

Sustainability: Goal Or Process

by Harry MacCormack

When [Wes Jackson](#) of [The Land Institute](#) in Salena, KS began using the term sustainability in the late 1970s, he and many others were reacting to an agriculture that is based in extraction. A food production system that mines, uses toxic synthetic chemicals, and pollutes every element of its resource base (soil, water, and air) is entropic. That system will at some point, for a variety of reasons, be incapable of production of food, fiber or even fuel.

Wes always envisioned re-grassing the great prairies of the U.S.A. He saw that for the long haul most of agriculture needed to move to perennial production based in biologically aligned farming and ranching practices. He, [Bill Mollison](#), and a host of others spawned various versions of permaculture. Bill's work is more orchard and garden oriented. Wes's work was with grains and seeds. What was being taught by both great men is, 40 years later, being practiced by only a few worldwide. Basically we have not understood the revolutionary nature of true sustainability. For it is not a concept or set of practices which can easily inform our current agricultural institutions. It runs counter to the industrial model. The implied durability is counter to the dominant culture processes of use for immediate profit. Setting up agricultural systems that remain biologically resilient for hundreds or thousands of years is not what modern society is about.

So what about all the moves to "Sustainability" by university ag schools, city councils, huge food chains? Sustainability is definitely well marketed. Are these marketers really trying to set up processes that, if achieved, would cut their own marketing throats?

As I said in *The Transition Document: Toward An Environmentally Sound Agriculture* in 1989 and 1993, the concept of sustainability has changed to mean "keeping what we have". Actually, the dictionary definition of "sustain" is "to keep from sinking or falling, especially with bearing up from below; uphold; support. " So for our institutions, the sustainability movement is a new way to say that all our conventional agriculture practices must go on... because they have gotten us to this glorious state of full shelves in super markets worldwide. It is a way of confirming, with a few environmentalisms added, that our current industrial food system will go on in perpetuity. All this is supported by a Federal Definition of Sustainability put into law in 1990 around the same time that we first established a Federal Definition for Organic. Public Law 101-624, Title XVI, Subtitle A, Section 1683 ¹ defines sustainable agriculture as "an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long term, satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole. "

Notice the open ended definition and the hedge words "where appropriate". This definition is neither "organic" nor is it "biological" in the sense of aligning agricultural practices with naturally occurring biological processes. It is a definition that leaves room for integrated pest

management (IPM) based in chemical control, although there are biologically based IPM practices available.

When we see "sustainable" food labels "certified" by a host of certifiers whose rules allow for "low input" chemical controls, we are looking at the newest version of conventional chemically based agriculture dressed up to look like an agriculture rooted in biological practices. Huge differences! And the general public is not aware.

Finally, years ago I gave a talk at a national press conference in which I got the cameras to go on by stating that "Organic is not Sustainable." I've just restated the difference. But there is another issue with sustainability that has not been adequately addressed by the organic movement. Are we generating biological resilience as we grow ever larger chunks of market? How do we know? We are not requiring any soil food web testing, which would give us a clue as to the directions our soils are headed. We are, with our practices, keeping synthetics out of the soil, water and air, but in the name of economic viability are we promoting less trucking, less packaging? In other words, has the organic community really made an effort to move away from the dominant industrial paradigm?

Real sustainability means developing a biologically integrated community at very local levels. This translates to developing integrated human communities based on very local food production practiced to what amounts to organic standards. In fact, local standards need to be more than organic for food systems that could sustain communities as long as humans are on the planet. For more on the how-to of such development go to www.tenriversfoodweb.org. We will attempt to keep all who are interested informed as we build such a three county food system.

¹ Public Law 101-624, Title XVI, Subtitle A, Section 1683, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., NAL KF 1692.831 1990