

SAVING OUR SOIL

How to protect an ecosystem under attack



Prince Charles, “having myself tried to farm as sustainably as possible for some twenty-six years in England,” spoke before a conference on the future of food in Washington, D.C., last May. This is an abridged version of his address. The full speech can be found on the Prince’s Web site at www.princeofwales.gov.uk.

The world is gradually waking up to the fact that creating sustainable food systems will become paramount in the future because of the enormous challenges now facing food production.

I have no intention of being confronted by my grandchildren, demanding to know why on Earth we didn’t do something about the many problems that existed, when we knew what was going wrong.

This is the challenge facing us. We have to maintain a supply of healthy food at affordable prices when there is mounting pressure on nearly every element affecting the process.

In some cases we are pushing Nature’s life-support systems so far, they are struggling to cope with what we ask of them. Soils are being depleted, demand for water is growing ever more voracious,

and the entire system is at the mercy of an increasingly fluctuating price of oil.

As I see it, these pressures mean we haven’t much choice in the matter. We are going to have to take some very brave steps. We will have to develop much more sustainable, or durable forms of food production because the ways we have done

things up to now are no longer as viable as they once appeared to be.

So what is a “sustainable food production” system? For me, it has to be a form of agriculture that does not exceed the carrying capacity of its local ecosystem and which recognizes that the soil is the planet’s most vital renewable resource.

Top soil is the cornerstone of the prosperity of nations. It acts as a buffer against drought and as a carbon sink and it is the primary source of the health of all animals, plants, and people.

If we degrade it, as we are doing, then Nature’s capital will lose its innate resilience and it won’t be very long, believe you me, before our human economic capital and economic systems also begin to lose their resilience.

A genuinely sustainable form of agriculture, in my own view, is surely not dependent upon the use of chemical pesti-

cides, fungicides, and insecticides; nor, for that matter, upon artificial fertilizers.

Nor would you expect it to drink the Earth dry, deplete the soil, clog streams with nutrient-rich run-off, and create, out of sight and out of mind, enormous dead zones in the oceans.



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You would also think, wouldn’t you, that it might not lead to the destruction of whole cultures or the removal of many of the remaining small farmers around the world. Nor, presumably, would it destroy biodiversity at the same time as cultural and social diversity.

Genuinely sustainable farming maintains the resilience of the entire ecosystem by encouraging a rich level of biodiversity in the soil, in its water supply, and in the wildlife—the birds, insects, and bees that maintain the health of the whole system.

Sustainable farming also recognizes the importance to the soil of planting trees; of protecting and enhancing water-catchment systems; of mitigating, rather than adding to, climate change.

To do this it must be a mixed approach. One where animal waste is recycled and organic waste is composted to build the soil’s fertility. One where antibiotics are only used on animals to treat illnesses, not deployed in prophylactic doses to prevent them; and where those animals are fed on grass-based regimes as Nature intended.

We have to put Nature back at the heart of the equation. If we are to make our agricultural and marine systems (and therefore our economies) resilient in the long term, then we have to design policies in every sector that bring the true costs of environmental destruction and the depletion of natural capital to the fore and support an ecosystem-based approach. And we have to nurture and support the communities of smallholders and family farmers.

It is, I feel, our apparent reluctance to recognize the interrelated nature of the problems and therefore the solutions, that lies at the heart of our predicament and certainly on our ability to determine the future of food.

How we deal with this systemic failure in our thinking will define us as a civilization and determine our survival. 🍌