

Ethics

"No other industry has the burden of responsibility that agriculturalists have, yet we have no code of ethics"

Alex Sim

The conference "Decision Making in Agriculture: The Role of Ethics" hosted by the Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC), Jan. 20-22, 1994, provided a rare opportunity for farmers and academics to discuss the future of agriculture and the choices farmers must make as they confront the massive changes that global trade, biotechnology and concern for animal welfare are having on their way of life.

Although the conference agenda was set in the broader context of a project "Building an Ethical Framework for Agriculture," run jointly by NSAC and the Dalhousie University Philosophy Department, it was clear that most participants were barely coming to terms with the crisis facing agriculture let alone trying to reach consensus on a new agricultural ethic.

In the keynote address, Dr. Paul Thompson, Director of the Centre for Biotechnology and Ethics at Texas A&M, focused on the clash between the Libertarian and Agrarian worldview. Thompson briefly defined the Libertarian worldview as one advocating individual freedom and property rights. Focusing on John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," Thompson used the bank's

foreclosure on the sharecropping Jode family as an example of Libertarian thought.

"The bankers are just making good sound business decisions," he said. " There is an ethic that tells them what they are doing is right."

In contrast, Thompson proposed that the Jodes followed an Agrarian worldview which stressed family, community and personal loyalty. "The Jodes see themselves as neighbours. What's ethical is to be loyal to people that depend on you and who you depend on," said Thompson.

Like many farmers today, he added, the Jodes did not see themselves as a distinct class and had difficulty comprehending the complex forces affecting their way of life. Developing an agricultural ethic respectful of the agrarian worldview is difficult, concluded Thompson, when agriculture is changing from being a community based activity to an industrial one.

The declining influence of agriculture is often thought to be a simple question of fewer farms and farmers, but the economic value of farming is in decline, as well. Using a study by U. of Maine economics professor Stuart Smith, organic vegetable farmer Norbert Kungl explained that the importance of farmers as food producers, when expressed in terms of the money generated by animal and crop production on farms, has barely doubled in the past 80 years. In contrast, he said, the value of the same commodities in the marketing sector (transportation, processing, packaging, promotion) has risen 600%.

Perhaps thinking about the four cents worth of wheat that go into the average loaf of bread, pig farmer Tom Van Milligan said that "at one time farmers viewed themselves as producers of food, today we are not. We produce a commodity turned into food on a global market."

Van Milligan led off the debate on animal welfare by describing modern housing systems which are designed "to raise more animals in less space with fewer people" as "factories" causing stress. Dissatisfied with conventional production technology, Van Milligan developed a group housing system for his sows, piglets and weaner pigs using deep straw/hay bedding with natural ventilation.

The system has been rewarding because the animals are more quiet and contented than previously while the barn is almost odourless.

As Van Milligan put it, "animal stress transmits itself to humans.

Humans become less human when they treat animals inhumanely.

"Now," he said, "our farm has become a better place to work because the animals are under less stress."

Bernard Rollin, philosopher at the University of Colorado, proposed that public concern for animal welfare has resulted from the evolution of animal husbandry into animal science. The difference, he said, was a question of caring for the individual versus caring for a population.

With the development of large scale production units, said Rollin, animal husbandry has been transformed into animal science using "technological sanders" like dry sow stalls, antibiotics and artificial insemination to put livestock in environments that

benefit humans but not necessarily the animals.

Rollin noted that in the future, farmers would not only face pressure to improve animal care from the radical segments of society, but also from the conservative middle class. This has already happened in Europe. Possibly, confrontations over animal welfare could be avoided if the public participated with farmers in forging a framework for the ethical treatment of livestock.

The proceedings shifted to international agricultural policy, highlighted by a sobering account of the world food trade by Bill Heffernan, Professor of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri. After describing how as few as four transnational corporations (TNCs) control over 50% of the U.S. markets for beef and broilers and that three firms control 80% of the flour milled in North America, Heffernan said that among the major commodity groups there is basically no competition left.

He went on to explain how TNCs are shifting livestock production to developing countries where production costs are lower. He pointed out how Cargill made Thailand a world leader in chicken production inside of a dozen years and suggested that within 10 years, more hogs destined for Canadian and American dinner plates may be produced in China than North America.

Heffernan asked whether in a free global market third world countries would exist as markets for North American farmers in a global economy or as competition?

"In the world of power, food is different than anything else," said Heffernan. "The Saudis are producing wheat at \$12 per bushel

because they realize that even oil will not stand up against the power of food."

By the same token, he added that TNCs in agribusiness reap a return of 2020% on their investment, second only to the pharmaceutical industry. "We are an industry where there is money," said Heffernan, "it's just that farmers are not making any".

In light of their immense power and the disregard TNCs have for economic and social structures in host countries, dairy farmer Havey Whidden noted that "when we open our markets to the world any control of our ethics will be gone."

One participant suggested that the recent decision to allow the sale of bovine somatotropin in the U.S., and the expectation of a similar ruling in Canada, despite widespread opposition is a clear example of how agrarian ethics have no place in a global market.

The 24 conference speakers showed that a large ethical gulf exists between large farmers who see farming mainly as a business and smaller farmers who also see farming as a way of life. Jack Wilkinson, President of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture took the position that anything but agribusiness was essentially subsistence agriculture and a quick route to poverty. By advocating a "get big or get out" approach to decision making, Wilkinson was seen by some as presenting a bleak and short sighted vision of agriculture not shared by the entire farming community.

Charles Blatz, author of "Ethics in Agriculture: An Anthology

on Current Issues in a World Context" (U. Idaho Press, 1991) followed Wilkinson by saying "it's irrational if a large scale producer thinks of the other people as anything other than competitors, likewise it's irrational if a small scale producer thinks of himself as a tough-minded business man."

Blatz said that

to be useful, an agricultural ethic should empower as many in the agricultural industry as possible, including medium and small scale farmers in order to ensure a secure and safe supply of food for consumers.

Author and educator Alex Sim, was quick to point out, however, that an ethical framework would be obstructed by big business and big government. He was doubtful a ethic based on the needs of farmers and the land could be formed.

University of Guelph sociologist Tony Winson recommended that farmers form strategic alliances with public interest groups such as the Sierra Club, land trusts and animal welfare advocates in order to strengthen the position of family farmers. Presumably consumers groups should also be included in this list but their voice was markedly absent during the conference. Winson added that Canadian farmers should ally themselves with their American counterparts who he says are not so much competing against Canadians but against the same corporate giants.

Farmer and former president of the Associated Country Women of the World, Ellen McLean, questioned the need for building a new ethical framework for agriculture by saying that the farm speakers

at the conference proved that one already existed. However, defending the ethical values of farmers was not the purpose of the conference. Instead, farmers were contemplating whether decisions based on their traditional ethical beliefs would suffice amid the complex changes affecting agriculture.

Philosopher Mora Campbell pointed out that historically the discussion of ethics has been very urban and that it is difficult to develop an agricultural ethic when few people talk about farming.

"How do you build an ethic for something people say is a thing of the past?" said Campbell.

Ethics cannot be legislated. To build an ethic, Campbell said, farmers and non farmers must start questioning what they value about agriculture and begin to tell stories about what matters most to them in life. The dialogue should include listening to emotions because emotions are very rational, said Campbell. It is on this basis that a consensus will form on which an agricultural ethic can be built. The Ethics in Agriculture conference was a step in this direction.

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