

**UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ**

**Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades**

**LIBERAL ARTS AND AGRICULTURE:  
A PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY**

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**Artes Liberales**

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**LIBERAL ARTS AND AGRICULTURE:**

**A PATH TO SUSTAINABILITY**

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## RESUMEN

El acto aparentemente simple de comprar o cultivar alimentos tiene una amplia gama de consecuencias, y a través de un conjunto reflexivo de opciones en la producción y compra de alimentos, es posible un cambio de paradigma global. La forma y la escala en que se producen los alimentos pueden ser claves para invertir la tendencia actual del calentamiento global y ofrecer alimentos estables, sostenibles, sanos y asequibles a la población mundial. El propósito de este trabajo de investigación es ofrecer una visión positiva y orientada a las soluciones de cuáles son las tendencias actuales en la agricultura sostenible y cómo el individuo puede tomar decisiones que apoyen un futuro sostenible. Una revisión de obras literarias y filosóficas históricas proporcionará una base de artes liberales a las ideas occidentales sobre la agricultura.

**Palabras clave:** Artes Liberales, Agricultura Apoyada por la Comunidad, Ecología, Economía, Agricultura Sostenible

## **ABSTRACT**

The seemingly simple act of purchasing or growing food has a wide range of consequences, and through a thoughtful set of choices in food production and purchasing, a global paradigm shift is possible. The way and scale in which food is produced can be a key toward reversing the current trend of global warming and offering stable, sustainable, healthy, and affordable food to the global population. The purpose of this research paper is to offer a positive and solution-oriented view of what the current trends are in sustainable agriculture and how the individual can make choices that support a sustainable future. A review of historical literary and philosophical works will provide a liberal arts foundation to Western ideas about agriculture.

**Keywords:** Liberal Arts, Community Supported Agriculture, Ecology, Economy, Sustainable Agriculture

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## **Introduction**

How people choose to procure and produce food can be viewed through a philosophical lens, which proves to be an effective way of navigating the choices involved in an essential human activity such as cultivation. Beginning with a review of historical literature regarding the cultivated world and early attitudes toward nature, this thesis will examine what it means to be cultured rather than uncivilized, and a unique perspective emerges. This perspective reveals that western thought has long fostered an attitude of dominion toward nature, indigenous cultures, and laborers. Specifically, industrial agricultural food production systems require that something or someone must be conquered for production to be civilized or cultivated. This attitude did not consider what the long-term consequences of such destructive actions would have on a global scale, but we now understand that the world is a more sensitive and malleable system than we had ever imagined, one that is highly susceptible to destructive human activity. Critically, this activity is now understood to be the primary driver of climate change and a major cause of mass extinction of species due to habitat loss. The natural systems that early western human beings sought to dominate have largely fallen under their influence, and the results are alarming.

As a response to the current climate crisis, many people are reimagining cultivation practices. Because most food production in pre-modern times was local and organic, the imperative to work with nature and natural systems is not a new idea. Today, those who stand in opposition to industrialized, monocultural agriculture are returning to the traditional ways as a solution to the problems caused by fossil fuel driven globalized and corporatized agriculture. Indeed, there are groups all around the world working to embrace a sustainable, smaller scale system of farming, food production, distribution, and consumption. The growing momentum of local action is proving to have benefits globally as more individuals and societies recognize and support the health-affirming benefits of sustainable agriculture.



Sustainable agriculture is a system of producing food that is in balance with nature and has a cycle of inputs and outputs that can be viewed as a closed loop rather than a linear system. Thus, it is renewable; whereas, industrial agriculture relies on fossil fuel inputs and pollution outputs, rendering it inherently unsustainable and environmentally catastrophic.

Having studied in my Liberal Arts major at USFQ ecology, literature, anthropology, philosophy, and biology, I have gained a unique perspective on the interconnected relationships between these fields and the perspectives they offer on the environment and agriculture. By investigating the sources of western attitudes and behavior and the modern solutions to the climate crisis, I hope to provide some possible solutions and align modern thought with a sustainable path forward. Large global philosophical problems can seem too enormous for an individual to feel that they can make a difference; however, I hope to demonstrate that an individual can have a substantial impact by making choices specifically related to how they produce, purchase, and consume food. Central to the idea of modern sustainable agriculture is the principle of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), an idea in which the individual members of a community choose to support local, small-scale farmers. This support can come in a variety of forms that are broad and will be explored in the following sections. I provide positive and feasible solutions to the problems of hunger, poverty, pollution, and climate change that have proven track records and are readily accessible to individuals and communities. This thesis focuses on CSAs in the United States of America, but these principles may be applied on a much broader global scale.

For perspective on future endeavors, one must first look to the past to understand how the current system came to be. With this knowledge in hand, a movement to heal the planet and systems of food production can emerge stronger with the wisdom of hindsight. Health, bounty, economic success, and sustainability can coexist.

What makes the cornfield smile; beneath what star  
 Maecenas, it is meet to turn the sod  
 Or marry elm with vine; how tend the steer;  
 What pains for cattle-keeping, or what proof  
 Of patient trial serves for thrifty bees:  
 Such are my themes.

Virgil, *The Georgics*

### **Agriculture and the Liberal Arts**

There is no culture without agriculture. As human beings evolved away from hunter-gatherer and nomadic ways of life, agriculture allowed us to settle in one place year-round, to grow crops according to the seasons, and to raise livestock through careful breeding and husbandry. Moreover, by learning how to eat seasonally and to store foodstuffs for the lean times of winter or the droughts and heat of summer, people were able to focus less on the practical necessities of survival and could instead use leisure time to develop alternative ways of thinking and living. The ability of families and communities to thrive with relative ease in a certain location would eventually lead to local diet and cuisine, language, storytelling, customs, style, and traditions unique to their population and region. In other words, agriculture was the practical and necessary context for the development of the Liberal Arts, and among the earliest manifestations of art in the Western Tradition had to do with understanding our place (“ser”) in the world (“cosmos”) for the development of both agriculture and culture.

Some found inspiration from the gods and their divine interventions; others looked to the cosmos to develop a secular understanding of nature through science-based and

observational poetry. A famous example of the latter comes from Virgil, the same Virgil who wrote the great ancient Roman epic, *The Aeneid*. The thesis statement, if you will, in the epigraph above comes from the beginning of his less-known work, a shorter, four-book epic called *The Georgics* (29 BCE). He intends to inform his patron, Maecenas, how to grow happy crops, to use the stars to understand the seasons, to grow grapes for wine, to tend the cattle, and to extract honey from the bees. The etymology of the word “georgic” comes from the ancient Greek: “geo” meaning “earth” combines with “ergon” meaning “work”, which together mean “earth worker”; that is, “farmer” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). That such an elite and intellectual author would lower his focus to farming might be surprising, especially since Virgil never himself grew any crops; in addition, as there were probably very few literate farmers, his audience must also have been limited to a rather elite group (Wilkinson 1950, p. 19). What then is the purpose of this kind of poetry? One of the first critical reviews of the epic came from his famous contemporary, Seneca, who argued that “[Virgil’s] object was to delight his readers rather than to instruct farmers” (as cited in Spurr, 1986, p. 164). But Spurr and others have attempted to rehabilitate Virgil’s reputation: “We must [...] beware against charging Virgil with agricultural inaccuracy” (p. 166). There is no reason why a poet cannot be both entertaining and informative, and there is a long tradition of this kind of literature running up to the present day. In the United States, a founding father, Benjamin Franklin, for example, published beginning in 1732 (renewed annually) a best-selling, witty, and yet highly useful example from the “farmer’s almanac” genre called *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Pencak (1992) connects the two famous authors: “Franklin drew eclectically on history, the classics, English tradesmen’s manual, and Augustan literature [i. e. Virgil]” (p. 191). That both Virgil and Franklin were intimately involved in nation building suggests the importance of both literature and agriculture to a nation’s identity.

My goal in this first section of the thesis is briefly to trace the history of this Liberal Arts and agriculture literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, the earliest extant literary texts address the topic of agriculture and the separation of culture from nature. Possibly the earliest of all is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Sumerian or Babylonian or Assyrian anonymous work from about 2,000 BCE or perhaps even earlier. The two main characters are Gilgamesh, who represents the rise of civilization, and Enkidu, who symbolizes Nature until he is subdued by Gilgamesh. Early in the text, a woman known simply as the “Harlot” asks Enkidu, “Why do you yearn to run wild with the beasts of the hills?” (p. 5). She then leads Enkidu to culture by first putting him in clothes and then introducing him to a group of Shepherds: “They put down bread in front of him, but Enkidu could only suck the milk of wild animals” (p. 6). Eventually the Harlot says, “Enkidu, eat bread, it is the staff of life; drink the wine, it is the custom of the land” (p. 6). Eventually he obeys, and at that moment, “Enkidu had become a man” (p. 6). Bread and wine are the direct results of agriculture; whereas, the drinking of milk was an earlier food product. Thus, agriculture leads directly to culture, but in the anonymous author’s fatalistic view, Enkidu dies of sickness precipitated by the very act of his enculturation. Wolff (1969) opines, “Enkidu serves as an example of a hero who wins fame but dies early and miserably; what is the use, the poet seems to ask, in such a life?” (p. 392). The transition in human history as depicted in *Gilgamesh* is evidently as much tragedy as epic.

The origin story in “Genesis” from the Bible can be read in a similarly tragic note. After Adam and Eve sin, God pronounces his punishment: “Unto the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Dr. Matthew Dolloff, Professor of Humanities at Universidad San Francisco de Quito, who advised me on this tradition and alerted me to Virgil’s *Georgics* and other historical texts. I also took his “Literature and Ecology” class at USFQ in 2019, and many of the primary sources included here are taken from his reading list.

thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (3:16). Eve’s labor will be childbirth and obedience, but Adam’s labor will be to till the earth: “cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (3:17-9). Whereas before, our original parents could simply pick the food they needed as they needed it in a garden that saw no extremes in heat or abundance; now they must face the harsh reality of a life of labor simply to survive. Blenkinsopp astutely observes, “The verdict on the man and the woman is not a punishment distinct from the expulsion into a harsher world, but simply a description of what life outside the garden will entail” (as cited in Heger, 2004, p. 54). God is not punishing them immediately but rather indicating what kind of future they and the rest of us will face.

Both *Gilgamesh* and “Genesis” depict a dystopian future after the transition to civilization and culture, and this vision is repeated in many works. As populations grew in large part because of advances in agriculture, field laborers and indeed enslaved peoples became the subject and occasionally authors of the oppression caused by industrial and globalized production. One example from the English Enlightenment period is Stephen Duck’s poem “The Thresher’s Labour” (1730). Duck was a farm laborer who had a natural genius for poetry. Like Virgil, he found fame in his country: his patron was Queen Caroline, and he was nominated to be Poet Laureate. But unlike Virgil, he was a commoner who felt so out of place in high society that he eventually committed suicide, and his poetry had little of the rhapsodical praises of country life.

The Sweat, and Dust, and suffocating Smoke,

Make us so much like Ethiopians look:

We scare our Wives, when Evening brings us home;

And frightened Infants think the Bug-bear come. (lines 66-69)

Keegan (2001) argues that Duck is responding to the georgic tradition by adding a heightened realism to his poetic descriptions: “Duck is just as concerned with engaging the debate about the formal nature and purpose of the georgic [...] as he was in describing the act of threshing” (p. 546). The realism is apparent as he discusses sweat at least five times in his short poem, for example.

For enslaved Africans in the Eighteenth Century Caribbean, the dystopia was all too real. While Duck managed miraculously to ascend to the highest status as poet, enslaved people often had no voice or identity at all. Dehumanized and abused, they became the workforce of a globalized monocultural agricultural industry. A new genre of abolitionist poetry surfaced in which “Writers exposed the cruelties that the slave suffered in America and the West Indies at the hands of overseers or other persons placed over him” (Turner, 1929, p. 391). One such poem is by a Frenchman writing in English about a sugar plantation in Jamaica in the late 1700s called “To Sir Toby.”

Ye powers! who form'd these wretched tribes, relate,

What had they done, to merit such a fate?

Why were they brought from Eboe's sultry waste

To see that plenty which they must not taste—

Food, which they cannot buy, and dare not steal,

Yams and potatoes!—many a scanty meal! —

The North American continent was largely colonized for the purpose of monoculture crops intended for export such as cotton, tobacco, and as here, sugar (and its byproduct, rum).

While the poem describes at length atrocities directed at enslaved people, I chose this passage because it also points out that the enslaved people had to grow their own cheap and unhealthy foods to eat while most of the land was used for sugar production and all the profits went to the planters. This inequality will become an important part of my subsequent analysis of community supported agriculture.

Maximizing land use at any cost became part of the philosophical discussions about production during the Enlightenment. The moral imperative to conquer the earth in the name of production comes from the first book of “Genesis”: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (1:26). Later, we are enjoined to “subdue” the earth. This led the highly influential social philosopher John Locke to argue in 1690 that “God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniencies of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational” (p. 13). His specific example was America, where the natives could and should be removed if they failed to cultivate the land to its maximum potential. Moreover, a man had the right to produce more than he could use if he could exchange goods for money before they spoiled, and that overproduction could be the result of others’ labor, enslaved or otherwise.

The opposite tradition to this realistically dystopian vision of food production is the equally unrealistic utopic vision of rural life. Although Seneca criticized Virgil for his naïve conception of farming, the pastoral tradition, in which poor people in the countryside were

praised for their innocence, honesty, and singing prowess, began earlier in Greece with authors such as Theocritus (c. 300 – 260 BCE). The goal is to celebrate an idyllic Golden Age, where, as in Eden, life is so easy and food so plentiful that days could be spent searching for and wooing potential lovers. The passages are quaint and old-fashioned, and even a little silly:

See here ten apples: from thy favourite tree  
 I plucked them: I shall bring ten more anon.  
 Ah witness my heart-anguish! Oh! Were I  
 A booming bee, to waft me to thy lair,  
 Threading the fern and ivy in whose depths  
 Thou nestlest! I have learned what Love is now:  
 [...]  
 O thou whose glance is beauty and whose heart  
 All marble: O dark-eyebrowed maiden mine!  
 Cling to thy goatherd, let him kiss thy lips,  
 For there is sweetness in an empty kiss. (Idyll 3)

Modern critics have discerned that these poems are already looking ironically at rural life, which is truly difficult, from the point of view of highly cultured court poets, who have the luxury to imagine a tranquil and stress-free world of love and courtship ritual. One such critic was William Empson, whose own Marxist ideology was inconsistent with sentimental depictions of working-class life and who saw pastorals as at least disingenuous (Sale 1966). Nevertheless, there are many examples of pastoral imitations throughout English literature.

Poetic iterations of a Golden Age also persisted into the Renaissance. Written in 1580, Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals" describes the indigenous nation of Brazil as "a



nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or political superiority; no use of service, riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no properties, no employments, but those of leisure, no respect of kindred, but common, no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of corn or wine.” The belief is that there was a time in our past (or contemporaneously in America) when everything was plentiful and held in common – there was even no need for agriculture. This idea of a Golden Age can also be traced back to Virgil, this time the *Aeneid*, who argued that it could be returned to, while other Augustan authors like Horace were more skeptical (Zanker, 2010). In his last play, *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare will satirize Montaigne’s vision of America and essentially plagiarize him in a speech by Gonzalo:

I’ th’ commonwealth I would by contraries  
 Execute all things, for no kind of traffic  
 Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
 Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
 And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
 Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
 No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
 No occupation; all men idle, all,  
 And women too, but innocent and pure;  
 No sovereignty— (2.1.147-156)

The elderly Gonzalo is derided as a foolish and senile old man as he envisions a new colony in Bermuda – Shakespeare’s only reference to the New World. Again, the utopic vision excludes agriculture.

Some have argued that modern, industrial, and monocultural agriculture has allowed human beings to have even more freedom because of the seemingly endless supply of affordable foodstuffs available all year. We have become so far removed from the growing, processing, and packaging of our food that we take for granted our privileged situation. We can indulge in leisure activities and create and appreciate more art. By now, however, we are beginning to understand that we can no longer rely on petroleum, fertilizers, pesticides, growth hormones, endless water supplies, and a stable climate, and consequently, industrial farming becomes less sustainable every day. A positive solution to our current crisis could be finding a middle ground between the dystopic and utopic depictions (or realities) of farming that are informed by the Liberal Arts traditions. The horrors of slavery and globalized, industrial agriculture are apparent; on the other hand, the benefits of a rural life and locally, organically, and sustainably sourced foods remain a hard sell in the United States for various reasons. My goal is to promote and participate in community supported agriculture (CSA). As a model, I am reminded of the Enlightenment concept of the “gentleman farmer,” historically an aristocratic and wealthy person who farms for both pleasure and scientific inquiry aimed at improving agriculture. Most Americans are affluent enough that they never have to grow their own food, but through education, demonstration, and cultivation, many will discover the benefits of sustainable farming.

### **Sustainable agriculture**

Soil health is critical to sustainable agriculture. It is the foundation of a healthy cultivated ecosystem that can be passed down from one generation to the next, continually improving over time. To contrast, the current industrial system of food production relies on a linear input of fossil fuel derived fertilizers that offer diminishing returns. This system has created an abundance of food that the world has never seen before, but it comes at a great

cost. The system releases huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere while depleting long-term soil health, and increasing the erosion of what should be stable topsoil. To frame the current system in a useful way, one can think of it as an opportunity to use the abundance provided by artificial fertilizers and industrial agriculture to transition to a sustainable system that mimics the natural cycles seen in nature. Human food production can look to a style of “biomimicry” in which nutrients are increased in soil rather than depleted, where topsoil is produced and built up rather than eroded away, and finally, where carbon is sequestered or captured into the soil rather than released into the atmosphere (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is a natural system seen in forests, prairies, and other productive ecosystems. Science is coming around to the idea of mimicking natural systems, and farming should be no stranger to this realization.

The parts of plants that we do not eat such as peels, seed pits, stems, vines, and leaves along with other organic material like eggshells and coffee grounds can be composted and kept out of landfills. These types of wastes make up a huge percentage of what currently enters the landfills in the United States.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, yard trimmings and food waste together make up about one-quarter of the country’s municipal solid waste.

When these organic wastes are disposed of in landfills, much of the carbon is stored underground, but the waste that breaks down releases methane—a heat-trapping gas 23 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>. Worldwide, methane produced in landfills and other solid waste disposal sites represents about 3 to 4 percent of all human-caused heat-trapping gasses. (Union of Concerned Scientists, UCS, 2010, p. 7).

It is the anaerobic or oxygen poor environment of the buried landfill that causes organic wastes to decompose in such a way that it creates methane gas, which is a significant contributor to global warming (Hawken, 2017, p. 100). Alternatively, as Hawken (2017)

continues, when these organic materials are properly composted in an aerobic or oxygen rich environment, they are quickly broken down by different types of bacteria and fungi into a nutrient rich material that can be incorporated into soil and used to increase fertility, drainage, and water-holding capacity - all the while sequestering or storing carbon (p. 62). By saving these materials and composting them, using them as mulch, or ensuring they are sent to a commercial or municipal composting site, the home gardener and cook are taking an excellent step toward participating in a sustainable future.

Food grown in healthy soils has a higher nutrient content, and whole foods that are not processed are generally healthier and more nutritious than processed foods. Moreover, consuming foods with a higher ratio of nutrients can also lower caloric intake, which is linked to improved health. For these reasons, food that is grown in soil that is properly amended with composted materials and other organic matter can be considered the healthiest option. Small-scale farmers who practice organic farming can ensure they are taking care of their soil and not being seduced into the pitfalls seen with large-scale organic farms. Large-scale organic farms often rely on many of the same methods seen in industrial agriculture. They are heavily dependent on fossil fuels and do little in the way of improving soil conditions or investing in many varieties of crops on their farms. “Duram argues, these large producers threaten many of the goals of sustainability and ecological balance that have been at the heart of the organic movement” (Duram, 2005, as cited in Schnell, 2006, p. 158). They often end up growing large monoculture crops that are organic in name but do little to benefit the soil and nutrition content of the produce they sell. For this reason, small-scale farms that produce and sell food to a local market are the preferred choice for those wishing to support sustainable agriculture and consume the healthiest food possible.

Food costs are a real concern for most people. It is often assumed that organic, fresh, and unprocessed foods are more expensive than processed convenience foods. This is not

true, as the hidden costs of processed foods lie in the government subsidies directed toward their production, as is the case with most of the corn, soy, and wheat based processed foods in the US market. Subsidies for these three crops alone totaled \$209,957,305,188.00 USD between 1995 and 2020 (The Environmental Working Group, n.d.). Other hidden costs lie in the detrimental health consequences of consuming too many processed foods and not enough fresh, whole foods. Costs can also be controlled by limiting the distance food must travel from the farmer to the consumer, thus reducing the fossil fuel inputs necessary for its transport.

Convolved supply chains are susceptible to disruptions such as the COVID-19 global pandemic. Locally produced foods and short supply chains can offer more stability and food security to local populations. Generally, the less distance food must travel before it is purchased and consumed, the more affordable it is. It does not have to be transported over great distances on planes, ships, trucks, or trains, which all add cost to the final product. Locally grown and produced food is inherently more stable because it relies on fewer variables to reach the consumer. A system in which many small-scale producers serve local communities is more robust than one or two giant producers serving an entire nation or region. When local problems arise in a specific area due to natural disaster, disease, famine or failed crops, the abundance of smaller operating systems can help fill the temporary needs in those areas rather than an entire globalized system collapsing under ever increasing strains.

The ratio of food waste versus production capacity is a concern that can also be mitigated by purchasing locally grown food. Spoilage accounts for a massive amount of food loss after it is produced. “Globally, the FAO [The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations] estimates that each year a whopping one-third, or 1.3 billion tonnes, of all food for human consumption is wasted or lost” (Ristino, 2019, p. 278). With this level of waste, it is important to keep in mind that current production capacity of food on a large

industrial scale far outpaces global demand. Ristino (2019) continues by stating that the 1.3 billion tonnes of food wasted each year is enough to feed nearly two billion people. With such a massive surplus, it is an error to accept as normal that large percentages of food will perish in the supply chain. Further waste occurs when perfectly healthy and nutritious foods are thrown out because of perceived cosmetic blemishes, allowed to rot on store shelves, or purchased and then left to rot in consumer pantries due to poor menu planning in the home kitchen. The collective result is that far more resources are being expended on food production globally than is necessary. In short, human industrial-scale food production is inefficient when one considers the level of waste in the system and the number of people suffering from food insecurity on a global scale.

As an alternative, local food production, distribution, consumption, and preservation can help reduce excess production, resource expenditures, and food waste. Local systems can be held more accountable for food waste than far-flung, out-of-sight, and out-of-mind systems that allow for anonymous mishandling of precious resources. It is much easier to ignore a big problem when it is not witnessed by the local population.

Some communities lack access to nutritious and healthy food choices all together. According to Segal (2010), “In these areas, ‘food deserts’ are often formed, where fairly priced, good quality healthy food is unavailable” (p. 197). Sometimes the only available food in these markets is highly processed junk food sold at convenience stores. This has community-wide consequences for the health of residents living in these areas. Possible solutions to the lack of access to food in certain communities can include farmers markets; however, “if farmers markets are too hard to create, then CSAs are also a good option” (Segal, 2010, p. 204). Farmers markets and CSAs can be part of the solution to food insecurity in urban settings. It is important to note that while there is an interest and desire to

purchase, cook, and consume quality food, it is a failure of the industrial food production and distribution system to meet these needs.

Similarly - and often ironically - rural communities can also lack access to fresh and quality produce despite historically having agricultural roots and active production in an area. The reasons may vary but are often linked to the lack of population density to support markets or the lack of infrastructure to preserve food in the growing season for later use during off-season months. In this case, solutions also exist. While food deserts are a symptom of industrialized food production and distribution, they are not without solutions. Most of the solutions are going to come from individuals and communities organizing to solve their unique set of challenges. Regional cooperatives or local governments can invest in solutions for their specific communities. One example could be a county's creating a commercial kitchen that allows small-scale farmers and local residents to preserve foods on a medium scale through canning, freezing, drying, and other preservation methods. Just such a place exists as part of a 14-county food bank system in rural Northeast state of Georgia (Rabun County Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). Their most recently constructed branch includes a facility that is "Much more than 'just' a food bank, this facility is a distribution center that enables the organization to better serve the counties of Georgia's mountain region. It is a state-of-the-art facility complete with a teaching kitchen, commercial kitchen, and frozen food processing line" (Rabun County Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). This example helps organize communities, stabilize the food supply, reduce food waste, and reduce costs to the end consumer. Another solution to food deserts comes in the form of farmers markets. According to Pitts et al. (2014), "increasing use of farmers' markets is one potential strategy to increase access to and consumption of fruits and vegetables, which would decrease risk of chronic disease" (p. 2). This can clearly be an opportunity for community organization, economic growth, and improving the health of the residents.

To conclude this section, sustainable agriculture is a system that aims to improve the health of the soil, farmers' lives, consumers' lives, the global climate, and economies. It can become a system that functions indefinitely because it does not rely on limited outside inputs to keep it running. In short, it is a cyclical loop that is self-sustaining - one that does not rely on outside chemical and mineral inputs, nor does it release excess carbon or other potent greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere if properly managed. It is a system that builds soil health and sequesters carbon into the soil while helping to reverse global warming. At the same time, it supports the health of local communities by providing fresh and healthy food while keeping money in the local economy.

It is helpful to consider sustainable agriculture as a cyclical system, a logical system, one that is self-perpetuating. It embraces natural cycles found within nature rather than opposing them. All life depends on carbon, and it is an essential element of all nutritious food, one that should be understood as cycling through the atmosphere, plants, soil, and animal bodies. But it must be handled with care because too much carbon in any one part of the system, such as the atmosphere, can lead to perpetual imbalance.

### **Community-supported agriculture**

Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) originated in Japan, where consumer demand for quality produce drove a structural change in how food was supplied.

The idea of community-supported agriculture was born in Japan in the mid-1960s. A group of women, dissatisfied with imported, processed, and pesticide-laden food, made arrangements directly with farmers to provide natural, organic, local food for their tables. Literally translated, the Japanese word for the arrangement, *teikei*, means “partnership” or “cooperation.” (Schnell, 2007, p. 552)



Eventually, the idea from this group of Japanese women made its way into Europe and North America (Schnell, 2007, p. 552). From there, a movement toward local systems of food production and consumption has spread and continues to increase in prevalence throughout the western world.

Community-supported agriculture quite simply means that a community buys or trades goods for the food produced by local farmers. It sounds simple enough and was the way human agrarian societies functioned for thousands of years before industrial food production came into being. Of course, there were anomalies, such as the long distance spice trade, but the majority of fresh food was always produced and consumed locally. It just made sense and still does. A modern definition is offered by McFadden,

A CSA farm is a community based organization of growers and consumers. Since it was initiated in the United States in 1985–1986, CSA has appealed to an increasing number of households as an answer to the problems inherent in the industrialization and globalization of the food supply: environmental pollution, chemical residue in food, questionable labor practices, and dependence on the world's polluting and dwindling supply of fossil fuels. The CSA model establishes a farm-and-food system around values and practices that strive to be environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. It promotes small-scale, diversified food production as an alternative to large, industrial-scale farms and reduces the need for packaging and transport (McFadden, 2014, p. 145).

The advent of refrigeration and high speed transportation has transformed what modern humans think of as normal or acceptable practices of purchasing food. Products grown halfway around the world and shipped to their local grocery store come at the cost of unprecedented amounts of fossil fuel extraction and consumption.

When consumers make a conscious choice to buy from a local producer, they are supporting local agriculture. This is the foundation of Community-Supported Agriculture as it has emerged in the modern era. Within the CSA framework, McFadden (2014) has identified eleven distinct subcategories: “Workplace CSAs, Congregation-supported agriculture, Mobile CSAs, CSA home delivery, Bicycle delivery, Winter CSAs, CSA and low-income people, CSA networks, Aggregators, CSA kitchens, and Community-supported fisheries (CSF)” (pp.149-151). One of the most well-known types of CSA is a subscription service in which a farmer offers a portion of their produce to each member who buys a share of the seasonal production.

CSA is a free-will economic and social association among nearby households and farmers who share the responsibility of producing and delivering fresh food.

Households support the farm by investing in a share in the winter or spring; in return they receive a box of produce each week throughout the farming season (McFadden, 2014 , p. 148).

This is an excellent way to eat what is in season, local, and fresh, and it keeps the money spent by clients in their community or region. The variety of CSAs that exists is evidence that the system is widely adaptable and able to meet the diverse needs of both producers and consumers.

To supplement community-supported agriculture, farmers often sell at local farmers markets. Farmers may have their own booths at such markets, or the market may operate in the form of a wholesaler that aggregates food from various local farmers that they then offer to the final consumer (Woods, et al., 2017, p. 2). Another variation on the system could be a large employer or charity, such as a religious or other social organization, that purchases all of the shares of produce a farmer will grow in a season and offers them free of charge or at varying costs to their employees or members. This saves on transportation costs

while reducing the scheduling and delivery complications associated with food distribution. Additionally, there are several forms of “CSA aggregation and distribution model[s]” in which a retailer would purchase the products from multiple farmers and offer them to their customer base (Woods, et al., 2017, p. 3). This last type does remove some of the community involvement between a farmer and the end consumer, but it can have the benefit of offering convenient and efficient distribution for both the farmers and customers. Regardless of the form, a key component to the success of such initiatives is community involvement, commitment, and communication between the farmers, purchasers, and end consumers.

My proposal is that people adopt some level of participation in a sustainable food system. This can range from composting vegetable scraps to becoming an organic small-scale farmer or finding a place anywhere in between. Residents of high rise urban apartment buildings can subscribe to a composting service in which a company picks up food scraps once a week and composts the material in a collective area in the local park as is done in Quito, Ecuador’s Botanical Garden in Parque La Carolina. Alternatively, you could quit your corporate office job and become an organic vegetable farmer in the North Georgia Mountains in the USA. The point is, there is some way for everyone to participate. Yes, it takes effort, but it does not have to be out of reach. Starting with what you are comfortable with or able to do can go a long way toward closing the gap between an anonymous food supply system that is disconnected from your community to becoming an engaging member of a system that benefits the entire planet.

Small-scale farmers are often individuals, families, communities, a group of friends, small businesses, or cooperatives that produce a variety of goods grown on a local farm. They differ from conventional industrial production not only in their scale, but also the potential to transform individuals, communities, and the environment in a positive way. Of particular interest is the blurring of traditional gender roles on a farm in which men did the outside

work and women did the indoor work (Brandth 2010). The blending of tourism, community involvement, and other factors such as farmland ownership by women is changing the traditional dichotomy. According to Brandth (2010), the owners of one small-scale farm that has a tourism component said that “Concerning their everyday work as tourist hosts, both women and men attach importance to taking good care of the guests” (p. 436). This is but one example of how the identity of small-scale farmers has changed from the traditional male-female gender norms of the past. In many cases women are the managers and owners of farms now and may run the business on their own or with the assistance of a partner. The point is to recognize that the opportunity to run a farm is not restricted to identity norms of the past.

Small-scale farmers were the producers of food until slave labor and industrialized systems were implemented. They can still be part of the solution to our globalized reliance on industrial agriculture. The history of farming and rurality in general can have a romanticized or idealized construct in the modern mind - just as it did for Theocritus, Montagne, and perhaps Virgil. While the goal to find sustainable solutions for small-scale farmers is a real concern, there are pitfalls to watch out for along the way. Suburban developments with bucolic names or farm tourism activities must not displace the actual working farms that seek to support locally consumed foods. According to Harrington (2018), some components of these “Idealized relationships with rurality call upon several characteristics. These include health, connecting to nature, aesthetics, privacy, and respect and nostalgia for rural livelihoods” (p. 269). The point of mentioning this aspect of the imagined or idealized history is that those seeking to find a connection with such a lifestyle or past must be aware of the potentially detrimental effects their chosen activities can have on the possibility of sustainable agriculture. Historically, urban and suburban development has pushed into the

agriculture zones, making it difficult or impossible for farmers to maintain a presence relatively close to cities or to compete with industrialized food supply chains.

Small-scale farmers can choose to focus on one or two specialty crops, but with the increasing understanding of the benefits of intercropping, they can grow an incredible variety of produce that is well adapted to their local ecosystem and growing season. This was the historic norm since a vast variety of heirloom vegetables, fruits, and farm animals were once common across the globe. Each region had developed varieties of plants and animals that were perfectly suited to their local region, and georgic poetry and almanacs helped farmers understand these cycles. In the temperate northern latitudes, apples came in the fall, cruciferous vegetables in the winter, peas and salad greens in the spring, cantaloupe and tomatoes in the summer. That was it. Food was eaten or preserved as it came into harvest with the seasons. Now flavorless cantaloupes are available year round, next to the two or three predictable varieties of apple on the shelves, with hard and flavorless tomatoes in February.

As an alternative to purchasing out-of-season products year round, one could enjoy what comes throughout the cycle of the year from local farmers. Canning, freezing and preserving are perfectly acceptable methods of preserving a harvest to maintain variety and nutrition during the cold months and can be part of the solution. However, buying produce that is flown and shipped in from around the world is unsustainable and damaging to the global climate as well as local communities. It deprives food producers of an income in the local economy and continually drives up usage of fossil fuels. Locally grown foods can also contribute to the preservation of heirloom varieties of plants and animals. Government seed banks often focus on storing away improved varieties that may have increased vigor or mass production capabilities, but local growers are often motivated by other factors. According to Gillis (1993), "Rather than valuing plants for their potential as agents of genetic improvement

in the future, the “driving force of [grassroots conservation groups] is the direct use and enjoyment of plants in their present forms” (p. 426). This idea is supported by small-scale food production that is agile and able to adapt to local conditions. By focusing on what crops do well and taste good and saving those seeds year after year, local varieties are developed and preserved. This creates a healthy food supply that is more resistant to disruption.

### **Economic impact**

Consumer demand is driving markets. The inertia behind the industrial agricultural business is a strong force, but a market share is increasingly turning toward supporting locally grown foods. This offers an advantage for small-scale farmers.

The demand for establishing vibrant local food systems – networks by which food produced in a given locality is purchased and consumed in the same area – continues to grow with communities and state governments in the United States striving to create a new generation of farmers. Between 2012 and 2015, total sales in ‘local food’ venues (farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, online distribution, and farmer stands) increased from \$1.3 to \$3.0 billion dollars. (Tidwell, 2020, p. 1)

Such evidence supports investment in training citizens to become local farmers. Moreover, food independence, like energy independence, is crucial to a nation’s security and identity.

Individual consumer choice is a powerful force, and the ability to select what food one buys has global consequences. Purchasing locally grown food or even growing a little bit of one's own food can align consumer behavior with desire to improve individual and community health. As Anderson-Wilk (2007) describes consumer behavior, “it does appear that a segment of consumers is willing to put their money behind environmentally friendly food production systems and that many CSA farmers provide soil and water conservation education and demonstration of land stewardship as part of their operations” (p. 2). This

segment is continuing to grow and recognize the responsibility and impact their choices have on the lives of farmers, the environment, and the quality of food they have access to. The trend will likely continue as the benefits to consumers and producers are continuing to be recognized and studied. Individuals are proving to have a positive impact on their community by supporting local producers who offer seasonal variety. Consumers are learning to purchase and enjoy foods that are in season.

## Conclusion

Both history and modern invention offer an alternative to the industrial food production system. As Shaw (1989) concluded, “If we are to have a system of food production that meets the needs of consumers, and an economy that supports rural communities, and a countryside that meets the needs of an urban population, we need a vision, we need a plan, and we need to start now” (p. 731). Indeed, the progressive vision of countless people and communities is thriving. Rural and urban communities can organize and find a productive and sustainable path in which they support one another.

From my studies and resulting Liberal Arts perspective, ecology, literature, anthropology, philosophy, and biology have converged to inform how the health of the environment and agricultural practices are inextricably linked and dependent upon one another. Long standing western attitudes regarding nature and humanity’s relationship with it include historical primary texts that help provide an understanding of how the industrialized agricultural system came to be and how aspects of it were justified on individual and societal levels. Beginning with Biblical dominion narratives, the separation of culture from nature, and a presumed justification for slavery and exploited labor, it is possible to trace the developments that resulted in the current industrial subjugation of the environment and the bypassing of natural ecological cycles.

Understanding the past through the literature review can help guide present strategies for changing attitudes. By educating ourselves, we can begin to organize at community levels to improve public health, local economies, and ecological health. Proven solution-oriented actions that can be taken today by individual and community organizations including, community supported agriculture, small-scale farming, organic farming, regenerative farming, reducing waste, and shortening the supply chains can point us towards a sustainable path forward while enhancing national and global security. A parallel may be drawn between



the biological diversity that exists within a healthy ecosystem and the robustness of a diversified small-scale farming system that does not rely on monocultures. From this emerges a healthy local economy that can support public health, reduce hunger, and break the cycle of fossil fuel inputs and pollution outputs. Ecology and biology demonstrate that a healthy ecosystem is a diverse one. Human societies and systems can embrace that diversity and emulate nature's model through the concepts of "biomimicry" in our farming and economic systems (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). An integrated Liberal Arts perspective is one that recognizes that a healthy economy, ecosystem, and human society can coexist within a logical, sustainable system that works with nature and its processes rather than opposing them. After all, etymologically, the root of both "economy" and "ecology" is "eco-" or "oikos" in Ancient Greek, a word that simply means "house" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

I close with a prophetic call to action that was shared with me by a friend who quit her corporate job and became an organic vegetable farmer in the mountains of Northeast Georgia. It is from the Hopi Elders, members of a Native American tribe living in the Southwestern United States.

### **We are the Ones We've Been Waiting For**

You have been telling people that this is the Eleventh Hour, now you must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour. And there are things to be considered...

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

What are your relationships?

Are you in right relation?

Where is your water?

Know your garden.

It is time to speak your truth.

Create your community.

Be good to each other.

And do not look outside yourself for your leader.

Then he clasped his hands together, smiled, and said, “This could be a good time! There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid.

They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly. Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.

And I say, see who is in there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves! Banish the word 'struggle' from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we've been waiting for.

--Hopi Elders' Prophecy, June 8, 2000

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