

Urges expanded view of sustainability

In recent years the concern over agricultural sustainability has grown as the combination of practices termed conventional has become more obviously suspect. It is my concern that agricultural sustainability be discussed in the fullest light possible and by the broadest complement of interested parties. It should *not* be defined only in the context of measurable parameters; it also grows both from human imagination and from a broad, holistic, and personal style of education. Any definition will, of course, fall short of the reality of what sustainability is.

In identifying limits to potential sustainability of agricultural systems, the most critical variables are not those definable in economic terms but rather those arising from ecological entities and relationships. I should note here the derivations of the words *economy* and *ecology* because these are the suppositions from which views of sustainability necessarily arise. *Economy* is formed from Greek roots, *oikos* and *nomos*, meaning "management of the household." *Ecology* is also a combination from the Greek, *oikos* and *logos*, denoting "rationale of the household." Thus, my proposed tenet is that sustainability is ecological - it derives from inherent properties of the "household," not from its "management."

This approach implies that good management requires intimate knowledge of the ecology of the system and an intuitive perception of when the system is "right." And it requires awareness of and action on the degree to which intervention is possible without creating substantial instability and disequilibrium in the system. Simply, management does *not* imply control.

To the degree that we can accurately interpret archeological and fossil evidence, we can say that the most sus-

tainable human systems were those of small groups of hunter-gatherers dispersed within the ecological resource. Such conditions, with a limited human population, may have been maintained for several hundred thousand years. The oldest agricultural systems may have been, at the outside, in existence for several thousand years. The difference in scale is obvious.

Agricultural practices which are commonly thought to have greater potential sustainabilities have been classified in recent decades with titles such as low-input, organic, ecological, regenerative, or biological. Many practices called conventional have grown apparently less and less sustainable. In fact, the sustainabilities of *all* these approaches may pale in the arena of millennia. In constructing agricultural systems, humans have affected both the flows of resources and the compositions of gene pools. It may be these changes were necessary, but there are few assurances (except the passage of time) that any or all of them is sustainable.

Sustainability must be viewed in another way. It is the physical expression of whole-hearted exploration of the mystery surrounding human existence

and transcendence. The ancient hunter-gatherers, and some early agriculturalists may have known this. Many of their rituals apparently focused on the human relationship to earth, water, sky, and heaven and to the multitude of living companions those peoples knew. Their purpose seems to have been to sacredly affirm those fellowships. Their effect may have been to ensure the long-term continuance of those ties. Science cannot replace those functions; it does not affirm sacredness. There may very well be modern examples of such spiritual intimacy with the earth and its creatures. These need to be left intact and working.

This letter to the agricultural community is an attempt to expand the focus of reflections on and actions toward sustainability.

Rick Williams
Assistant Professor of
Agriculture/Biology
Ferrum College
Ferrum, VA 24088



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR INVITED

The AJAA welcomes letters, short or long, commenting on articles in this journal or sharing ideas likely to be of interest to other AJAA readers. Since our space is limited, we do reserve the right not to publish all letters or, at times, to publish only excerpts from them. To take part in this exchange of ideas, write to: Editor, AJAA, 9200 Edmonston Road, Suite 117, Greenbelt, MD 20770.