklin: “Those willing to trade liberty for a little security deserve neither liberty nor security.”

My family and I are “small farmers.” We grow vegetables and fruit for our own consumption. We are developing a commercial small fruit operation (raspberries, blueberries, gooseberries). We cherish the rural heritage of Vermont, and although we do not have animals ourselves, most of our friends and neighbors do.

Your assault on our and their way of life is unacceptable and intolerable. We will not accept or tolerate it, and you will not succeed.

Jeff Bickart
Craftsbury

Vermont Commons welcomes your input.

Please e-mail letters to editor@vtcommons.org or post to 308 Wallis Drive, Waitsfield, VT 05673. Although we will try to print your letters in their entirety, we may edit to fit. Please be concise. Be sure to include your contact information (name, address, telephone, and e-mail) for verification purposes.
A Bright Future for Farming: Vermont Can Lead the Way

By Vern Grubinger

The commerce of food, and therefore farming, is dominated by oligopolies. At every level—from sales of agricultural inputs, to purchasing of raw commodities, to processing of food into branded products, to retailing of food to consumers—a handful of enormous corporations control a majority of the transactions.

For example, major suppliers of chemicals and seeds for farmers are Bayer, Dow, DuPont, Monsanto, and Syngenta. Purchases of raw products produced from farmers are dominated by Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, ConAgra, Smithfield, and Tyson/IBP. Food manufacturing giants that create most of the branded products on store shelves are Coca-Cola, Mars, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Philip Morris, and Unilever. And finally, a huge share of these products are sold to consumers at stores owned by Ahold (Stop and Shop, Giant, Tops), Albertsons (Hannaford, Shaw’s, Star Market), Carrefour, Kroger, Wal-Mart, and a few others.

The clout of the top food retailers in the world staggers the imagination. Wal-Mart has 5,760 stores in 13 countries, with $285 billion in sales. Carrefour has 11,080 stores in 37 countries, with $90 billion in sales. Ahold has 7,078 stores in 15 countries, with $65 billion in sales. Kroger operates 4,169 stores in the U.S., with $56 billion in retail sales. By comparison, the 120 food co-ops in the National Cooperative Grocers Association have annual retail sales of $625 million.

The situation is not unique to farming and food; a similar scenario exists in banking, books, hardware, movies, music…you name it, even beer. A handful of multinational corporations dominate in many specific market categories where new companies rarely succeed; those that do are purchased or run out of business.

Some people say that it is precisely this economic system that brings us abundant and cheap food. But the problem, according to the Agribusines
ness Accountability Initiative, is that “far too few consumers realize that they actually pay for their ‘cheap food’ three times: at the checkout counter, again through their tax bill, and finally by assuming the long-term social and environmental costs of unsustainable production methods. Thanks to market distortions, public subsidies, and tax avoidance, corporate oligopoly power in the food system actually results in a massive transfer of resources from farmers, workers, and consumers into the coffers of an ever-smaller number of transnational companies.”

A more subtle consequence of disproportionate corporate power in the food system is a “disconnect” between farms, food, communities, and healthy people. Instead, the focus is on development of false relationships with imaginary people and fake farms in order to create brand loyalty to lousy products. What’s lost is value-driven decision-making that honors our humanity, embraces the joy of stewardship, and celebrates the sanctity of life, albeit in some kind of balance with the need to turn a profit.

In this context, it’s no wonder that the United States is steadily losing farms, farmers, and farm processors, distributors, and market outlets; less farmland development, less agricultural chemical use, less reliance on wholesale commodity sales, less junk food sold to children.

It will take a progressive but realistic set of incentives to involve all the players we need. But most of these will turn out to be no-brainers with long-term analysis. Serving fresh, local food in schools will turn out to improve educational performance while reducing childhood obesity. In hospitals, the same food will enhance patient health and speed recovery. In colleges and universities, enrollment and retention will improve along with the menus. More farm stands and farmer’s markets will increase tourism revenues.

Agriculture and food processing is already an economic engine in Vermont, estimated to be worth $2.6 billion annually. Through meaningful “buy local” incentives for companies and institutions, we could aim to double this figure with a very small public investment.

We’ll need a lot of new farmers in our sustainable food system, and they don’t emerge out of thin air. In fact, they don’t even come from farms that much anymore. Vermont is already a very attractive place to the urban and suburban kids that are turning out to be the farmers of the future, but we can do much more to encourage people to make a career of farming. How about interest-free loans or small grants to help new farmers get started, a new farm venture capital fund, and a farmer’s retirement fund just like teachers have?

Vermont has done a great job of protecting farmland through the purchase of conservation easements, and that effort should continue, but even more needs to be done in the face of rising land values and development pressure. Local and regional officials, land-use planners, and agricultural commissions need to work together not only to identify the best farmland and how it can be protected, but also to raise funds for market development and infrastructure that will help farmers succeed economically on that land.

Innovation and stewardship are hallmarks of Vermont’s farms. We have farmers developing and using all kinds of renewable energy resources, from biodiesel to wind power to electricity from manure. There are new products appearing all the time, including winter-hardy grapes, artisan cheeses, and local meats. Nationwide, we lead the way in organic production on a per-capita basis, with more than 300 certified farms, including a booming organic dairy sector, up from three farms in 1994 to 78 last year. Let’s find simple and straightforward ways to encourage, recognize, and reward these farms for their good deeds, both in policy and in the marketplace.

Finally, we’ve got to take a page from the system we’re up against, by spreading the word and staying on message. Tell one, tell all, then tell them again:

“We grow the best food in Vermont; we sell the best food in Vermont; we eat the best food in Vermont.”

Fertile soil

As the most rural state in the nation in terms of percent of our population living in small towns, and as a state with a rich tradition of self-sufficiency and practicality, Vermont is an ideal place to bring a sustainable food system to life. Many of the components of the system already exist in various stages of development in Vermont, including a diversity of agricultural products, a wealth of creative farmers, a populace with an exceptional affinity for family farming and healthy food, and an unusually high proportion of “alternative” markets: independent grocers, general stores, food co-ops, farmer’s markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture (CSA), as well as restaurants and institutions that buy local as much as they can.

How can we bring this cauldron of possibility to a boil? It will take leadership from the top to put the necessary recipe of policies in place, and a critical mass of Vermonters to stir them to life. A wide range of individuals and organizations will be needed to participate in the creation of our sustainable food system. Mutually beneficial partnerships will have to be developed among diverse groups: state and local agencies, educational institutions, food companies, advocacy organizations, consumer groups, and farmers. But it can be done.

The first step is to develop a shared vision. Vermont really can be a place where a wide range of healthy food is produced on our own well-managed farms, where farmers earn a fair and stable profit, where communities enjoy economic development associated with local food commerce, and where people live better, longer, and happier lives because they eat well.

The vision has to be accompanied by measurable goals: more farms, more farmers, more food.
Republicanism and Size (Part 2 of 3 parts)

By Donald W. Livingston

(In Part 1 of this essay, published in the March 2006 issue of Vermont Commons, author Donald Livingston traced the historical development of the concept of the “republic” as an organized polity, and noted that size — primarily of population — was a criterion consistent among all successfully functioning republics. “The republican tradition is loud and clear in its proclamation that republican order . . . must be of a human scale, which we have taken to be . . . in the range of between 50,000 and 200,000. The tradition also teaches that if a regime grew to great size it would necessarily lose its self-governing republican character and become a centralized monarchy, no matter what it called itself.”)

At the end of Part I, Livingston was discussing the choices faced by the American colonies after their successful secession from Britain.)

So Americans thought to escape monarchy by choosing federation, and desired each state a sovereign republic. But a problem remained. Each state might have satisfied the first four conditions of republicanism mentioned earlier: 1. sovereignty resides in the people or their representatives; 2. all citizens are equal before the law; 3. all citizens should have a measure of economic independence, or factions and tyranny will result; 4. necessity of a legal code rooted in nature and tradition; 5 republics must be small. But none satisfied the fifth. They were all too large for republics — having been drawn not by republican criteria but by the British Crown. The territorial boundaries of each American state were artifacts of monarchy. So there was the real threat that each state could become centralized, thereby destroying self-government in the smaller “republican” political units within it.

The largest state was Virginia, which had conquered from England the vast Northwest Territory stretching up to Canada. Richard Lee urged the Virginia legislature to cede this vast territory to the Union rather than govern it as a colonial possession, which, he said, would necessarily turn Virginia into a monarchy. So real was this possibility for each state that William Rawle, in one of the earliest works on the Constitution (A View of the Constitution, Philadelphia, 1825) went out of his way to argue that if a state should become a monarchy (and he said it could, since the states are sovereign), it would have to leave the Union, which is constitutionally a federation of republics.

The fundamental problem of U.S. politics after secession from Britain was to find a way to guarantee republican government within the out-of-scale territory each state had acquired from the Crown. The thing was not impossible, because even under monarchy Americans had experienced “republican” life as an order of small self-governing Protestant communities in a nearly universal agricultural world. No urban center at the time of the Declaration of Independence had a population of more than 35,000.

Nor is it a contradiction to speak of republican polities under monarchy. We should consider that although a republic should be small and as self-sufficient as possible, no republic is an island unto itself. The smaller it is, the more it needs to trade with the world around it for things it cannot produce itself, and the more vulnerable it is to being conquered. So every republic will have to form trade and security agreements with surrounding polities, and in doing so will sacrifice some of its liberty. But it will remain “republican” to the degree that it is self-governing in respect to the five criteria mentioned above. Economic integration on a vast scale does not require political integration. (Switzerland and little Iceland are economically integrated with the world but are not politically integrated with other states.)

So Americans enjoyed small-scale “republican” life under monarchy. The question was whether they would continue to enjoy it under the newly-created states — the territorial boundaries of which were of a scale requiring monarchical centralization.

There were two ways republican liberty could be preserved. One was to divide the states through secession in the direction of a human republican scale. Virginia ceded her vast Northwest Territory to the Union in order to remain republican. Later, Virginia would also allow the western part to secede and form the state of Kentucky. North Carolina allowed secession of its western territory to form the state of Tennessee. Massachusetts allowed the secession of Maine. It is significant that the Constitution makes no provision for acquiring new territory.

Assume, then, that the territory of the Union is fixed at the boundaries drawn by the Treaty of Paris (1783). In that case, the political logic of republicanism would require the continual division of states by secession in the direction of a more human scale of political order. The result might have been 50 or more small sovereign states today in the territory of the original 13 states, rather than the 50 large states we have today on a continental scale.

Each of the 50 states within the original territory would still be large and could be divided into even smaller republican cantonal states, each having a high degree of autonomy. This was Jefferson’s ideal for Virginia. He greatly admired the New England Town Meeting system, which he saw as so many human-scale republics disposed in a larger sphere. And he proposed that Virginia be divided into small “ward republics” having considerable autonomy over local matters. This would yield a system similar to Switzerland — a small state (a little over half the size of South Carolina), containing four languages and divided into 27 cantonal states, each with considerable autonomy. America could have developed into a federation of Swiss-size republics, themselves divided into Jeffersonian “ward republics.”

So the Jeffersonian solution to the problem of republicanism within the monarchical-scale territory of an American state was to “republicanize” the territory through secession and division in the direction of human-scale republics. Hamilton’s contrary vision was to consolidate the states into one vast empire where the states would be reduced to administrative units of the central government. In this vision the language of republicanism would still be used, but the essential criteria of size and scale would be set aside. After 1865, one would no longer speak of America in the plural — as a federation of republican states each with its own way of life to enjoy and defend — but of a single republic of continental size, “one and indivisible.”

Or as the Supreme Court in its fanciful ruling in Texas vs. White (1869), would put it: the American polity is not “indestructible Union, composed of indestructible States.” This new political ethic of “indivisibility” would have a chilling effect on the primordial Jeffersonian ethic of republicanizing its monarchical-scale territories by dividing states, through secession, into smaller polities. The treaty that annexed Texas to the Union allowed its division into five states, but it has not happened. Twenty-seven counties of northern California voted in 1992 to secede and form the 51st state, but the legislature of California would not allow it — unlike the legislature of Virginia which ceded the Northwest Territory to the Union and allowed the secession of Kentucky. Every American state has come to imitate the Union in thinking of itself as a centralized state (i.e., a “monarchy”), “one and indivisible.”

Wordplay

The Jeffersonian republican spirit in the United States has been massively suppressed. But, as in the case of the Roman Empire, its republican language survives and is used to legitimate spectacular transfers of power to the central government that no 18th-century absolute monarch could have imagined. The political party effecting this revolution would, perversely, call itself “the Republican Party,” and henceforth a centralized continental empire would be referred to as the “Republic.”

The United States empire could be said to be a republic in the superficial sense of allowing representatives, voting, etc. But even these concepts lose their meaning when detached from the essential context of size and scale. Genuine republican representation (and recall that Rousseau’s small
Genetic engineering has significantly helped drive corporate consolidation in agriculture. Monsanto, the genetically engineered (GE) seed varieties now (along with Dow Chemical) for essentially all of Syngenta and DuPont – are also among the world's largest pesticide producers, and are responsible of 88 percent of the world's GE crop acreage.

What was the catalyst in this revolution in language whereby republicanism was transmuted into its opposite? It was not through argument. The Jeffersonian persuasion more or less dominated throughout the antebellum period. The change was made possible by a sudden and vast increase in the territorial size of the American polity. The Louisiana Purchase (1803) more than doubled the territory controlled by the United States, the size of which was already stretched to the breaking point for the purposes of republicanism. Ironically, it was President Jefferson who initiated this expansion. And later conquests from Mexico would extend territory to the Pacific.

Although the Jeffersonian persuasion would dominate in speech, the central government would gradually succumb to the temptation to govern its far-flung western territories as colonies in the same way the British had governed its colonies on the eastern seaboard. So, in the end, it was a disregard of size and scale that would subvert the United States' experiment in republicanism.

But human-scale republicanism did not go down without a fight. From 1803 to 1860 some interesting proposals were put forth for reconciling republicanism with the unprecedented challenge of size posed by the Louisiana Purchase and later westward expansion to the Pacific.

But that is a topic for the next essay. In the meantime, we can no longer use the terms “republic” and “republican” with innocence, but must be prepared to explain exactly what we mean or cannot mean by them.

Resistance lives

These facts and figures may appear insurmountable, but all around the world, people are saying no to corporate food, reclaiming the ability – and the right – to make basic choices about how our food is grown and how we obtain it. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have become a leading symbol of this resistance, with farmers' organizations around the world often leading the opposition. In much of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, GMOs are at the center of highly visible and persistent public controversies, and more than 30 countries have adopted labeling rules and import restrictions, resisting pressure from the United States and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to step back and simply accept this disruptive and dangerous technology.

It is no accident that Vermont has been a leader in resisting genetic engineering in the U.S. Vermonters are very concerned about the quality of our food, and share a concern and identification with those who grow our food that has been all but obliterated in much of the U.S. It is Europe's distinct food cultures that have driven the resistance there to GMOs and agribusiness control. In this respect, by moving toward a more conscious culture with respect to our food, Vermont may have more in common with Europe than almost any other place in the United States. More than 80 Vermont towns are on record supporting GMO labeling and, in most cases, a moratorium on growing these crops – a distinction we share with 15 towns elsewhere in New England, as well as three northern California counties, where enforceable bans on raising GE crops and livestock have been enacted.

In the countries of the global South – the so-called “developing world” – agriculture remains far more central to people’s everyday experience, livelihood, and traditions. From India and Korea to Brazil and parts of Africa, militant farmers' organizations have emerged in recent years and joined with farmer activists from Europe and North America to create a global “peasant movement” known as La Via Campesina. Via Campesina has intervened in numerous international over the past decade, and has developed the concept of food sovereignty as a centerpiece of its demands toward various international agencies.

“Food sovereignty” is defined by Via Campesina as people’s fundamental right to define their own agricultural and food policies. This includes prioritizing agricultural production to feed people, rather than for export; protecting farmers' right to land, water, seeds and credit; and granting countries the power to protect local agriculture from the common practice of food dumping. Since the 1990s, agribusiness companies, mostly from the U.S., have been unloading, or dumping surplus commodities on international markets, thereby undercutting the value of local food in the recipient countries. Food sovereignty advocates support fair trade and have been in the forefront of resisting the myths of “free trade” advanced by the U.S. government and the WTO.

Just as the sum of many small, local efforts has helped restrain the unchecked spread of genetic engineering and other excesses of corporate globalization, a similar convergence of local efforts can help us grow toward a healthier, more-sustainable future. A year after Mendocino County in California became the first county in the U.S. to completely ban the raising of GMOs, people in the
town of Willits and neighboring communities launched a regional “Economic Localization Project,” inspired by awareness of the looming peak in world oil production. For a growing number of Americans, “peak oil” represents the end of the unchecked expansion of the petroleum-based economy and an imperative to create a way of life that can withstand what analyst Michael Klare has termed the “permanent energy crisis.”

The WELL (Willits Economic Localization) meets biweekly, and has encouraged the creation of more than a dozen projects to further the aim of energy and food self-reliance in central Mendocino County. They are developing community gardens, a barter market, a school gardens project, and an effort to green their new community hospital. Other towns in the region have formed a biodiesel co-op, organized bulk purchase of fruit (and olives!) trees, and even started a yak cooperative. They’ve brought renewable energy technologies to area schools and organized local food tastings, along with a wide array of other educational and celebratory events. Last fall, Jason Bradford, one of the founders of WELL, produced a detailed study of his town’s food needs and how they can be met locally.

‘Going local’ in Vermont

Of course, food self-reliance is a more readily achievable goal in northern California than here in Vermont, but we are also beginning to see some heartening steps in that direction. One group of 20 Upper Valley residents pledged this past January to only eat foods from within a 100-mile radius for the entire month. They relied on a local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm – Luna Bleu – which provides stored produce all winter; on Butterworks Farm’s dried beans, wheat, corn and sunflower oil; and on diverse local sources of dairy products, bread, maple syrup, honey, and meats. It helped, of course, that they had planned ahead and put by an ample supply of produce from last year’s gardens. They also relied on the active support of the Upper Valley Co-op in White River Junction, whose manager, Kye Cochran, is renowned as a dedicated local food and GE-free advocate.

In another local effort, the Addison County Re-localization Network (known as ACORN), has undertaken a detailed mapping of the county’s energy and food needs. ACORN is working toward online partnering of growers and buyers, innovative ways for food processors to share needs, and an effort to strengthen agricultural zoning. One aim is to make it more difficult for prime agricultural land to be converted to other uses, a problem that has escalated rapidly in recent decades throughout much of the Champlain Valley. The efforts of ACORN and kindred groups across Vermont are profiled online at www.vtpeakoil.net.

Vermont has a vital network of farmers markets and CSAs. Many growers plant a little extra every year to supply local food shelves. Burlington’s Intervale features some of the most vital and collaborative urban farms in the entire country. NOFA and the Vermont Grass Growers are helping struggling dairy farms make the transition to more sustainable methods. Thanks to FoodWorks in Montpelier, many Vermont schools have active food gardens and horticulture programs.

But more is needed. Even a couple of decades ago, there were many more local canneries for local produce, and freezer lockers and slaughterhouses to serve those who raised animals for meat. Today we have more artisanal cheesemakers than ever before, but Vermont’s largest cheesemaker, Cabot, has been steadily moving its production out of state since its 1993 purchase by the regional giant AgriMark.

Two policy initiatives are being debated in Montpelier this year that can help further the goal of increased food self-reliance. One bill (H. 456) would provide small grants to schools (up to $10,000 each) to develop working relationships with local farmers and food processors, and also provide training and processing assistance for school food-service personnel to bring more local products into their kitchens. Another (H. 654) addresses the link between food self-reliance and emergency management, and would bring together emergency planners, municipal officials, and regional planning commissions in a coordinated effort to strengthen and expand local food and energy supplies in preparation for potential future shortages.

Another crucial policy area is helping farmers through the costly transition to organic and sustainable production methods. When he was first nominated by Governor Douglas, Agriculture Secretary Steven Kerr paid significant lip service to the idea of state aid to farmers who wish to transition to organic production. This idea has languished over the past four years, and needs to be a central element in any meaningful plan to help sustain Vermont farms and farmers. In Europe, public support for organic transitions has been widely available, and has hugely benefited the land, farmers, and consumers. In Austria, 10 percent of the farms are organic (50 percent in the alpine Salzburg province), with a 10-fold increase during the 1990s once state support became available for organic conversions. Vermont should be able to do this as well.

Can all these efforts toward increased food self-reliance in Vermont meet the dual challenge of responding to future crises and sustaining a high quality of life for all Vermonters? Can local alternatives challenge the influence of agribusiness giants like Monsanto over our lives, and also meaningfully serve those who are unable to pay more for high-quality local food? One of the strengths of the GE-Free Vermont movement over the years has been its insistence that we will not promote the idea of a niche market for safe, healthy food while those who are less fortunate among us are limited to increasingly hazardous corporate food. A sustainable future – a future of genuine food sovereignty – is only possible if healthy, local food is available to everyone, regardless of their economic status, family history, or access to land.

In the best Vermont tradition, we can work collaboratively with our neighbors to create a greener future for us all.

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Gardening has become a popular hobby in the United States. Although some people who garden plan on providing their family with food year-round from their venture, most do so to enjoy the freshest produce available as a supplement to what they purchase at stores or farmers’ markets. In general, gardens beyond a small ornamental planting tend to be restricted to locations with larger lots. Exceptions to this have been found in community urban gardens, located in places such as New York City and Washington, D.C. But gardens are a viable option even on a small city lot such as can be found in Burlington or Montpelier. There is a good deal of history in urban gardens. During World War II the U.S. government urged citizens to plant “victory gardens” in order to provide fresh food locally to their family and community, allowing for more food to be sent to feed the troops. Americans responded to this, producing up to 40 percent of the food consumed in the country in home gardens.

More recently, the combination of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the continuing U.S. trade embargo led to a severe reduction in imported food, oil, and fertilizers in Cuba. To ward off starvation, the Cuban government urged citizens to plant gardens and raise livestock. The government provides extension specialists in urban agriculture, information, and sales of gardening supplies. In Havana, Cuba’s largest city, approximately 90 percent of its produce is grown locally in small gardens and urban “farms.” In 1997, this also included 7.5 million eggs and more than 3,600 tons of meat!

Why should we concern ourselves with growing food at home when it is so readily available for sale at stores? Well, a number of reasons come to mind. An obvious one is that nothing tastes better, or is more nutritious, than just-picked produce: strawberries and tomatoes still warm from the sun, crispy lettuce, sweet peas, and more.

Food security is another issue. The oil crisis has garnered much attention recently. Currently, much of our food comes with “frequent flier” baggage, traveling an average of 1,500 miles before it lands on our plates. It is estimated that every calorie of food takes 10 calories to produce and transport. This does not appear to be sustainable over the long term. Increasing costs for fuel will be passed on to consumers, causing food prices to rise, and importing food that can be grown locally – using precious fuel and adding to greenhouse gas emissions – us clearly a losing proposition.

As well, what if production or transportation of food were to be hindered, either by fuel shortages, severe weather, a disease pandemic, terrorist actions, or other events? Wouldn’t you feel a greater sense of security if you were able to feed your family a significant portion of its diet from food you grew at home or nearby?

If you’ve got access to any land at all, either in your own yard, a vacant piece nearby, or at a friend’s house, you can grow a significant amount of food. Even if all you’ve got is a condo with a patio or balcony, if it gets a reasonable amount of sun you can grow some food.

Start by assessing the land you’ve got available. If your land is growing grass, marigolds or whatever, it can grow food. If you’re looking at planting in a small urban space, it’s important to abandon the headset of a garden that consists of long rows of vegetables separated by wide strips of tilled soil. Edible plants can be grown wherever there is soil, water, and light. Your land can be steeply sloping, border your driveway, or occupy your front lawn; it doesn’t matter, as long as those three prerequisites.

Soil fertility is a must; the greater the fertility, the better the crop. It is good to ascertain the pH of your soil; other than a few crops such as blueberries, most prefer a somewhat neutral pH. This can be tested either with a low-cost kit or through UVM. In this area, the usual problem is a low pH, easily remedied with applications of wood ash or lime.

If you’ve got the space, I would recommend raised beds. These can either be framed or unframed. Mark out an area approximately four feet wide by however long you desire. Turn over the soil, remove weeds and grass, add compost and other fertilizer, and then plant. Raised beds allow for a greater density of planting and don’t waste precious space with wide rows, important in an urban garden. Additionally, once they are developed they can be tended from the sides, preventing needless compaction. If you want to frame your beds, anything that is non-toxic can be used. I suggest avoiding all treated lumber. I have used slab wood, obtained from sawmills, and nailed the ends together. This provides a cheap yet serviceable framing material. Although there are fans of “double dug” beds out there, I personally don’t think it’s worth the time and energy. Regular applications of compost and other organic materials will produce a well-drained and loose soil.

Speaking of compost – you do compost, of course! This too can be done anywhere. There are some nice composters, made of plastic, that are attractive enough for any city lot. More rustic ones can be constructed by tying four pallets together stretched around tomato stakes hammered into the ground will also work. The general concept is to contain the material to be composted while keeping out the neighborhood dogs.

What materials can be composted? All of your kitchen scraps, weeds, grass, and leaves are suitable. Although there are complicated ways of composting, involving layers, and all sorts of admonishments on what not to compost, I use it all. I follow the static pile method, which basically means that eventually it will all rot – producing organic compost! If you have access to animal manure (not cat or dog, however), add that as well.

What to grow? Well the first rule would be to grow what you like. If you don’t eat it, why waste space growing it? Keep your space in mind, however. Without a good deal of land, crops such as pumpkins or corn are usually not advised. Grow vertical whenever possible, using trellises.

One mistake home gardeners often make is to plant the garden on Memorial Day weekend, and that’s a mistake! In Vermont, you can plant some crops as early as April, such as peas, spinach, broccoli, radishes, and many greens. Think succession planting. Don’t leave any space bare. As the early spinach bolts, replace it with beans or carrots, for instance. Aim for a variety of maturity dates.

Season-extension materials such as Remay will protect your crops from mild early or late frosts. Think winter storage crops, as well. Many, such as potatoes, carrots, leeks, onions, garlic, beets, and winter squash, will keep nicely in a cool spot, perhaps a back bedroom or basement. Read up on techniques for preserving the harvest. Information is available in numerous publications.

Fruit can also be successfully grown in small spaces. Blueberry bushes make wonderful ornamental plantings and can be used instead of common foundation bushes. Plant varieties that grow well in Vermont include Patriot, Blue Ray, and Blue Crop. Plant a minimum of two kinds for pollination. Dwarf varieties can be grown in patio pots.

Strawberries can be grown in planters if space is at a premium. Raspberries can be grown in a trelis row. Grapes will happily exist anywhere they can climb, up a porch support or against a shed in a sunny spot. If you’ve got room for a tree or two, why not plant an apple or pie cherry tree instead of an ornamental that doesn’t bear fruit?

For those with no land, or only shaby growing spaces, container gardening is a worthwhile option. There are many possible types of containers, including purchased plastic or clay pots, half whiskey barrels, food-grade plastic buckets obtained from a bakery or deli, and even a child’s wading pool. Fill them with a mix of soil and compost and don’t forget drainage holes. Place them wherever they will have sun. Water often, as they will have a tendency to dry out easily.

Perhaps there is a vacant piece of land in the area? This could become a community garden. There are community gardens currently operating throughout Vermont, which charge minimal plot rental fees, providing camaraderie as well as gardening advice, shared seeds and supplies, and community. The Vermont Community Garden Network, newly formed in 2005 under the auspices of the Friends of Burlington Gardens, just hosted more than 100 people from 50 communities in Vermont at a one-day conference held at Gardener’s Supply. To further assist Vermont community gardens, “mini-grant” awards and technical assistance for community garden projects are now being offered.

So, this spring, just grow where you’re planted! Remember, when it comes to Green Mountain independence, V is for “Vermont Victory” garden!

Readers: E-mail us your favorite gardening resource at editor@vtcommons.org – book, web site, etc. – and we’ll host it at our blog! •
Local Food in Vermont: Mixed Messages

By David Timmons

Standing in a cash-register line at a University of Vermont commissary, I’m pleasantly surprised to see a sign listing the benefits of local food: taste, nutrition, energy conservation, and community. I glance down at the bottle of Vermont apple cider in my hand, and mentally pat myself on the back. But looking around at shelves full of national-name packaged foods and snacks, I wonder how one looks at it. On one hand, agricultural production in my hand, and mentally pat myself on the back. But looking around at shelves full of national-name packaged foods and snacks, I wonder how much of the food for sale could really be from Vermont. The local food sign and the shelf stock don’t convey the same message.

The answer to the question of how much Vermont food might be local depends on how one looks at it. On one hand, agricultural production in Vermont is strong. In 2002 (at the last USDA Census of Agriculture), Vermont farmers raised $473 million of agricultural products (farm gate value), or $767 per Vermonter, more than the U.S. average $696 per capita. This suggests Vermont farmers could feed Vermont. A 1976 study by Burrell and Nolfi also found that Vermont had enough farmland to produce a typical American diet. Using the 1976 land-use figures and 2002 population and land-availability numbers, we find that Vermont still has enough land for food self-sufficiency, despite population growth and loss of agricultural land since 1976 (though self-sufficiency will not long be possible if farmland loss continues). Historically, most important food crops were raised in Vermont: beef and potato production in the state peaked in 1840, pork, wheat, and bean production peaked in 1850, oats peaked in 1880, corn (for grain) and apples in 1900, chicken and pears in 1910, cherries and strawberries in 1940, and eggs in 1960 (dairy production is currently near its all-time high).

Vermont is clearly capable of feeding itself. On the other hand, current production is not particularly diverse. If food trucks stopped running tomorrow, we would have plenty of dairy products, and shortages of almost everything else; the supplies of local meat, poultry, eggs, grains, beans, fruits and vegetables are all less than amounts consumed. Taking lack of diversity into account, Vermont produces at most 38 percent of its food, even if every potentially local food item stayed in the state. But much of the production that could provide local food is in fact exported; actual food self-sufficiency is much less than 38 percent (and harder to measure). By U.S. standards, Vermont’s agricultural diversity is quite low. Thirty-one states have more potential than Vermont to feed themselves (Minnesota ranking number-one at 88 percent), though Vermont leads all New England states except Maine. And there are two obstacles to more food self-sufficiency: the state would need to both raise a wider variety of crops and livestock, and to develop the industries to process these into foodstuffs.

On the third hand (economists need lots of hands), Vermont is at the center of a renaissance of farmers’ markets, farm stands, and other forms of direct sales from farmers to consumers. Nationally, direct sales doubled between 1992 and 2002, and in Vermont increased by a factor of 2.4. Direct sales exclude sales at grocery stores, co-ops, restaurants, and sales of processed foods; for these and other reasons, direct sales represent only a small portion of total local food activity. But direct sales are arguably the best indicator of consumer interest in and demand for local foods, likely the most critical component of a local food system.

And here Vermont excels, with the highest per-capita direct sales of the 50 United States, at 5.5 times the national average. While tourists and others passing through undoubtedly assist in this effort, tourism alone does not account for Vermont’s high direct sales. Vermonters buy more food from local farmers than do most Americans.

So what might cause Vermonters to raise and consume more of their own food?

Agricultural economists express market food cost as the sum of production cost and cost of transport to market. Historically, transportation costs were more significant. Writing in about energy demand continues to rise while fossil fuel supplies ebb. And even current transportation may be more expensive than it appears, since the market price of fuel does not reflect its full cost to society (“externalities” like oil spills and global warming are not counted as transportation costs). A 2001 paper by Redefining Progress compared eight studies on the external costs of gasoline, including costs like car accidents, time lost to congestion, and environmental damage. The average additional cost per gallon calculated was $4.54, which, added to a market price of $2.50 would result in a real gasoline cost of $7.04 per gallon. Higher transportation costs – from fuel scarcity and/or taxes designed to reflect real social costs – would return an historic advantage to Vermont farmers and result in more local food production and consumption.

Agricultural location theory also assumes that foods are commodities, that one apple is the same as the next. But local-food adherents, like those who buy organic, reject this premise. Consumers may value the place of production as an attribute of the food, one for which they may pay a higher price. Research indicates that reasons consumers prefer local food include freshness and nutritional value, preserving local farms and helping the local economy, and environmental benefits – what we might call “internalized values.” Even though the market price of gasoline is not $7 per gallon, some consumers may mentally assign such a cost to fuel, and make purchasing decisions accordingly. Through their food purchases, people may also express values around helping the local economy, preserving local farms and farmland, and better securing long-term food supplies. Demand for local food can outweigh minimum production cost as a determinant of local agricultural production. And demand for local food is strong in Vermont.

Thus there are mixed signals about Vermont local food. Vermonters did feed themselves. Vermonters could feed themselves again. Though at the moment Vermonters don’t feed themselves, compared to most Americans, Vermonters are particularly inclined towards food from their own state. While larger forces in the outside world may ultimately steer Vermont (and all localities) toward more local food production, in the short term local food utilization is most likely to grow because of demand for fresher food, and by people expressing other internalized values through their local food purchases.
VERMONT LIBRE  By Thomas Naylor

LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES: RELICS OF THE PAST

When former Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards and Illinois Democratic Senator Barack Obama recently spoke to packed houses in Burlington, they provided glaring evidence that there is “nothing new under the sun” in mainstream U.S. two-party politics. Both delivered speeches laced with pseudo-liberal blather, Obama delivering a “call to action” similar to Howard Dean’s 2004 “Take Back America” campaign. As Edwards and Obama recited one liberal Democratic cliché after another, a discerning listener couldn’t help but be struck by how completely irrelevant the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have become in today’s 21st century world. Those who openly identify themselves with either of the terms are anachronistic and out of touch with reality.

Both liberals and conservatives claim to be individualists, all the while behaving as worldclass conformists, who are consumed by affluenza, technomania, e-mania, and megalomania. Conservatives like big business, big military projects, and big prisons. Liberals are drawn to big cities, big social welfare programs, and big government, the same big government that is owned, operated, and controlled by Corporate America which they abhor.

Liberals are indecisive moral relativists who tend to whine and believe that only the federal government can solve all of our problems. Conservatives, on the other hand, are tough-talking, mean-spirited, free-market zealots, who want to privatize everything in sight. They are often drawn to religious fundamentalism. Many conservatives and some liberals support President George W. Bush’s foreign policies of full spectrum dominance and imperial overstretch, both of which are grounded in the doctrine of might makes right. They are big on revenge.

President Bill Clinton proved a conservative Republican disguised as a liberal Democrat. He granted Republicans their every wish. Clinton called for more trade, more budget cuts, more privatization, more foreign investment, more mega-mergers, more computer networks, less government control, lower interest rates, and more economic growth. He wanted everything to be bigger, faster, more complex, more high-tech, and more interdependent—bigger markets, bigger trade agreements, bigger financial institutions, and bigger telecommunication networks. Every time his political ratings dropped he would bomb some Third World country, and most Americans loved it.

Conservatives don’t want anyone messing with the distribution of income and wealth. They like things the way they are. Liberals want the government to decide what is fair. Liberals believe in multiculturalism, affirmative action, and minority rights. Conservatives favor states’ rights over minority rights.

What liberals and conservatives have in common is that they are both into having—owning, possessing, controlling, and manipulating money, power, people, material wealth, and things. Having is one of the ways Americans deal with the human condition—separation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, and death. To illustrate how irrelevant the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have become, consider the case of Sweden and Switzerland, two of the most prosperous countries in the world.

Sweden is the stereotypical democratic socialist state with a strong central government, relatively high taxes, a broad social welfare net financed by the State, and a strong social conscience. Switzerland is the most free market country in the world, with the weakest central government, and the most decentralized social welfare system. Both are affluent, clean, green, healthy, well-educated, democratic, nonviolent, politically neutral, and among the most sustainable nations in all of history. By U.S. standards, they are both tiny.

Switzerland and Sweden work, not because of political ideology, but rather because the politics of human scale always trumps the politics of the left and the politics of the right. Under the politics of human scale, a politics that trumps our now-outdated and useless “liberal-versus-conservative” dualistic mindset, there would be but one fundamental question: “Is it too big?”

The Vermont Sovereignty Declaration

R ecent actions by the United States government, including the prosecution of illegal wars, the PATRIOT Act, the illegal rendition of “terrorist suspects,” prisoner abuse and torture, citizen surveillance, violations of our constitutional rights, the suspension of habeas corpus, a foreign policy based on full spectrum dominance and imperial overstretch, and a culture of deceit have all given rise to legitimate concern that under circumstances of its own choosing, the federal government might not rule out (1) the suspension of the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights, (2) the declaration of martial law, (3) the militarization of civilian police functions, (4) the suspension of free elections, (5) the usurpation of individual property rights, or (6) the negation of the Second Amendment right to bear arms.

In light of these troubling developments, the People of Vermont hereby reaffirm (1) our right of sovereignty, (2) our right to nullify acts of the central government deemed to be unconstitutional, (3) our right to secede from the Union, and (4) our right to call a statewide Convention to decide whether or not Vermont remains in the Union.

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It is understood from the beginning that there are many varied groups with secession as the core of their strategy, and it is unlikely that there will be any full consensus on platforms or goals. But if we can assemble articulate and active representatives from serious, ongoing groups that are working in their various ways to push the idea of secession at a regional, state, or multi-state level, we are convinced that we can advance the cause of secession throughout the continent and pave the way for some genuine successes.

The Middlebury Institute is willing to underwrite the travel costs for some of those representatives, especially from the Western reaches of the continent, who are unable to pay their own way. We are unable to absorb the two-night hotel room fees, but we will provide a conference room for a Saturday meeting and a banquet on Saturday night.

Individuals from real, active, serious, and ongoing secessionist and separatist organizations—please, no individual secessionists or the like—are urged to contact the Director@Middleburyinstitute.net if they wish to take part in the first North American Secessionist Convention.

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from about 12,000 to about 8,000 years ago, agriculture became the established way of life for the great majority of the world’s people—and when I say “way of life” I mean that in the fullest sense. Agriculture was not simply a way of getting food, satisfying one basic human need. Agriculture cemented in the human mind the psychology by which people understood their world: it was we who chose what seeds to plant and where, what forests to cut down, what weeds to pull, what fields to fire, what waters to divert, in short what species were to live and die, and when and how. Agriculture was a superb demonstration that humans could control nature (or believe they could); that humans could literally domesticate nature and place it under regular and systematic human will and design.

Hunting had certainly had its impact on local ecosystems, especially hunting to extinction as had happened all over the world in the preceding few millennia, but for the most part and the longest time it was no more harmful to nature as a whole than any other species’ predation. Now, with deforestation, dams and irrigation, soil exhaustion, extensive settlements, and all that goes with agriculture, almost all natural systems were disrupted and degraded. We were declaring war not just on a species but a world.

That portentious attitude was surely behind the thinking that led to the next round of domestication: of fellow creatures. Like the planting and harvesting of grains, this seems to have begun in the Fertile Crescent, which had four of the easiest mammalian species to domesticate—goat, pig, sheep, and cow—out of the only 14 species that have ever allowed themselves to fall under human control. Whatever possessed humans to think of and carry through such a process is lost in the pre-historical mists, but we can assume that once they had fenced in wheat fields for convenient food (and protection from being eaten by other species) it was not that much of a leap to try to fence in animals (or at least to control herds) for convenient food. Thus the domestication of animals—"enslavement" might be a more appropriate word—joined that of plants.

Agriculture had numerous consequences, mostly deleterious, which is why a sober academic like Jared Diamond, a physiologist at the U.C.L.A. School of Medicine who has studied it extensively, could call agriculture “the worst mistake in the history of the human race.”

Perhaps the first important consequence was an increase in population numbers and densities. Farming and herding allow a significantly higher yield per acre of land than hunting and foraging, and wheat and barley in particular are highly productive, so larger populations could be supported—100 times greater than hunting societies—and larger populations are what farmers always want anyway, given the laboriousness of their job. This was apparently achieved in most places by women giving birth to more children during their reproductive years, birth intervals being much shorter for farm families that can wean infants on to milk and gruel and not have to extend female lactation (and hence infertility) for years as hunting families must. In a very short period of time clan sites became villages, villages proliferated, and some of them grew into small, densely packed cities, of 1,000 (Jericho) and even 5,000 people (Catal Huyuk).

But think of what this means. Sedentary communities of more than 50 people are living as no one had ever lived before: they would need to create all sorts of new political, economic, cultural, and social institutions and policies to handle complexities at those scales. Gone the ancient rules of reciprocity for no good reason is going to give his hungry neighbors one of his animals for dinner, as was regularly done in hunting bands when the men came in with a catch, or he would soon be impoverished. Gone too the life of limited possessions imposed on mobile hunting societies, for now with a sedentary population, one could have all the possessions one could accumulate, from goats to grindstones and animals to acres, and the more the better.

Population accumulations and densities had other consequences. Diseases, many from the domesticated animal populations now living in close proximity to humans for the first time, had fertile territory in which to spread, and communicable “crowd diseases” flourished (measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis from cattle, for example, flu and pertussis from pigs, plus plague and cholera) that would have died out in the small populations of hunter-gatherers. It is little wonder that human life spans quite rapidly grew shorter—hunter-gatherer women on average reached the age of 40, men 50 or even 60, but agriculturalist longevity was in general 10 years shorter.

Another apparent effect of crowding was a decrease in body size, because when populations expanded to the limit of their food-growing, as farming settlements inevitably do, then, as the British Museum’s Christopher Stringer explains, “humans therefore had to drop in either number or size, and evolved the latter course.” Average body height of the Sapiens hunters was about 6 feet, of the women maybe 5 feet 5 inches, but as early as 5,000 years ago the average height of agriculturalists was 5 feet 3 inches for men and 5 feet for women. Even more alarming was a decrease in brain size, of 8 to 10 percent, after the beginning of agriculture, perhaps as a result of the tediousness and repetitiveness of farming and herding as well as a response to the social overload of larger settlements, and possibly also because the continual concentration and information-processing of the hunter in the wild was no longer necessary.

Food surpluses proved another feature of agricultural societies because of the productivity of their concentrated fields, and this, coupled with better techniques for storage of grain and its protection from rot and rodents, allowed farmers in good harvest years to contribute their surplus grains to a communal grain supply. This in turn fed the development of two characteristics that were carried over from late-on hunting societies, division of labor and hierarchy—but now in just a few millennia came to have an increasingly decisive economic and social role in the life of agriculturalists.

Because of surpluses there could be full-time artisans and potters who would be supported from the communal granary, full-time shamans, full-time laborers for dams and irrigation ditches, full-time guards to protect the village from predators human and otherwise, full-time accountants to regulate the collection, storage, and distribution of grain—and full-tim e rulers, the high-status chiefs who would have had to try to bring order to such a complicated society and see that all these tasks were efficiently done. The hierarchy that had been resorted to in the hunter-gatherer world at times of stress now evolved into a full-blown stratified “class society.”

And here’s the kicker: in the end, agriculture always failed. It was an environmental assault on the earth that was almost never sustainable for much more than a few centuries without disruption and devastation: in the long history of empires dependent on agriculture and irrigation (Babylonia, Sumeria, Assyria, Carthage, Mesoopotamia, Egypt, Inca, Aztec) we may read the story over and over again, of the exhaustion and salinization of the land, the destruction of forests, the overgrazing of fields, the compaction of soils, the extinction of wild animals, the silting and salting of rivers, the alteration of climate, erosion, desertification—and, as agriculture and its attendant systems began to fail, the revolt of the underclasses, or the collapse of the imperial systems, or the invasion of outsiders, or often all three. Nature always ended up having her revenge: of all the places where agriculture started, only one, central China, remains a productive agricultural area today; the rest are deserts or jungles.

As the story of agriculture makes clear, the domination of the earth can come only at a price, and as we can tell today, the price may well be the despoliation of the earth and the destruction of human systems, perhaps the decimation of the species itself.