

Environmental Information, should be available in May 1996. For more information, contact the Center at the address below.

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## The Politics of Sustainable Agriculture

*A Conference, held at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, USA, during 7–8 October 1995*

How political is sustainable agriculture? What special perspectives can those who study politics bring to the challenge of agricultural sustainability? These questions were addressed at this interdisciplinary research conference. About 130 people attended the conference including academic researchers, farmers, activists and government officials. The conference was funded by the University and by a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture.

The primary goal of the conference was to promote a discussion of the political and social issues involved in creating a more sustainable agricultural system. Conference organizers hope to see the development of an interdisciplinary sub-field in which key issues of integrating agricultural policy and practice to promote sustainability can be considered.

Featured speakers included Angus Wright (Professor of Environmental Studies, California State University), Wes Jackson (President, Land Institute, Salina, Kansas), Patricia Allen (Senior Analyst, Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, Santa Cruz, California), and Peter Rosset (Executive Director, Institute for Food and Development Policy [Food First], San Francisco). Angus Wright and Patricia Allen gave the most provocative presentations, challenging the audience to go beyond technical substitution to question the political and cultural assumptions of conventional agriculture. Patricia Allen's assertion that even the much-lauded family farm should not be taken for granted as the most just or sustainable alternative, drew protests from some of the attendees. Clearly, we are far from a consensus on how far the sustainable agriculture movement should and must go in questioning the established social order.

One high point of the conference was Peter Rosset's description of the transition of low-input sustainable agriculture in Cuba. The sudden disappearance of fuel, chemical fertilizers and pesticides brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union has profoundly altered Cuban agriculture. The difficult adjustment to animal power and forced organic farming provides the rest of the world with a living experiment in the problems of and potentialities for agricultural de-industrialization on a national scale.

More than forty papers were presented during 14 panel sessions. Many topics concerned policy issues such as commodity programmes, pesticide reduction efforts, and government intervention

in capital markets. Others related to social movements and community development. The impact of global integration and free trade was another common subject. Those papers which presented sustainable agriculture as primarily a matter of developing new technologies (such as satellite-based 'precision farming' or crop substitution) elicited challenges from the audience for being 'reductionist'. The majority of the attendees seemed intent on keeping the focus on political and social issues.

While it would be difficult to find a unifying theme in the diverse collection of papers, the concept of ensuring community-based 'food security', came up repeatedly. From the urban-rural 'food policy councils' of California to the urban organic gardens of Cuba, the food security concept seemed to integrate the subjects of policy, practice, ecological sustainability, social justice, and community development which dominated many of the discussions.

At an evaluation session at the close of the conference attendees voiced their support for the explicitly social and political nature of the discussions. Some lamented the fact that the conference was so short. Several important topics received only a few minutes. There was a strong consensus amongst both academics and activists that more meetings of this type should be organized.

Materials from the conference will be published in several formats. A special issue of the journal *Society and Natural Resources* will be devoted to the conference. The special issue, scheduled for January of 1997, will include about seven of the papers presented at the conference. Several more conference papers will be published by Taylor and Francis in a book also expected in early 1997. Abstracts from most of the papers are available from Stuart Shulman at the University of Oregon, Department of Political Science, Eugene, OR 97403-1284, USA (e-mail [stu@gladstone.uoregon.edu](mailto:stu@gladstone.uoregon.edu)).

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## Global Biodiversity Forum

*Held in Jakarta, Indonesia, during 4–5 November 1995*

A session of the Global Biodiversity Forum (GBF) was held in Jakarta, Indonesia, immediately prior to the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Like the previous two sessions, it provided an opportunity for governments, NGOs, the scientific community, business, and industry to come together to share information and debate issues relevant to the conservation, sustainable use, and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of biological resources. The Forum series is organized by IUCN in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Resources Institute (Washington, DC) and the African Centre for Technology Studies (Nairobi, Kenya). Local hosts included the Indonesian Biodiversity Foundation (KEHATI) and the World Wide Fund for Nature-Indonesia Programme.

More than 400 people from over 40 countries participated in the Forum, coming from governments, non-governmental

organizations, inter-governmental organizations, and the private sector. The opening address was given by Indonesia's Minister of the Environment, Sarwono Kusumaatmadja (who, subsequently, chaired the COP). Keynote addresses were given by Jeffrey A. McNeely (Chief Scientist, IUCN), Tim Boyle (Centre for International Forestry Research [CIFOR], Bogor, Indonesia), John Mugabe (African Centre for Technology Studies) and Linda Warren (Marine Policy Specialist, Cardiff Law School, UK).

The Forum broke into four parallel workshops, dealing with marine biodiversity, regulation of access to genetic resources, decentralization of governance and management of biodiversity, and forests and biodiversity.

Since this year's COP was discussing marine biodiversity, the marine workshop was particularly relevant, dealing with national, local, and community-based management of marine and coastal resources, approaches for sustainable mariculture, maintenance of sustainable fisheries, and actions taken under the Convention process to conserve marine biodiversity. The workshop called for the COP to set in place a mechanism for integrating implementation of the various relevant international agreements at the national level. It also called for the COP to establish an expert panel on marine and coastal biodiversity to address issues such as gaps in taxonomic knowledge, ecological knowledge, and impacts of various activities. This body was also called upon to promote technology transfer in the field of mariculture. The workshop identified community-based coastal resources management as a key component of marine biodiversity conservation in many circumstances, and noted the importance of traditional forms of marine tenure.

The topic of access to genetic resources was a hot one, as the issues involved are highly contentious. A number of participants urged Parties to move quickly to develop controls on access to their resources to ensure conservation and the fair and equitable sharing of any benefits. Governments should harmonize access measures through consultation on a regional or international basis, in order to promote cooperation rather than competition among countries. Both the countries providing genetic resources and those receiving them need to ensure prior informed consent and equitable sharing of benefits. Parties should investigate how to protect the interests of indigenous and local communities, since existing tenure and intellectual property regimes appear to be inadequate to address current demands.

Decentralization of governance is a reality in many countries, under the pressure of declining public budgets, pressures to reduce centralized administrative staff and functions in favour of regional and local levels, policies to promote more democratic governance, and the application of ecological criteria to land-use planning.

Decentralization can have a significant impact on the management of biological resources, as evidenced from examples presented at the workshop from Indonesia, Tanzania, Kenya, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Switzerland, Zimbabwe, Thailand, eastern Europe, and the United States. These studies demonstrated that decentralization offers an opportunity to form partnerships among communities, different levels of government, business, industry, scientists, and resource managers, which make ecological, economic, political and social sense. The evidence suggested that where communities and local institutions can establish adequate financial and institutional capacity, biodiversity and biological resources can be appropriately protected, managed, and used sustainably at various levels of management and governance. Clear ownership tenure, transparency, participation, and recognition of the value of traditional systems of resource use, are keys to success in decentralized planning and management.

The session on forests sought to identify information needs for the sustainable management of forests, and especially on the conservation of forest biodiversity. In order to develop a comprehensive, integrated strategy for conservation, planners need to evaluate the conservation value of forests. This evaluation should include criteria for trade-offs among potential conservation areas and among components of biodiversity, and the underlying causes of biodiversity loss, from the global to the local scale. It should also consider criteria to determine where, when, and to what extent, conservation of biodiversity and use of natural resources can be integrated or should remain separated. Equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of components of biodiversity requires information on valuation of different types of benefits of forest biodiversity, better understanding of key ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, assessment of the global net impacts of land-use changes, and a better understanding of institutional dynamics.

The results of the Global Biodiversity Forum were presented to the COP by Dr Setijati Sastrapradja (Director, Indonesian Biodiversity Foundation). Through the two weeks of the COP, participants at the Forum frequently voiced their views developed during the Forum. It is expected that another session of the Forum will be held prior to the next COP, to be held in November 1996 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Regional sessions of the Forum will be held in the coming months in China (for East Asia), and Colombia (for Latin America).

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