



## **IN HARMONY WITH NATURE**

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

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

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

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

We can quite easily kill insects, diseases, weeds and parasites using modern chemical pesticides. This has allowed us to realise the lower food prices brought about by a specialised, mechanised, standardised industrial agriculture but we still loose about the same percentage of our crops to pests as we did in earlier times. In addition, health concerns about pesticide residues in our food supplies and in our drinking water are on the rise. In addition, rural communities have withered and died and industrial agriculture has replaced the family farms. Good paying jobs in the city are no longer there for people forced off the land. How many more pests can we afford to kill before we kill ourselves? How many more workers can we displace before we displace ourselves? How many more battles with Mother Nature can we afford to win?

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

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

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

The industrial model of the past, and present, was based on the assumption that the welfare of people was in conflict with the welfare of nature. People had to harvest, mine and otherwise exploit nature, including people, to create more goods and services for consumption. Human productivity is defined in terms of one’s ability to produce goods and services that will be bought and consumed by others. Quality of life is viewed a consequence of consumption – something we can buy at Walmart or Disney World. The more we produce, the more we earn, the more we can consume, and the higher our quality of life. The more we can take from nature, and each other, the higher our quality of life.

The sustainable model is based on the assumption that people are multidimensional – that we are physical, mental and spiritual beings. We have a mind and soul as well as a body. All three determine the quality of our life – what we think and what we feel as well as what we consume. And, the three are as inseparable as the height, width and length dimensions of a box. The industrial model has focused on the physical body, the self – getting more and more to consume. The sustainable model focuses on finding harmony among all three – the physical, mental and spiritual – on leading a life of balance.

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

preferences. Harmony comes only from changing our actions to conform to the “higher order”. A life lived in harmony is its own reward.

A sustainable agriculture must be economically viable, socially responsible, and ecologically sound. The economic, social and ecological are interrelated and all are essential to sustainability. An agriculture that uses up or degrades its natural resource base, or pollutes the natural environment, eventually will lose its ability to produce. It's not sustainable. An agriculture that isn't profitable, at least over time, will not allow its farmers to stay in business. It's not sustainable. An agriculture that fails to meet the needs of society, as producers and citizens as well as consumers, will not be sustained by society. It's not sustainable. A sustainable agriculture must be all three – ecologically sound, economically viable and socially responsible. And the three must be in harmony.

Some see sustainability as an environmental issue. They are wrong. It is an environmental issue, but it is much more. Any system of production that attempts to conquer nature will create conflicts with nature, degrade its environment and risks its long run sustainability. Industrial agriculture epitomises a system of farming in conflict with nature. Sustainable farming systems much function in harmony with nature.

The fundamental purpose of agriculture is to convert solar energy into products for human food and fibre. Nature provides biological means of converting solar energy into living plants and animals. Nature provides a means by which things come to life, protect themselves, grow to maturity, reproduce and die to be recycled to support a future generation of life. Agriculture attempts to tip the ecological balance in favour of humans relative to other species. But, if we attempt to tip the balance too far, too fast, we destroy the integrity of the natural system of which we are a part. A sustainable agriculture must be in harmony with nature.

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

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

Finally, a sustainable agriculture must be in harmony with the human economy. The greatest challenge to farming in ways that are ecologically sound and socially responsible is in finding ways to make such systems economically viable as well. Our current economy seems to favour systems that exploit their natural and human environment for short run gains. Those who choose to protect the natural environment must sacrifice any economic opportunity that might result from exploiting it. Those who show concern for the

will being of other people – workers, customers or neighbours – must sacrifice any economic opportunity that might result from exploiting them. So it might seem that sustainability requires that one sacrifice some economic well being to achieve ecological and social sustainability.

Conventional thinking assumes the relationship among the environment, social and economic wellbeing is a trade-off relationship – that one can have more of one only by sacrificing some of the others. However this represents a highly materialistic worldview. If anyone gets more of something, then someone else must have less of it. There is only some fixed quantity that must be allocated among competing ends. This materialistic worldview ignores the fact that we can gain satisfaction, for ourselves, right now, by doing things for others and by saving things for future generations – just because we know these are the right things to do. Our satisfaction is not dependent on realising the expectations of some future personal rewards – the reward is embodied in the current action rather than the future outcome. There is inherent value in living and working in disharmony – making us worse off rather than better off.

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

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

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

Something different also means marketing in the niches – giving people what they really want rather than coercing or bribing them to take what you have for sale. The conventional wisdom is that niche markets are limited because individually they are small.

The conventional wisdom is wrong. All consumer markets are niche markets, because they are made up of individuals, and we all want and need something a bit different. Industrial systems of mass production and mass distribution treat things as if they were pretty much the same. The cost saving in industrial systems come from doing the same basic thing over and over again – producing uniform commodities in large volume. Niche marketing means giving people what they actually need and want – producing in harmony with the market.

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

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

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

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