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Galiano Community Food Programme's 'From Table to Field' Conference

The next 'greener' revolution: challenging the industrialized food model - Elizabeth May

On the first Sunday of spring, I was lucky to be on Galiano Island among those present for a conference on the imperative to grow healthy local food.

Keynote speaker was Salt Spring Island poet and rebel farmer (or farmer and rebel poet?) Brian Brett. His book *Trauma Farm* is emerging to be, to sane agricultural policy, what *Silent Spring* was to raising awareness of pesticides. His observations were echoed by other farmers through the day.

In *Trauma Farm*, Brian Brett writes about 'progress traps'. The term, he says, was coined in *A Short History of Progress* by fellow Salt Spring Islander Ronald Wright. Referring to weapons technology, Wright used the term to describe a narrowness of focus that leads to logical failure.

Brian Brett's talks of progress traps in relation to the industrialization of agriculture. Brian writes: 'Progress traps are what happens when scientists and health officials convince themselves that they can control the natural world within whose glow we walk.'

Since reading *Trauma Farm*, I have been spotting modern agriculture examples of 'progress traps' at an alarming rate. From local organic growers on the Saanich Peninsula, I heard about the latest rules for organic growers in California. To control that pesky natural world, organic farming is being converted into something alien to the earth. The FDA wants the food grown in 'safe' conditions. The threat that field mice or other critters that might bring disease or feces within the rows of lettuce has resulted in a requirement that several metres on all sides of the field be converted to a dead zone—herbicide out of existence so that no living creature can cross that barrier to contaminate the crop. Trapped by their own crazed logic and the idea that the natural world must be brought to heel, the FDA will undo

one of the essential virtues of organic growing—that it is compatible with the biodiversity that surrounds it.

The most chilling of industrialized agricultures progress traps may be the Enviro-pig. These pigs are being raised in isolation at the University of Guelph in hopes that they will be approved for human consumption. The problem Enviro-pigs are supposed to solve is water pollution from hog manure.

Due to the latest craze in inhumane treatment of pigs: raising tens of thousands of animals in single barns—indoors for their whole lives in cages over metal slotted floors—a new water pollution threat has been created. Liquid hog manure in the millions of gallons is being created in these mega-hog factories across Canada. The 'disposal method' is to spray the hog manure on farm fields as fertilizer. But the liquid hog manure is rich in phosphorus. The over-fertilizing effect of this manure in water courses causes eutrophication, choking the life out of lakes and rivers.

A sensible solution would be to return to more traditional ways of raising hogs. I met one farmer in Saskatchewan who had found an ideal solution, even in settings where thousands of animals are raised in the same barn. Allow pigs to move indoors and outdoors and have cement floors covered in alfalfa. Collecting the manure and alfalfa from the floor and composting it created safe, non-noxious compost.

But those caught in progress traps are not likely to think alfalfa represents a solution when the brave new world of bio-engineering is within our reach. So Enviro-pig was born. It is a transgenic pig, with genetic material from Ecoli bacteria spliced into its DNA, reducing phosphorus in manure by up to 65%. Environment Canada has approved continuing work at the University of Guelph. It is still a long way from isolation facilities in

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Guelph to the hotdog at the Fall Fair, but proponents of Enviro-pig are sold on its benefits.

Against this mad, mad world stand a growing band of farmers, activists, and citizens (with a nod to Salt Spring Island's John Wilcox, another speaker, who spoke out in frustration at having the actions of responsible citizens denigrated as 'activists.')

This movement is growing across Canada—motivated for health, slow food, low-carbon strategies, food security, protection of biodiversity, and healthy sustainable communities.

The Galiano Island conference "From Table to Field" (sponsored by the Galiano Community Food Programme) attracted over 80 people from every one of the southern Gulf Islands and from the Saanich Peninsula and Victoria. The number of innovations, workable models and creative experimentation was breath-taking and inspiring.

People are trying out various models to find housing for people willing to work on farms: to give young people access to land to grow food on land owned by older people or by those who may not have the time or inclination to put good agricultural land to use. All kinds of models exist—cooperative growing efforts, leases and Community Supported Agriculture.

On Saturna, an olive growing effort is underway (see ad page 15). On Mayne, there is a growers association to share training and labour. 'Crop mobs' may be the modern version of a good old fashioned barn-raising.

The networking and emailing, websites, tweets and twitters can barely keep up with the proliferation of new groups, new initiatives. All of the fertile burbling of the fervour for growing healthy, local food suggests a social movement. It is a peaceful revolution in the making.

The 1960s 'Green Revolution' directed us into this particular progress trap. It is premised on massive inputs of fossil fuels, irrigation and chemicals. It has given us more food. It has also given us mad cow disease, new strains of avian flu, depleted soil, redundant trade. Its primary beneficiaries are Cargill and Monsanto and other transnationals. The losers are farmers and eaters.

The good news is that the failure of logic in the industrialized food model will require that we shift to tasty local food—and soon. And those places that already know how to feed their communities will be miles ahead and can show the way.

Eat local healthy food, the life—and community—you save may be our own.

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