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Bioneers

Ripe For Change:

The New Food Movement

by Claire Hope Cummings

Bioneers: You've been covering food and farming as a journalist now for ten years. What changes have you seen?

CHC: The biggest surprise is that, after ten years of discouraging news, there is now a real maturity to our movement and a sense of hope emerging.

The farmers and activists I talk to are optimistic. There is a growing confidence in our ability to step forward and take the lead. For so long it seemed like we were stuck in the struggle. The ravages of industrial agriculture and the complete capitulation of government agencies and land grant universities to the corporate agenda have been relentless. There were organized attacks on the organic standards and GMO contamination to contend with along with working out how to grow healthy food in harmony with nature. But we are succeeding. Change is in the air.



Organic farming methods have been proven. It's now an astounding 2% of the U.S. food supply. Some farmers are going further and combining that success with alternative methods of energy production and waste control. Our success is changing how the public perceives sustainability. And there is a post-Katrina effect. People had their eyes opened to social injustice and the link between the failure of the government to protect the environment and how that impacts their lives. Gore's film is creating a stir. The time has come for the progressive vision.

Bioneers: Are you saying that sustainable and organic agriculture can feed the world?

CHC: Yes, but unlike agribusiness' claim to "feed the world," what we are saying is that the world can feed and power itself, using nature-based technologies. There are some challenges to scaling up production but overall, what energy and agricultural production needs is to do, is scale down. With changes to existing policy and financial frameworks, it can be done.

Worldwatch Institute has shown that renewable sources can now meet the world's energy needs. And where energy goes, agriculture will follow. We are at a turning point in all this and the general public is beginning to understand that we either go sustainable or we go extinct.

Industrial agriculture is such a dinosaur! I'm not just talking about its voracious use of fossil fuels. Their technology is so simplistic, like using one chemical against one pest and mono-cropping. If that were proposed now, it would be a joke. Unfortunately, we let it take over and are now caught up in what I call "zombie agriculture"—a system that is dead and dying but is made to look alive through the massive infusions of public money. Take away all those subsidies and industrial agriculture would fall flat on its face. Industrial agriculture is bad science and bad economics

What will drive change is the energy crunch. We can farm our way out of the energy and environmental crisis, but only if its done according to principles of sustainability and democracy. [My essay in this month's World Watch](#) explains how I think we will reach a tipping point towards sustainable agriculture.

The real challenge will be what we do with this opportunity. The work we do now may not reach fruition in our lifetimes. And we have been stuck in the critique for a long time. Can we, for instance, create a model of social change based on the Bioneers values of modeling our social strategies on natural strategies, restoring the commons, and acting in ways that promote inclusion, diversity, equality? I think we can but we will have to move from the more adolescent mode of rebellion into a period of mature movement building and act with more consciousness and coherence.

Bioneers: Have there been any particular personal experiences that inform your point of view?

CHC: One was living and farming in Vietnam for three years in the early 1990's, and the other happened just a few months ago.

In Vietnam, life is lived right out in the open. I saw devastating hunger, dire poverty,

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careless death, and rapacious disease. Here in the West, we have become adept at hiding from life's realities and limitations. But we pay a price for that. When you live in such an artificial world, you are actually more vulnerable. If television is your main source of information, as it is for most Americans, then the perception managers control what you think and do, which for the most part is consume. The result is a lot of disconnected people who have a disproportionate sense of entitlement, and who are easily fooled. So, because the media is so crucial to social change, I decided to become a journalist.

And what I wanted to cover became clear. In Vietnam, more so than here, it's obvious that food is the primary way that people relate to the natural world. And, because I was there as part of the rice business, I saw how industrialization and globalization worked. I decided I wanted to tell stories about the culture of agriculture and report on the dramatic changes taking place in food and farming.

And I started a farm there. Vietnam is a gorgeous and gracious country. The local food markets are full of fish, meat, vegetables, insects, and flowers. They have a thriving local food system and they engage in the global food system. One way this works is that women would bring pesticides home with them from the rice fields and use them in their household gardens. Pesticides are used indiscriminately, poisoning the people and the water. So, I decided to grow my own food organically, to see if it could be done, and for women's health and for the Mekong River, where I lived. I hired a water buffalo and got it started but it took me a year to learn how to farm organically in the tropics. Then I would invite local women over, and treat them to lunch and a demonstration of organic farming.

When I returned to California, it all came together. The new food movement was starting here and people were interested in these issues. I started reporting on radio and in print. But it was not always easy, especially since my expertise was in agricultural biotechnology. That industry does not take kindly to criticism. There were personal threats and institutional attacks on me and my work, and moments of deep discouragement. Sometimes it seemed like mainstream agriculture, stuck in a mentality of scarcity, was taking me down with it. Then I had my second "aha" experience.

It was when I first saw the PBS film "[Ripe for Change](#)." It was at a screening for those of us in the film. I'd done my critique of biotechnology, just as I have for years, on radio, in print, and at Bioneers. And I was expecting that the film would be the usual treatment of food, a mix of the good and the bad. But I'd underestimated the talents of these filmmakers.

There was this one moment in the film, when Mas Masumoto, a peach grower, is talking about selling his Suncrest peaches to Alice Waters. Mas sends Alice a box of peach blossoms each spring, as a promise of things to come. The film shows the box arriving, being opened, and Alice carefully unfolding the paper inside to reveal the branches arrayed with delicate pink and white flowers.

It's hard to articulate what happened for me at that moment but it was partly realizing the enormous possibility inherent in the film itself, partly realizing that someone had actually captured the beauty and magic of growing and sharing great food, and that millions of people would share that moment. But it was also a deeper confirmation of the truth that sharing real stories changes lives. I am a big fan of what Caroline Casey calls "the story strategy" for social change and that we need a new story.

We've been telling ourselves the same old David and Goliath stories of struggle. And we think that if we just give people enough information, they will see our point of view. But that's not how people really connect and change.

What hit me in the film was that I could see, taste, and feel the clear emotional appeal of our vision. Our sustainable vision has such great emotional appeal but we often neglect to develop that. But we know it's right, intuitively and we each have emotional/spiritual experiences that motivate our work. Since last year, I have been working on a book about seeds, and it would be so easy just to talk about the threats and the peril seeds are in, something I have been reporting on for years. But from the moment I saw the film, I have devoted half the book to the stories of the people and places involved in seed saving and the lessons we learn from nature about abundance and generosity.

This is not sentimentality. This is applied wisdom. We need to fully understand and embrace the emotional appeal of our sustainable vision. The attractiveness of what we offer is the key to connecting with ordinary people and their every day lives. There is real truth in what Alice Waters once said: that we could all be transformed, simply by tasting the perfect peach.

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