

Report on a Seattle Conference Cultivating Regional Food Security:

Recent Research in Urban Rural Food Systems
2010 WSU/UW Joint Conference, December 4-5, 2010
held at the Center for Urban Horticulture, UW Botanic Gardens, Seattle

Report by Michael Pilarski (all opinions are his alone)



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I attended this two day conference for a number of reasons.

- 1) I am one of the coordinators for Slow Food Okanogan (a local chapter of Slow Food) which is working toward localizing the food system in Okanogan County. I wanted to get ideas to bring back to our local area.
- 2) I am a small farmer and one of my markets for vegetables is a Seattle consumer buying club. The conference was a place I might make some market contacts.

As it turns out I did not meet any potential markets, but I did learn a lot to bring back to the Okanogan local food group.

I learned that:

- 1) WSU Cooperative extension has a lot of programs geared toward improving the local food situation. A lot of staff and a growing list of programs. I did not hear anyone give a figure for how much of WSU resources are devoted to serving big export agriculture as compared to local food agriculture. Certainly we know that conventional agriculture is WSU's main constituent and funding source. Conventional farmers need all the help they can get to stay afloat financially and meet ecological and climate challenges.
- 2) Local food is a big topic in the Puget Sound region. There is a continuing growth in the numbers of gardeners, community gardens, small farmers, and promoters of healthy food, organic, permaculture, etc. This has led to the formation of many grassroots groups around these issues. Let's call this broad overall group "bottom up". It has also led to the growth of government, agencies and academics starting programs to serve these constituencies. Let's call them "top down".
- 3) The conference was a meeting between these two broader groups of people. It was a WSU/UW joint conference, so it was hosted by the "top down" folks, but the "bottom up" folks were invited to participate. Virtually all the speakers were from the top down folks. Bottom up folks asked questions and made comments during the presentations and there was lots of talking in the breaks. On Sunday afternoon we had breakout working groups to develop proposals for the local food system.

This created more of a dialogue which involved everybody. I participated in the **“rooftop gardens and greenhouses”** working group and it was great. I typed up the notes and report for the group. I will be posting the **report** on my website: www.friendsofthetrees.net

An analysis of the 34 speakers showed that 10 are currently with WSU Cooperative Extension, 11 are working at universities or colleges, 9 are in government and 4 work for non-profits (tending to be the larger ones). Very few “bottom up” speakers. This is not to say that people in the top down sector aren’t doing good work. Many of them are. Many of them started their career as part of the bottom up group. Many of them work with the grassroots and help start grassroots initiatives and help them succeed. Some of the speakers were great (to me) and others ones were not very relevant to my bottom up outlook. Of course there is something to learn from everyone, and after all, I was there to hear where things were at with local food initiatives in Seattle from the academic/government point of view. So I am grateful for what I did hear and did learn.

For information on the Conference Proceedings contact conference coordinator Karen Luetjen at 206-616-1569 or luetjen@u.washington.edu.

By and large, it was a fantastic group of people. Like any group there were some personalities I liked and others I did not. But, we are all in this together.

I bring all this up because I would like to make a few comments on the differences between the top down and the bottom up approaches.

But first some of the highlights of the conference for me.

Sarita Schaffer was my favorite presenter because of her great work, her youthful enthusiasm and can-do attitude. . Sarita gave a presentation on Viva Farms in the Skagit Valley. The Viva Farms Incubator Program was launched in June 2009 to provide new farmers affordable access to education, training and technical assistance; capital and credit; land and markets.

The first development phase of the incubator is well underway. Thirty students, approximately half of whom are Latino, completed Skagit County’s first bilingual “Sustainable Small Farming and Ranching” course and thirty-six students completed the first bilingual “Agricultural Entrepreneurship and Farm Business Planning” course. The Port of Skagit has leased Viva Farms 33 acres for an incubator farm where course graduates may sublease plots on which to launch and grow their farm businesses. Access to shared infrastructure, equipment and low-interest “educational loans” minimizes participants’ start-up costs, while agricultural and entrepreneurial support from peers, WSU Extension personnel and Viva Farms staff increases the likelihood of early-stage success.

The farm incubator is not an end point for farmers. It is a starting point to transition them to farm ownership and secure long-term tenure. Once farmers establish stable agricultural enterprises at the incubator, Viva Farms will help them relocate to new land and continue growing their operations. They will need capital to acquire land, equipment,

seeds, livestock and other farm inputs. The goal of the loan fund is to provide affordable start-up and growth capital to new farmers.

Sarita teaches bilingual farm business planning courses as a regional director of WSU's Latino Farming Program. She also directs GrowFood.org, a 30,000-member sustainable farming work, internship, and volunteer organization that she co-founded in 2001.

Dr. Steve Jones gave a great presentation on small-scale grain growing titled "Kicking the Commodity Habit: Small Grains for Small Farms". Dr. Jones is obviously one of the leaders in re-decentralizing small grain production in the New England states as well as the Pacific Northwest. His presentation was informative, upbeat and clearly showed a great empathy and respect for small farmers. Jones comes from many years as a wheat breeder at WSU Pullman. He is currently the director of the Northwestern Washington Research of Extension Center of Washington States University in Mount Vernon. We're lucky to have him there.

Elise Krohn is a traditional foods educator and herbalist who works with western Washington tribes through Northwest Indian College. Elise's presentation was on "Tribal Food Sovereignty in Western Washington". We learned about the current situation vis-à-vis traditional foods and Native Peoples in the region and current initiatives to increase the use of traditional foods in the diets of tribal people. There is an upsurge in interest in traditional foods within the tribes. Elise reported on this upsurge.

Just prior to attending the conference I ran across Elise Krohn's 2010 book (co-authored with Valerie Segrest) *Feeding the People, Feeding the Spirit: Revitalizing Northwest Coast Indian Food Culture*. I was staying at a friend's house and read the whole book while there. So I was pleasantly surprised to meet Elise several days later at the conference along with Valerie Segrest and two other tribal animators she works with. I recommend their book to anyone interested in this topic.

Katie Murphy gave a report on her "Soil Study of Urban Planting Strips" in Northwest Seattle. This is a very useful piece of work for urban gardening. Katie analyzed hundreds of soil samples from roadside median strips throughout northwest Seattle testing for organic matter, nutrients, ph, suitability for gardening, as well as for lead, arsenic and cadmium contamination. Her findings are that most of the soils already contain a decent amount of nutrients and organic matter and are suitable for food production. One thing that needs further elucidation is on what are the problematic levels of these three contaminants since state and federal agencies have different standards. Her heavy metal findings were that cadmium is not a problem except in some small areas, lead is within acceptable limits in most parking strips and backyards. Arsenic is above 19 ppm in about half of the parking strips (Washington contaminant level is 19 ppm) but most of this is below 30 ppm which is the EPA polluted level.

Of course more testing needs to be done, especially of heavy metals in the food grown on these sites. My understanding is that there is little heavy metal uptake in soils that are high in organic matter and biological activity. The best gardening techniques for productivity and soil health will also reduce risk of toxics uptake. Another factor is that different plant parts concentrate heavy metals differently. Fruits are safer than leafy greens or seeds in a contaminated situation.

Murphy is currently pursuing a Master's in Restoration Ecology and Environmental Horticulture at UW. Upon reviewing this report she commented: "Thank you for the very accurate reporting of my study. One thing to note is that these results were from preliminary data and the full disclosure of the study will happen when I complete the analysis and then defend my thesis in June."

Travis English gave a fascinating look at a Kenya project in his presentation "Transforming Agriculture in Kenya with Community-Driven Solutions". The Tumaini Women's Group is a group of 22 widows aged 72 to 102. Most of their children have died (mostly HIV/Aids) and they were collectively caring for 73 grandchildren. Due to poverty, drought and poor soil (as a legacy of chemical farming) they had little food production. Enter Samuel Nederuti and his wife Peris with training on how to grow food using biointensive methods. Their small, grassroots ngo is called Grow Biointensive Agricultural Centre of Kenya. They are both graduates of the Manor House Agricultural Centre in Kitale, Kenya which has trained thousands of people in ecological farming methods. The woman's group now grows enough food to feed themselves and their families and with surplus to sell to break out of their cycle of poverty. The situation is tough in Kenya, but there is a large grass-roots movement for ecological farming. In spite of decades of the "green revolution" promoting chemical fertilizers, pesticides, etc which have impoverished many farmers and much farmland. One evidence of this grass roots movement is the Kenya Biodiversity Coalition which is composed of 95 groups representing 50,000 individuals. An article on KBC is at www.realchangenews.org/index.php/site/archives/4272/

Travis was also at the conference to blow the whistle on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's "Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). AGRA was launched in 2006 by the Rockefeller Foundations and the Gates Foundation. Monsanto is also heavily involved in AGRA. AGRA's mission is to increase the amount of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and chemical-dependent high-yield seed varieties and genetically modified seeds. In essence, repeating all the mistakes of the last "green revolution" and reducing food sovereignty in Africa while increasing profits and control by the big multinationals. The conference participants, by and large, were horrified to hear what our local Gates Foundation was up to in Africa. One of the conference organizers rushed up to the microphone to say that the intent behind AGRA was good, even if we disagreed with its methods. I certainly would like to think well of the Gates Foundation and its good intentions, but working with Monsanto and the Rockefeller Foundations certainly gives grounds to be suspicious of their intent. If you want to know more about this go to www.seattleglobaljustice.org/agra-watch. The website also gives information on the other activities of the Community Alliance for Global Justice. Working locally for justice in the global economy.

Some other tidbits from my conference notes.

The world is currently growing enough food to feed 9 billion people. At least one billion of today's 6.8 billion population are chronically hungry. Obviously hunger is a problem

of equitable food distribution (resource distribution overall) rather than a problem of a shortage of available food.

Resilient Farms Project, Western Washington University
Helping Define and Promote Small and Medium Sized Farm Resilience to Extreme Events and Rapid Changes
www.wwu.edu/huxley/resilience/Research/FarmResilience/FarmResilience.shtml

The city of Belo, Brazil is an example of how a large city can make affordable food accessible to everyone. For an investment of \$10 million annually they have funded many projects to accomplish their food goals. Which works out to only a penny per person per day. Belo is the capital of and largest city in the state of Minas Gerais, located in the southeastern region of Brazil. It is the third-largest metropolitan area in the country. Belo has a population of over 2.4 million, or almost 5.4 million in the official Metropolitan Area. See article at www.yesmagazine.org/issues/food-for-everyone/the-city-that-ended-hunger

Re-imagining GDP (or GNP)

Some other ways of measuring progress are:

- Genuine Progress Indicator. Vermont and Minnesota publish GPI statistic for their states.
- Minnesota Sustainability Indicators,
- Canadian Index of Well Being
- Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index
- Sustainable Food Indicators, Wallace Center

Food System Factoids

<http://foodsystemfactoids.blogspot.com>

The Food Bubble: Speculation in hunger and food.

Harper's Magazine, July 2010

harpers.org/archive/2010/07/0083022

The world record for wheat production is 120 bushels/acre, set in 1919 at Ebey's Prairie on Whidby Island, Washington.

Worker Owned Cooperatives & Food

An article on this is at www.foodfirst.org/en/node/3111

Some contrasts between the top down and the bottom up approach to food re-localization.

At one point in our working session I proposed that citizens be encouraged to start rooftop gardens without asking for permits (or permission). I was quickly shut down. I think this is representative of the differences between top down and bottom up.

Government has the general attitude that government knows best and people can't be trusted to do the right thing. The government must set regulations to protect the citizens and the public. Regulations usually mean permits, delays, fees and inspections. It becomes prohibitive to do many things for oneself. Many things are outright prohibited and to pursue them risks, fines, reprisals, even imprisonment. An example is grey water systems, which were illegal in Seattle till recently.

While there are certainly cases where regulations, etc are good, there are also arguably many cases where regulations are excessive infringements on individual rights. They squelch personal initiative and change from the bottom up. I recently heard a story about a sustainability gathering in the Puget Sound region organized by the bottom up crowd i.e. regular citizens. City government sent a representative to listen in. When the government person asked the crowd what the city could do to help, he was told the city could "Get out of the way".

I am all for good government. I like government that helps the people, that serves the people. Unfortunately so much of current government policies have more to do with helping big business than they do with helping people. I am one of the majority of Americans who think we have too much government and mis-directed government. Government has to win back the trust of the people. I hold out much more hope for the grass-roots solving our current problems than I do for the government to do so. At this point, it looks like there will be a steady cut-back in government services and employees whether we like it or not. Which will defacto make civil society responsible for many services the government now provides.

I would look forward to attending a conference on Regional Food Security which was organized by the bottom up crowd. Have the presenters be representatives of grass roots initiatives and have a lot of dialogue. Certainly it should invite the top-down crowd to listen and to build collaboration. The best case scenario means that everyone is on board and helping create a better local food system. At this point, the biggest potential for change is in grassroots civil society.

What are the food conferences which have been held, or are being planned (in Washington State) that most exemplify the bottom up approach? Please send me your nominations. I'd love to include such a list with this article on my website.

Of course these views are mine alone and do not represent the views of the conference. I imagine there would be some sympathy with some of my opinions by some participants, but I expect that this might push a lot of people's buttons on both side of the fence. Obviously like most dichotomies in our society, there is no clear black and white. We each carry some of both approaches in our makeup. We are all working for towards an improved local food system. Yes, we should get along but sometimes it is useful to read a perspective from a member of the bottom up crowd.

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Feedback from Dr. Steve Jones upon reviewing this article.

“Hi Michael, thanks for sending this and for taking the time to write it. Looks great to me.

I think the top down vs. bottom up style was dictated by the way it was organized towards a goal of coming at these issues from a scientific point of view. At least I heard a few of the organizers describe it that way,”