

# International Dimensions of Humane, Sustainable Agriculture

Native, peasant farmers of the third world should not be encouraged to emulate the industrial nations' addiction to meat, and their low-input sustainable agricultural practices should be respected and not obliterated by colonial agribusiness "aid and development" enterprises.

Through careful study of their often highly efficient, traditional agricultural practices and the various environments or bioregions they inhabit, peasant farmers can be assisted to help restore the land where needed, such as by reforestation, and feed themselves and their livestock more sustainably. Small-scale livestock-improvement programs, like those of Heifer Project International in Tanzania, East Africa, have combined soil conservation and regeneration with other sustainable agricultural practices, where the production of crops and forages is closely integrated, ecologically and economically, with humane, small-scale dairy cow milk production. Such programs have benefited countless families and village communities, where women, in a polygamous society, are the main work force.

A handful of small, nonprofit organizations are making a difference by linking other appropriate aid and development projects, like bio-gas production and improved garden-field soil-enrichment by nutrient animal-waste irrigation. Other examples are improved animal breeding and husbandry practices, and developments like a crop-integrated small-scale dairy goat enterprises, and improved cart and plough design and utilization.

But these organizations face the ideological and economic opposition of such larger organizations as the World Bank, IMF, AID, and FAO, who, for example, have helped underwrite a variety of nonsustainable colonial-style agricultural projects, especially monocrop plantations and livestock development projects that benefit the rich and further disenfranchise the poor.

These organizations have done little to improve standards of humane slaughter, basic hygiene and safety in third world slaughterhouses, the care and handling of livestock in transit to slaughter in their programs designed to increase meat consumption

amongst the indigenous urban affluent and beef production as an export commodity. They have done little to protect indigenous cultures or endangered wildlife species, like the African wild dog (which the Botswana government permits hunters to shoot without any limit). Irreplaceable wildlands have been given little protection from total obliteration by these agencies aiding and abetting the expansion of the global cattle industry.

Such agencies have done little to date to prevent further loss of biodiversity and land degradation in subsidizing the unsustainable and nontraditional raising of cattle primarily for meat. Pastoralists suffer further when their traditional grazing lands are taken away by private ranchers and government or privately-owned plantations. In Central and South America, forests are still being cleared for timber, cattle, and other cash-crop exports, which destroy the forest economy and culture of indigenous peoples. This ultimately harms the entire world, for all things are connected, and when we harm any part, we harm the whole.

One of the most destructive of all long-term aid and development programs, funded in part by the World Bank and the EEC, is in Botswana. It has led to the extinction of zebra in the south of the country, and to the demise of hundreds of thousands of buffalo, wildebeest, and other wildlife by encouraging an export beef industry.

Thousands of kilometers of veterinary fences have been put up to control the spread of foot-and-mouth disease to cattle, primarily by buffalo. These fences have caused animals great suffering and the demise of hundreds of thousands of migratory wildlife species who are blocked by and even become ensnared in these fences of death. It is a tragic irony that Botswana's heavily subsidized beef, produced at such great cost to wildlife, is exported to Europe where half a million tons of European farmers' surplus beef is being held in cold storage by their governments at taxpayers' expense. Countless other species have been harmed by pesticides sprayed over thousands of square miles to kill the tsetse fly, carrier of sleeping sickness, a disease that affects cattle but is harmless to wildlife that have natural immunity.

A disrupted, but once relatively sustainable, African livestock culture will mean the end of Africa's Eden unless governments and development agencies alike recognize the role of livestock in sustainable agriculture in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

The cattle cult of other countries like India is contributing to irreparable loss of wildlife habitat, and thus to the end of the tiger, wild dog, and lion.

Increasing the "offtake," or rate of slaughter of cattle for sale as beef as a measure of population control, cannot be sustainable when these animals compete with people for land and food, and with cows, which provide milk and manure for fuel and fertilizer, replacement heifers, and young bulls to work the ox cart and plough.

The cattle herds of traditional pastoralists are like a bank that earns around 50 percent annual interest (one calf per cow per year), provided there are no droughts or animal disease epidemics. But when they become overcapitalized and keep more cattle than the land can sustain, what remedies remain? They cannot have more land. Keeping their herds small by killing more at a young age for beef is one logical solution, provided it is sustainable, done humanely, and does not contribute to the demise of wildlife.

Another solution is to improve the health, nutrition, and husbandry (or care) of their cattle and explore the potential for genetic improvement. However, until there is more effective control of the human population, and alternative, sustainable agricultural practices established, all controls of the livestock population will fail as long as people continue to multiply, need meat and milk, and raise cattle for status and economic security.

Furthermore, Western, sedentary, cattle-only, ranch-type operations, do not work well in other cultures and climates, and it is imprudent to encourage the third world countries to emulate the West's addiction to meat. We should not forget the devastating environmental consequences of the "opening" of the West to the cattle industry in the 19th century. The old cattle trails provide living evidence today of how extensive the cow cult became in a few decades, from Montana and the Dakotas to New Mexico and Texas. Millions of cattle were raised on the range, causing

irreparable damage to the wild grasslands of the West and Southwest in order to provide the growing industrial centers of the East with beef.

Government subsidies of this sector of the livestock industry continues today, ranchers too often abusing low grazing fees on public lands in the West by overstocking and other poor range-management practices. Only 2 percent of U.S. livestock meat is produced on public land in the West, the environmental costs of which do not justify the continued destruction of public lands and extinction of wild plant and animal species caused by the cattle industry.

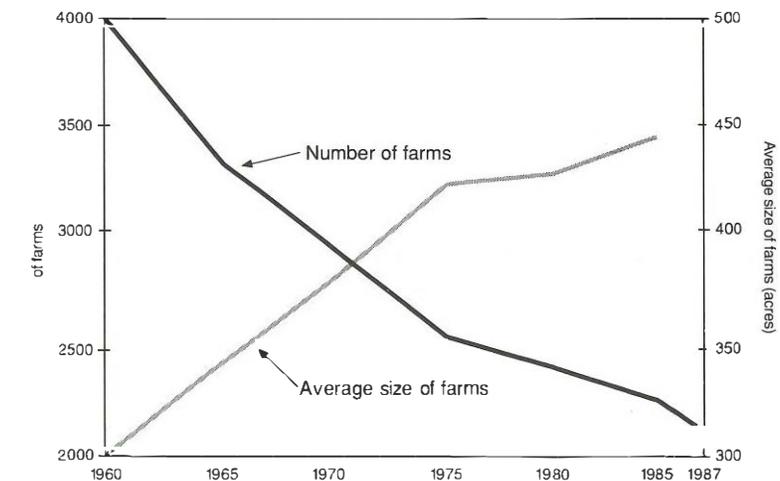
Government subsidies and consumer support of intensive feed-lot operations of inhumane veal production systems and of intensive poultry and hog farming systems in the industrial world should be opposed by all — and their adoption by less-developed countries strongly discouraged.

For economic and ecological reasons, fattening livestock on heavily subsidized feedgrains should be greatly reduced, and more forages used that are an integral aspect of crop rotation and ecological farming. Greater public support is needed for local producers of food and fiber. No beef, nor any other food or feed, should be imported from another region or country if the end result is to jeopardize local farmers who practice humane, sustainable agriculture. If alternative, socially just, humane, and sustainable agriculture is to ever find a safe and secure foothold for our future stewards of the land, it must be based upon local and regional public support of farmers and ranchers who care for the land and supported by state and federal governments.

In the United States, more than 400,000 family farms have gone out of business since 1985 (see Figure 9), and the same trend — fewer and larger farms — is evident in other developed nations. But these large factory-scale agribusiness farms are overproductive and, in the long-term, nonsustainable. Their wholesale use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers is not only harmful, but also not cost effective.

The agribusiness alliances of the livestock and poultry industries with multinational grain merchants and the petrochemical-pharmaceutical industrial complex must be confronted.

Figure 9: Farms — Number and Acreage — 1960-1987



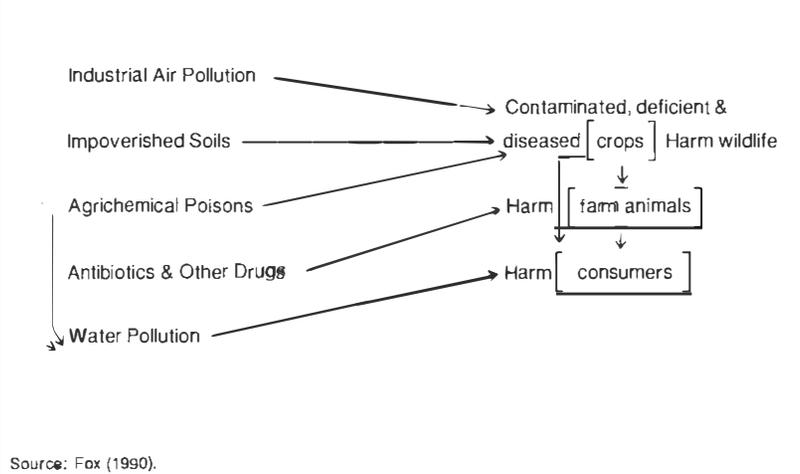
Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1988.

Local family farmers who practice humane and sustainable agriculture must be supported; we must also support traditional, ecologically sound, “natural farming” practices, like rotational grazing, organic farming, and animal feed production, permaculture, and other alternative agricultural practices and innovations. We should also avoid the temptations and convenience of “fast foods,” especially the hamburger, some 35 percent of which comes from spent dairy cows in the United States and may also contain beef from other countries where rain forests are fast disappearing and rangeland turning to desert.

The high-technology, utopian dream of industrial farming is not cost effective. Neither the land, nor farm animals, can be treated as nonliving resources, units of production, and mere commodities. The agribusiness experiment in such factory farming has shown its result: It doesn't work. Humane ways of raising livestock and poultry under less intensive and ultimately healthier conditions can be researched, adopted, and improved upon. They also can be better integrated with whole farming systems that are ecologically sound when livestock and people alike are

consuming in balance with the optimal carrying capacity of the region, and in the process helping to restore the natural biodiversity of the region they inhabit. Modern agriculture has many challenges to face today that cannot be put off until tomorrow. Industrial air pollution, impoverished soils, agrichemical poisons, antibiotics and other animal drugs, and water pollution variously harm wildlife, farm animals, the crops they consume, and all that we consume, especially the products of farm animals in whose bodies a host of harmful chemicals become concentrated. (See Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Interrelationships Between Environmental Factors and Human Health**



All new developments in food animal agriculture, like the pharmaceutical industry's push to make dairy farmers economically dependent upon one of its first major products of genetic engineering biotechnology — Bovine Growth Hormone (which farmers are to inject to stimulate cows to produce more milk) — must be opposed. Opposed, that is, if they do not accord with the science, economy, and philosophy of humane, sustainable agriculture.

Making meat less fatty and “consumer friendly” will not suffice. Meat must be derived humanely and from sustainable agricultural systems. The adverse environmental impact of farm ani-

mals will only be remedied when they are once again an integral part of a humane, sustainable, and socially just society that will forego raising large numbers of animals inefficiently, primarily for their meat.

In the long history of agriculture, following the domestication of cattle, sheep, and goats, we find two disparate agricultural economies evolving. The conflict between sedentary agrarian peoples who tilled the soil and kept a few livestock, and the nomadic, warring, pastoralist livestock keepers has been mythologized in the biblical account of the conflict between these two cultures of Cain and Abel. Many communities were destroyed by or assimilated with such tribal pastoralists as the Kurgans, Aryan nomads and Hittites, in search of more land for their expanding herds and peoples. Their tradition lives on today wherever livestock are kept as the primary source of wealth and agricultural productivity. And, whether they are nomadic or sedentary, their livestock almost invariably continue, like locusts, to ravage the land.

The long historical tradition of animal exploitation and cruelty, as exemplified by pagan religious slaughter and 19th century bull-baiting, continues today in the bull fight, the cowboy rituals of the rodeo calf-roping contests, the hot-iron branding of cattle on the range, and the ritual slaughter that entails the shackling and hoisting of a fully conscious animal. We must not forget how well the bovine species has served humanity for millennia. It is now time to liberate them from all forms of cruel exploitation and extend to them the respect and compassion that is long overdue.

Past civilizations held cows, among other creatures wild and tame, in far greater reverence than does industrial society today.

We live by a different currency today, for the only reverence for the cow is as a commodity, mere chattel and capital. We should never forget that cattle have harmed no one, but in the process of treating them as we do, we have turned them into a sentinel, indicator species, whose overabundance is no longer a measure of wealth. Rather, their numbers are indicative of ecological imbalance and loss of biodiversity. Cattle, along with other livestock, have become a major cause of global ecological damage,