

The Alliance for Sustainability ¹

Sustainable Agriculture Defined

Various definitions have been provided for what constitutes sustainable agriculture, ranging from the narrow focus on economics or production to the incorporation of culture and ecology. Wendell Berry has simply said, "A sustainable agriculture does not deplete soils or people."

Over time, the International Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture and an increasing number of researchers, farmers, policy-makers and organizations worldwide have developed a definition that unifies many diverse elements into a widely adopted, comprehensive, working definition: A sustainable agriculture is 1) ecologically sound, 2) economically viable, 3) socially just and 4) humane.

These four goals for sustainability can be applied to all aspects of any agricultural system, from production and marketing to processing and consumption. Rather than dictating what methods can and can not be used, they establish basic standards by which widely divergent agricultural practices and conditions can be evaluated and modified, if necessary to create sustainable systems. The result is an agriculture designed to last and be passed on to future generations.

Conceived in this sense, sustainable agriculture presents a positive response to the limits and problems of both traditional and modern agriculture. It is neither a return to the past nor an idolatry of the new. Rather, it seeks to take the best aspects of both traditional wisdom and the latest scientific advances. This results in integrated, nature-based agro-ecosystems designed to be self-reliant, resource-conserving and productive in both the short and long terms.

Ecological soundness: Aldo Leopold summed up this concept quite simply, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It's wrong when it tends to be otherwise." Derived from the Greek word for house, in current usage "eco" implies the wisdom and authority to manage in the best interests of the household. Species diversity is essential to achieve self-regulation and resultant stability. An ecologically sound agriculture also must be resource efficient in order to conserve precious resources, avoid systems toxicity and decrease input costs.

Economic viability: Essential to this perspective is that there be a positive net return, or at least a balance, in terms of resources expended and returned. Ignored in current accounting are numerous subsidies that make agriculture appear economically viable, and hidden costs such as loss of wildlife and health care costs from chemical exposure.

In addition to short-term market factors relating to supply and demand, real viability requires an understanding of a number of other considerations, including relative risk and qualitative factors (security, beauty, satisfaction), which are often ignored in economists' models because they are difficult to quantify. Asked Leopold, "Do economists know about lupines?"

Social Justice: The system must assure that resources and power are distributed equitably so that the basic needs of all are met and their rights are assured. This requires equitable control of resources and full participation. Whether in the field, market or voting both, all people must be able to participate in the vital decisions that determine their lives.

Access to land is necessary in order for a majority of the world's population to escape poverty and grow the food it requires. As important as equitable land tenure is the availability of adequate

resources to succeed in this effort, including capital, technical assistance and market opportunities. At the same time, the rights of landless farm workers and the urban poor must be recognized. This requires fair wages, a safe work environment, proper living conditions and the right to nutritious, healthy food.

Humaneness: Agriculture must embody our highest values (kindness, mercy, sympathy) in all aspects — from respect for life to the protection of diverse cultures.

Humans clearly have an interdependent relationship with animals — from their physical labor and companionship to their invaluable recycling of organic matter and provision of food — but too often animals are seen only as objects to be exploited. Humane agriculture must be based on a fundamental respect for animals and a recognition of their rights.

It is equally important that the highest values apply to human interactions as well. Cultural roots are as important to agriculture as plant roots. Without strong communities and vibrant cultures, agriculture will not flourish.

The increasing substitution of the term “agribusiness” for “agriculture” reflects a fundamental shift to a monetized economy in which everything, including human beings, is assigned a certain value. Such a system leads to an increased sense of competition, isolation and alienation. As rural societies break down, their values are lost as the backbone of the larger society. Without such a backbone, agriculture is neither humane nor sustainable. — by Terry Gips

References:

Jackson, Wes, Wendall Berry, and Bruce Colman, eds. 1984. *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*. North Point Press, San Francisco.

Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press, New York.

Notes

¹<http://homepages.mtn.org/iasa/susagdef.htm>