

Agriculture sustainability

BY DENNIS KEENEY

THE term “sustainable” is, in my opinion, the most overused, most misunderstood and most abused word in current environmental and developmental writings. A good example is the recent article in this newspaper, “Farmers Have the Facts on Sustainability—and More.” The October 2009 essay states that “Growing more [corn] with less—less land, less water, less fertilizer—and doing it year after year after year” defines sustainability. Monsanto defines itself as a sustainable agriculture company with the slogan “Produce More. Conserve More. Improve Farmers’ Lives.” The list goes on. Google “Sustainable Agriculture” and you get over 6.4 million hits; sustainable development gives 25.8 million. Sustainable is used as an adjective, a noun (sustainability) and an adverb (sustainably). The Web gives over a dozen definitions. Most pertain to ecological or life systems that can be maintained at a productive level indefinitely. Some include humanity, families or economics. Many times, sustainability is used in a self-promotion context. In 1989, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (termed the Brundtland Commission) presented perhaps the most widely quoted definition of sustainability: “[to meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Other terms also have been used. Aldo Leopold talked about the “Land Ethic,” “Limits to Growth” was used often in the 1970s. About 30 years ago, “sustainable” came into vogue. It immediately went to the top of the environmental hit parade and has stayed there since. There are oodles of Sustainability Centers and academic programs and so forth. But to this day, and perhaps forever more, the term “sustainability” will remain a subjective description of an idealized goal. The value of the term is being slowly eroded as it is applied more and more for commercial and political gain.

I do not wish to praise, support, deride or attack the term sustainability. I do call for clarification in its use (with little hope of success). When I am asked to comment or review programs that use sustainability in some context, I invariably call for a definition and am almost always ignored.

After struggling with this term and concept for over two decades, (I was the first director of the Leopold Center in 1988), I firmly believe it should be used as a goal and that its continued use to describe “practices,” “technologies,” “methods,” etc., is diluting the power of the term.

Here we talk about sustainable agriculture and, presumably, western or developed-world sustainable agriculture. Is this really possible considering the way agriculture has been and will continue to be practiced?

The main roadblocks to true sustainability as I see them are:

- ◆ Almost complete reliance on petroleum
- ◆ Rapid industrialization of agriculture
- ◆ Based on a narrow specialized range of annual crops with genetics controlled by the seed industry
- ◆ Based on industrially grown meat and dairy animals
- ◆ Long-term degradation of soils and waters
- ◆ Chemical pest control that encourages loss of diversity and pest resistance

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- ◆ Dependence on government intervention and political support for economic return
- ◆ Overproduction of crops not needed in the food supply
- ◆ Frantic effort to find alternative products such as biofuels while overlooking food needs
- ◆ Declining research support in the public sector
- ◆ Loss of endemic knowledge as entering farmers find the industry unattractive
- ◆ Shifting climate causing shortages in water and need for crop adaptation

I am sure you could add more to this list or debate many on my list. The point is most are defining sustainable agriculture starting at the present point in time, ignoring the fact that the aforementioned trends cannot be continued. Some groups might think that more corn for the next few years is a sustainability indicator. But this does not take the long view. Hypocrisy abounds. Farm industry leaders decry the higher production costs brought on by climate change control while asking for government support for disasters created by climate change. The specialization in agriculture causes economic crises when they over- or underproduce, markets shift, or pests and weather take control. The taxpayer is asked to underwrite the risks.

There are many local options on each farm, community, crop system and so on to take advantage of what we know and move toward a more “sustainable” agriculture. But let’s not fool ourselves, current western agriculture is not sustainable. What replaces it is going to be highly influenced by random events. So rather than burn up so much energy and political goodwill while minimizing options for the future, agriculture should look for ways to stabilize and perhaps reverse the very things that are moving it away from sustainability.

Agriculture cannot go it alone, even though in the U.S. the dominant theme is “my way or the highway.” Over time the Corn Belt coalition in Congress is eroding and agriculture is being questioned for its effects on the environment and high subsidy costs, as well as food safety and hunger issues throughout the world. The

public realizes that coarse grain commodities do not feed the world and that protecting U.S. markets with high tariffs and subsidies do little to promote agriculture in food-short areas.

Instead of regarding all outside of agriculture as the “enemy,” agriculture must work with its perceived enemies to build coalitions that would support an agriculture that is moving toward sustainability, even if it may never get there.

In my view, such a coalition means “consumer first, environment first, farmers first, fair trade first,” not “corporations first, lobbyists first, governments first, free trade first.” The coalitions I envision are not going to be easy. And they answer only part of the solution. Farmers need ways to do better without feeding on the corporate-petroleum bandwagon. They need perennial crops that do not take a lot of nutrients and that protect soil from erosion while improving soil tilth. They need markets they can produce for, and work with. They need ways to own their land and pass it on to their children or others, while also passing on knowledge of how to farm.

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Sonny's Corner

"Sonny's Corner" is a regular column in *Prairie Fire* featuring commentary on civil rights and justice issues. Our friend and Omaha colleague, Joseph P. "Sonny" Foster, died suddenly at age 54 in August 2005. He left an uncompleted agenda, as did many of our civil rights and justice mentors and heroes. We shall attempt to move forward on that unfinished agenda through this column.

The following text is from noted author Willa Cather's graduating oration from Red Cloud High School, as published in the *Red Cloud Chief* on June 13, 1890. A member of a class of three, all of whom gave orations at the graduation exercises, Cather was said to be "a great surprise" for her reasoning—an attitude not untypical for the time, since her two classmates were male.

"Superstition vs. Investigation"

BY WILLA CATHER

ALL human history is a record of an emigration, an exodus from barbarism to civilization; from the very outset of this pilgrimage of humanity, superstition and investigation have been contending for mastery. Since investigation first led man forth on that great search for truth which has prompted all his progress, superstition, the stern Pharaoh of his former bondage, has followed him, retarding every step of advancement.

Then began a conquest which will end only with time, for it is only the warfare between radicalism and conservatism, truth and error, which underlies every man's life and happiness. The Ancient orientals were highly civilized people but were dreamers and theorists who delved into the mystical and metaphysical, leaving the more practical questions remain unanswered, and were subjected to the evils of tyranny and priestcraft. Those sacred books of the east we today regard as half divine. We are not apt to think as we read those magnificent flights of metaphor that the masses of people who read and believed them knew nothing of figures. It is the confounding of the literal and the figurative that has made atheists and fanatics throughout the ages.

All races have worshipped nature, the ruder as the cause, the more enlightened as the effect of one grand cause. Worship as defined by Carlyle is unmeasured wonder, but there are two kinds of wonder, that born of fear and that of admiration; slavish fear is never reverence.

The Greeks, lacking the intense religious fervor of the Orient, entertained broader views. Their standard of manhood was one of practical worth. They allowed no superstition, religious, political, or social, to stand between them

It is the most sacred right of man to investigate; we paid dearly for it in Eden; we have been shedding our heart's blood for it ever since. It is ours; we have bought it with a price.

and the truth and suffered exile, imprisonment, and death for the right of opinion and investigation.

Perhaps the strongest conflict ever known between the superstitious and investigative forces of the world raged in the dark ages. Earth seemed to return to its original chaotic state, and there was no one to cry, "Fiat lux." The old classic creed fell crashing into the boundless path, and the new church was a scene of discord. All the great minds were crushed, for men were still ruled by the iron scepter of fear, and it was essential that they should remain ignorant. Superstition has ever been the curse of the church, and until she can acknowledge that since her principles are true, no scientific truth can contradict them, she will never realize her full strength. There is another book of God than that of the scriptural revelation, a book written in chapters of creation upon

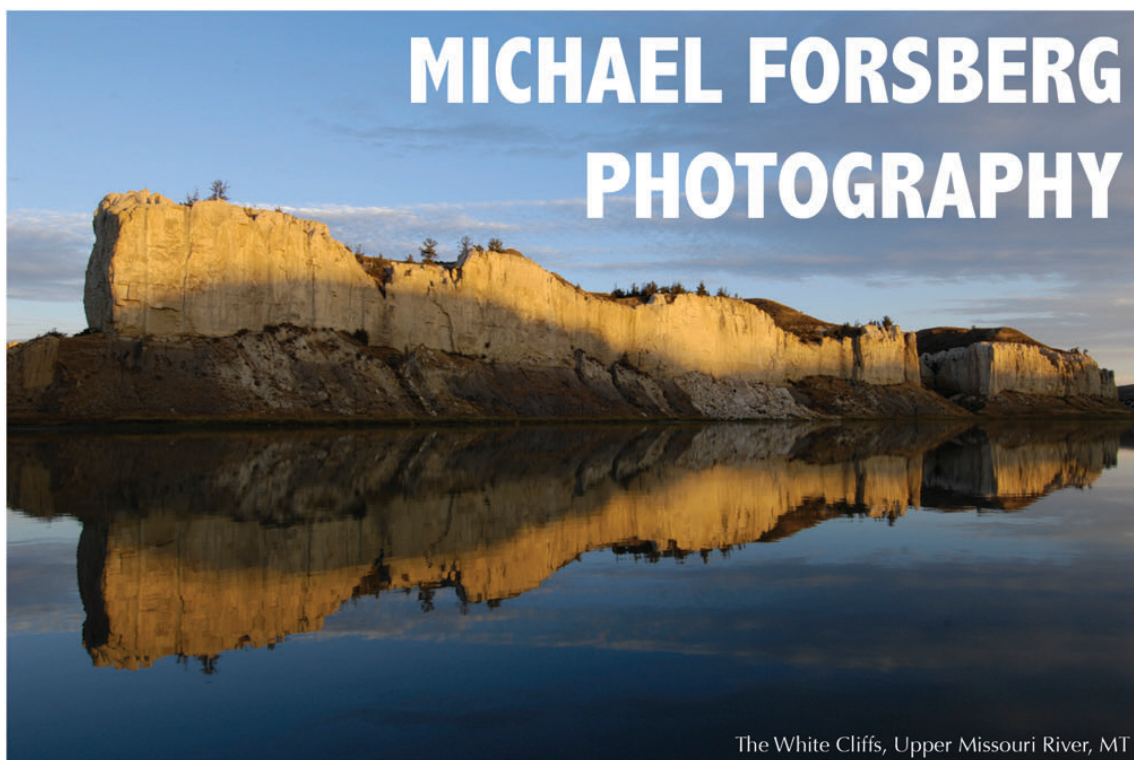
the pages of the universe bound by mystery. When we are morbid enough to say that the world degenerates with its age we forget that the heroes and sages of history were the exceptions and not the rule; what age since the world's founda-

fires of the past. In the Elizabethan age, a book was written asserting that nature is the only teacher, that no man's mind is broad enough to invent a theory to hold nature, for she is the universe. With the publication of the "Novum Organum" came a revolution in thought; scientists ceased theorizing and began experimenting. Thus we went painfully back to nature, weary and disgusted with our artificial knowledge, hungering for that which is meat, thirsting for that which is drink, longing for the things that are. She has given us the universe in answer.

It is the most sacred right of man to investigate; we paid dearly for it in Eden; we have been shedding our heart's blood for it ever since. It is ours; we have bought it with a price.

Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress; and yet upon every hand we hear the objections to its pursuit. The boy who spends his time among the stones and flowers is a trifle, and if he tries with

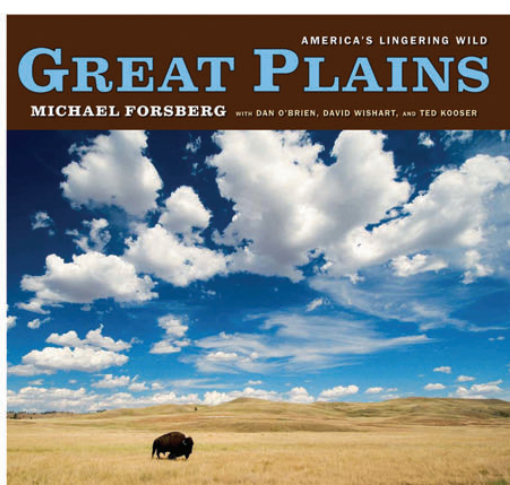
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Agriculture *from page 15*

This is not going to be easy. Our land grant research and extension programs are decimated, and many will never recover. Industry controls development of inputs such as seed, pesticides, equipment and fertilizers, as well as purchasing, processing and marketing of agriculture products. They have the favor of agricultural states' politicians, and hence key laws and subsidies that keep current agriculture entrenched. Environmental groups, international organizations, and food marketing and processing must be part of new coalitions. Agriculture will have to compromise, but so will others. The future of food and environment and our highly regarded way of life are in jeopardy.

Agriculture is showing signs that all is not well. But it is also showing few signs that it will be able to recognize the deep trouble it is in and respond in time to prevent major disruptions.

Growing more corn with more inputs just is not going to cut it long term.

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