

“Healthy Eating: A Family Affair”
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By Judith LaBelle

What we eat affects our health and the health of our environment. The two are inextricably linked. The choices that we make with our food dollars can improve our own health and the health of our environment, or undermine them.

The direct impact of food on our health and the health of our families, has been the focus of the other presenters.

But how do our food choices impact environmental health and how does that relate to your family’s health?

Let’s look at what has been happening in our food system: The major trend in the food and agricultural sector over the past several years has been corporate consolidation.

In most US commodities today, four or fewer companies control 50 to 80 percent of market share. Take beef for example, four beef packers control almost 85% of the US market.

Or look at retailing – WalMart is the leading food retailer in the US. With this kind of market power, the big players can dictate terms and force changes back through the system to the farm level.

This concentration and the competition among the mega-firms is one reason that the part of your dollar that is actually received by the farmer has been dropping. In 1920 it was 44%. In 1990, it was 9% and it has continued to drop since.

Just think of that: for every dollar you spend for food in the supermarket – less than a dime goes to the farmer. Meanwhile, the part of that dollar consumed by marketing was 67% in 1990 and has continued to increase.

This concentration in the food system also has an impact on the landscape and therefore biodiversity. The farmers who are part of this concentrated system are forced to become as large as possible to seek efficiencies of scale and to scrape every possible inch of productive capacity from their land. This has led to industrial farming – the reliance on intensively fertilized row crops and confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

While industrial farming has helped provide access to “cheap food”, questions have been raised about the quality of the food raised this way. As one person said at a Slow Food meeting recently, “You are not what you eat, you are what what you *eat* eats.”
(repeat)

We know that in CAFOs animals are stressed to the point where many are given routine doses of antibiotics to keep them alive, which has led to concerns that those same antibiotics, which are critical to treatment of human illness, will lose their effectiveness.

Hormones are also given to animals to speed their growth, and concerns have been raised about their potential impact on human health, as traces may remain in the meat.

Interesting studies from Europe have also shown that animals raised the traditional way – on grass pasture – are high in the healthy Omega 3s. Yet when those same animals are “finished” on corn in a feed lot, the levels of Omega 3s drop and those of the unhealthy Omega 5s increase.

So eating beef may be akin to eating salmon, if you are looking for the health benefits of Omega 3s, but only if it is from a cow raised and finished on grass.

Industrial production also has many harmful effects on the environment, with obvious connections to human health. Here are a few examples:

- Water quality impacts from inadequately treated waste – both on nearby and farther away. Bacteria and e-coli have been found in groundwater near CAFOs. And there are now dead zones in coastal waters – largely caused by excess nutrient runoff from ag lands – largest where Mississippi River empties into the Gulf of Mexico – larger than the State of Massachusetts.
- Air quality impacts are also caused by the concentration of animal waste. CAFO emissions carry high levels of hydrogen sulfide and ammonia gas – which can cause illness and permanent injury to people who live nearby. Studies have found higher levels of respiratory in people who live near CAFOs than in people who live in communities without them. In some communities with CAFOs, property values have gone down by up to 90%, largely as a result of the pollution.
- reliance on fossil fuels – when animals are not allowed to graze, fossil fuels are used to produce their food elsewhere and truck it to them. The animals must then be shipped to slaughter and market. As a result food typically travels between 1500 and 2500 miles from farm to table.

This system has increased our dependence on fossil fuels, and contributes to air quality impacts and concerns about global warming. It has also made the price and availability of food subject to fluctuations in the price and availability of foreign oil.

- Reduction in biodiversity. To create more efficient production, farmers are encouraged to create large, monocultural fields, and tear out old hedge rows and fill in vernal pools.

As Fred Kirschenmann of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture has noted, that means that “Conservation practices, such as riparian buffer strips, shelterbelts and terraces ... begin to disappear to make way for the largest possible farm equipment. ...habitat for wildlife and wildlife corridors...give way to miles and miles of continuous cropping.”

- In contrast, the small and midsize farmers who are not part of the industrial system generally are very good stewards of their land. Especially on the agricultural land that surrounds urban areas, their farms often provide critical habitat and are essential to maintaining biodiversity or what biologist EO Wilson has termed the “richness of life.”

I work in the Hudson Valley, which is just north of New York City. We are incredibly fortunate. In our region, agriculture supports biodiversity and environmental quality. Agriculture in the Hudson Valley, the Catskills, most of upstate New York - is typified by small to mid-size farms that are family-owned and operated. These small and mid-size farmers are generally good stewards of their land and, therefore, our environment. There is very little of the “industrial” production which has come to dominate many Midwestern states.

We are also fortunate to have as a colleague Michael Klemens, a world-class scientist who has studied biodiversity in Africa and other distant places. More recently he has returned home to create the Metropolitan Conservation Alliance, a program of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Through MCA, Michael is working to protect biodiversity in the metropolitan region.

Michael has helped us all understand the critical role farmers play. He has helped us understand that the modest looking pools that appear in the spring are vernal pools that are critical to many amphibians. That the sometimes scruffy looking farm hedgerows are critical habitat for snakes and birds and many other creatures. That some farming practices, such as active grazing, are essential to maintain certain habitat types that, in nature, are generated by blow-downs or fires.

But the deck is stacked against these smaller farmers. The multi-billion dollar subsidies funded by our tax dollars go to the huge corn, grain, and other commodity producers. The trade agreements entered into over the past several years have opened our markets to a flood of agricultural products from other countries. Most are from countries where labor is far cheaper – and where farmers don’t have to be concerned about the environmental impacts of their production methods.

Apples are an excellent example. New York State produces several varieties of world class apples. Winesaps or Romes or think or your favorite. Yet the market for apple juice has been flooded by cheap concentrate from China and the apples in your local supermarket are more likely to be from South Africa than New York.

It is little wonder that during the final decade of the century, the Hudson Valley lost nearly half of its orchards – a trend that has continued and perhaps even accelerated since.

Our farmland is giving way to its final crop – single family houses. And it is easy to see why. At the same time that milk prices have been at or below the cost of production, the value of land has been escalating sharply.

As one farmer told us, “Every day people come to my door offering more money than I ever dreamed of, yet I can’t afford to buy braces for my kids.”

This is a man who *wants* to farm, but he has to be able to make a decent living.

Through our Agricultural Initiative, we at Glynwood Center are doing everything we can to help this farmer and others do just that – make a decent living so they will keep their land in agriculture.

We are not alone – we are working with a wide range of farmers, nonprofits, agency officials and private businesses. Together we are determined to keep agriculture as an important part of the future in the Valley, not just a relic of the past.

Our success is important to every person in this room who cares about biodiversity, as well as those who care about their own health and the health of their family, or who just enjoy a tasty, juicy fresh tomato.

So what are we doing? A few examples:

First, we are participating in events like this to increase public understanding of what the Europeans call the “multifunctionality” of agriculture: the fact that small and mid-size farms produce much more than food. They provide scenic settings for our towns, enhance regional economies and - most important for tonight’s theme – sustain biodiversity.

Within the Valley, we are also doing this through our Keep Farming program which uses a series of assessment tools to allow community residents to analyze the economic, environmental and scenic values generated by local farms.

We then help the community evaluate tools and techniques and develop a strategy adapted to their situation. One community, for example, is using what it learned about its agricultural soils to shape the development areas to be allowed in its new master plan and zoning, to protect the best soils.

For another example, with our partners at MCA we have developed a new program, *The Moveable Feast for Wildlife and People*, through which food from wildlife friendly farms can be featured at special events. These events help people understand the importance of responsible farmers while providing them with a new market. If you are

interested, please visit the website, Moveablefeastforwildlifeandpeople.org, and conduct a Feast in your own community.

Second, we are supporting the recreation of the infrastructure local farmers need. For example, the livestock producers need nearby slaughterhouses and aging facilities. The fruit producers need processing kitchens to create value added products. The vegetable farmers need trucking that will allow them to get their products to markets quickly and in good condition. In many ways we are trying to recreate what we have lost since WWII.

In one of the most important projects, we are supporting the creation of a new wholesale market in NYC to serve regional farmers, to provide a more efficient access to this incredible pool of consumers.

This will all require significant investment. So we are urging state and regional economic development agencies to realize that agriculture is an important part of the region's economic future, and worth supporting through grants and loans. We are also beginning to reach out to the private investment community for support.

Last fall we completed the 1st analysis of the Ag Census Data to focus only on the Hudson Valley, so that local officials and farmers would have the ammunition they needed to argue for agriculture as an important part of the Valley's economic future, not just a quaint vestige of its past.

Some private companies are already playing important roles in supporting regional farmers and I want to highlight one. Niman Ranch is the leading national distributor of natural meats from owner-operated farms that produce their beef and pork in accordance with animal welfare and environmental standards. Although it is based in California, it works with farmers in several states.

We have had farmers in Iowa, for example, tell us that if it were not for the distribution and marketing provided by Niman Ranch, there wouldn't be any small independent hog producers left in the state. It is the only alternative to the industrialized, concentrated feeding operations, which wreck havoc on the environment.

Bill Niman likes to say that we need to be concerned about "locale as well as local." And I agree. Although I encourage you to buy from local producers, that isn't always possible. And when it isn't, buy from a company like Niman Ranch that supports small producers who are good stewards in their own communities, even if those communities are in another state.

Niman Ranch is also beginning to have more of a presence in the Northeast and we welcome them – they will be great allies for us and for the farmers in our own region.

Third – We are promoting local land use and tax policies that encourage rather than discourage farming.

Through our Glynwood Grange program, we are helping local officials from across the Valley deepen their understanding of agricultural issues and the actions they and their communities can take to sustain small and midsize farmers.

As a result they are beginning to take new approaches. For example, in Goshen there is a fair amount of land that has been “saved” through cluster zoning or purchase of development rights programs that preclude further development. The Supervisor has begun to examine how the municipality can encourage owners of that land to return it to active farming, rather than hold it as lawn or open space.

Fourth – we are using our own farm to support our programmatic efforts.

Glynwood Center is located on a former estate that has long had Black Angus cattle, as well as free range chickens and sheep. But we are relatively small – we have only about 100 acres of pasture land. So we are working with a sister farm in nearby Millbrook, to create a larger pasture raised beef operation than either of us could do alone.

This increased production will help support the expansion of the slaughtering capacity needed in the Valley – we will be a good customer – and enhance the identity of the Valley as a place that produces very high quality products. Having our own financial stake in resolving these infrastructure issues has given us great credibility as we work with farmers and others.

But while Glynwood and our many colleagues work to save farming in the Valley, **what can you do?**

1 – *Recognize the connection between biodiversity and farming in your region.* This is not true in all parts of the country. You have great potential here – but it won’t survive without our conscious support.

2 – *Get over the idea that price is the most important factor in choosing food.* Food is not fungible. For example, not all strawberries are alike.

Several years ago a colleague of mine started the first university-based program to use regional food. As part of that, he had a group of students trace the strawberries served by school’s food service all the way back to the farmer – so from the dining hall in Middle America to the farm in California. They taped the farmer, who held up a large, red perfectly formed strawberry and said: “See this – this is fiber, I can ship this all the way across the country and it won’t dent.” Then he held up a lumpy, little thing and said: “See this - now this I take home to my family!”

So fresh, local food may cost more, and sometimes may not look as perfect, but consider what you are buying in terms of your health, your family’s health and your community’s wellbeing.

3 - *Whenever you can, “shorten the food chain.”* Buy direct at farmers markets or through a community supported agriculture project. In CSAs, farmers sell shares to a group of consumers who each receive a box of fresh products throughout the growing season. The food will be fresher and tastier, you can learn how it was produced and the farmer will receive most of your food dollar.

If you don’t know how to find regional producers, visit [a website that lists regional producers]

4 - *If you want fresh, regional food, don’t be shy - ask for it.* Consumers can have a surprising amount of influence. Owners and chefs sit up and take notice when customers ask where and how the food being served was produced.

5 – *Use your purchasing power.* If you or your organization will be hosting an event, plan your menu to feature fresh local food. Even hotels and conference centers are beginning to respond to customer demand for regional food. To learn more about how to work with them, you can visit Glynwood’s website or call us for a copy of our guide on “using local food at your next event.”

6 – *Support organizations that are supporting regional farmers.* There are many choices: many of them here.

In closing, let me urge you to vote with your fork. Use your food dollar to support the regional farmers who support biodiversity.

This is one situation where – even in Chicago - you can – and should – vote early and often.