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Picture: Mark Ritchie from www.sustainableagriculture.net web site

Health and Agriculture

by Joseph Bevilacqua

To some, “You are what you eat” has become a cliché that invokes images of hippies eating tree bark with Euell Gibbons. But to others, it is a phrase that’s still full of common sense. This important concept is being given a renewed and serious look by a small but growing diverse group of concerned farmers, environmentalists, health professionals, educators and policy experts.

The connection between foods and health is not a new subject to Hunter Purdy, a registered nurse who is also co-founder of the Kentucky Sustainable Agriculture Community and has been working in this area for years. This past April, Purdy attended a conference at Georgetown College in Kentucky on “The Future of Agrarianism,” where she was impressed with a talk by Mark Ritchie.

“He said the more we start looking at personal wholeness/wellness, the more this will lead to looking at our connections with others and the wider world. It will help us to become more aware and pay attention to animal welfare, GMO’s, energy, education, growth and consumption, where things come from, what it means to care for our parents, children, neighbors, and ourselves. He talked about heart, spirit, and soul.”

Ritche is a longtime food activist and president of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. He increasingly draws the numerous connections between sustainable agriculture and health. “Farming with less chemicals improves the health of the farmers, their families, their farm workers, the water and air supply of the neighbors. Farming with fewer antibiotics improves the long-term efficacy of antibiotics for humans. Direct marketing can lead to fresher, therefore more nutritious food.”

“The direct connection,” explains Hunter Purdy, “is that healthy people make up healthy communities. Healthy communities have a local/regional economy, local/regional food system, are not controlled by mega-corporations, have a thriving rural-urban connection, etc. It’s part of everything being connected.”

“Personal health and the health of the environment are inextricably linked, since humans are a part of the environment, not apart from it,” adds Leo Horrigan, the Urban Agriculture Coordinator of the Center for a Livable Future (CLF”), at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

Horrigan believes “A sustainable agriculture is one that recognizes that connection, and takes seriously the issue of good land stewardship, because all life is dependent upon healthy soil and biodiversity, including human life. If we do not have healthy soil, we cannot raise healthy food to sustain ourselves. Great civilizations have fallen because they did not sufficiently conserve their natural resource base, in particular, their topsoil.”

“For me, the fundamental truth is that humans are made up of the same stuff as the earth,” concludes Purdy. “We’re the same. If the earth isn’t healthy, we aren’t healthy. Sustainable agriculture supports a healthy earth.”

The difficulty has been in getting agriculture and the health communities together on the issue. Russell Libby, Executive Director of the Main Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association say, “Right now the connections between the two communities are limited. When we turn to the foundations of health - food and environment - then there are unlimited opportunities for cooperation. However, very few

doctors study nutrition extensively, and very few farmers pay attention to nutrition issues as one of the key factors in selecting varieties to plant or in how they choose to market their foods.”

Leo Horrigan is more optimistic. “My understanding is that the sustainable agriculture and health communities do not have strong linkages yet,” explains Horrigan. “But I think it’s inevitable that they will become much stronger as people explore their connections more. Even more so than the medical field, public health is a strong potential partner for sustainable agriculture proponents, because of its focus on societal conditions - like our current food and agriculture system - that cause ill health in populations.”

“The interconnectedness and interdependence of it all is what needs to be emphasized, agrees Hunter Purdy. “We are starting to do this some by asking ‘where does this food come from and what did it cost to get here?’ This brings to light many factors.”

She believes we need to raise the kind of questions that are asked in holistic medicines: “Where did this symptom come from?” “What contributed to how I am feeling right now?”

“The answer should address who this person is in his/her entirety,” says Purdy. “One’s food, thoughts, where one lives, what one thinks, how long it’s been since the last bowel movement, what kind of chemicals one puts on one’s body or cleans with, how often one laughs out loud, how close the electric transformers are to where one spends most of one’s time, EVERYTHING. Sustainable agriculture has a connection to all of this.”

This is way too big an issue to tackle in a single article,” warns Margaret Mellon, Food and Environment Program Director for the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). UCS worked on antibiotic use in agriculture as part of a large coalition called Keep Antibiotics Working.

“We have tried to begin that process by choosing to work on an issue that represents one of the clearer links between human health and the choice of production method - i.e. antibiotics,” noted Mellon. “That enables us to begin to form connections with health organizations like the AMA, American Public Health Association and the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics. But these connections are only in the early stage.

“One problem is the lack of definitive, conclusive research. “Such studies are much more difficult to do than you might expect,” says Mellon. “You can cite the National Academy’s Study on pesticide levels in children, for example, but I’m not aware of studies comparing children, who ate ‘sustainable’ food vs. those who did not.”

And what studies do exist don’t always point to solutions, explains Russell Libby. “Recent compilations of studies in both the U.S. and the U.K. have found that organic food tends to have higher levels of vitamins and minerals than conventionally grown foods. But eating organic food by itself isn’t the solution. All of U.S. agriculture needs to make these transitions to sustainable production systems, building soil health, minimizing use of pesticides, and shortening distribution lines.”

Leo Horrigan says more involvement by more groups is one answer. “Farmers and consumers can get involved by becoming more connected to each other, through direct-market channels such as farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture. Parents and educators can advocate for more locally, sustainable grown food in school cafeterias. Organizations can lend their political support and technical expertise to these efforts.”

“In some ways, the problems with our food system are analogous to the problems with our political system,” says Horrigan.

The dominant food system is very centralized and distant from our everyday lives. People do not have a direct say in how their food is produced or what kind of food is produced. As consumers, they 'vote' indirectly through the marketplace, but this is a very inadequate way for them to express their food desires. In the same way that political parties tell people what their range of political choices are, and keep those choices severely limited, the food industry limits our food choices, under the guise of offering us a wide selection. The industry does give us many choices, but not necessarily the choices we would choose if it was up to us and we have better information.

The movement toward sustainable food and agriculture systems is about creating more food democracy and more healthy choices. As more groups come together to share resources, accumulated knowledge and new ideas, the connections between agriculture, food and health will become clearer, and ways to improve our food systems and better educate the public will undoubtedly emerge.

Cooperation between the sustainable agriculture and health communities will be essential, and in the coming years the National Campaign will work to build alliances and collaboration in this relatively new and promising arena.

(Source: *AgMatters Newsletter*, Summer 2002, National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture is a network of diverse groups whose mission is to shape national policies to foster a sustainable food and agriculture system – one that is economically viable, environmentally sound, socially just, and humane. Contact info: PO Box 396; Pine Bush, NY 12566. Phone 845-744-8448, fax 845-744-8477, www.sustainableagriculture.net)