

-SOIL ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE 2008

“Transition: Food and Farming in 21st century Britain”

18th & 19th November The Passenger Shed Bristol

Almost 450 delegates formed the audience of this years conference. The theme according to our programme, was that “the challenges of fossil fuel depletion, climate change, diminishing soil and water resources and population growth present an unprecedented threat to global food security. To address these challenges Britain and every country in the world needs a future food plan.” The aim of the conference was “to create a food plan for the future- a manifesto for feeding Britain.” An opportunity for delegates from around the world to listen, debate and inspire a plan for feeding Britain.

In the opening plenary session Rosie Boycott of the London Food Authority chaired the session and suggested “we have to be the people who see it in advance and start making plans to address what is ahead of us. Green Party leader Caroline Lucas introduced the notion of the “triple crunch”: economic recession, accelerating climate change and peak oil production. “These along side a rising population will impact enormously on our food systems and food security.” She also reminded us that today food production typically consumes roughly 10 calories of fossil fuel energy for every one calorie of food produced. Jeremy Legett then explained that a new report written warning about the impending oil crisis has been written by big business corporations and represents the first ever alarm bells coming from multi nationals. Perhaps even they are waking up. Solutions, he suggested, lay among over 50 types of renewable “clean technologies” which desperately need investment. Finally Pete Smith, a soil scientist from Aberdeen University then offered some support for organic systems by explaining their ability to act as carbon sinks through their longer term fertility building leys.

The first workshop sessions revolved around soil fertility, livestock, trade and city food plans. The latter two explored how current business models will need to adapt to future challenges. How will we feed densely populated cities and if more localised community led models are a realistic alternative in what is essentially a global economy.

After lunch the second plenary was lead by Monty Don (Soil Associations new president) who clung to the notion that “it could be a crisis but it could also provide the most dramatic and exciting possibilities for good.” He was then given the dubious pleasure of trying to interview Hilary Benn MP via a fairly difficult phone link who proceeded, amongst other things, to refuse to rule out the role that GM technology may have within a food system for this country.

Vandana Shiva closed the first day with a hugely emotive address and said it was time to take agriculture back from agribusiness. “As globalisation violently pushes peasants off the land, the soil symbolises another culture, a culture of non-violence, a culture of permanence, a culture of dignity in work, a living culture for the protection and renewal of life.”

Day two opened with another plenary this time focusing on the need on national food planning. Dr Tim Lang of City University presented the case for such a plan. "We all know we need a good food system, but we're still not too sure what it should actually look like. One can be sure that with people like him at the helm we might just stand a chance. Next up Rob Hopkins of Transition Towns led us through all the examples of well documented "bottom up" mobilisation that TT encourages. Julie Brown of Growing Communities in Hackney provided some working proof that food production in inner cities can be more than just "a good idea". They provide a good chunk of the produce for their 450 customers wherever possible and have devised a range of low impact delivery/distribution systems appropriate for densely populated areas. Finally Peter Melchett of the Soil Association urged the need to create a new reality. He felt it was possible for the UK to feed itself organically, but it would necessitate a wholesale change in what we actually. "Farmers and growers have incredibly important skills" he said "and we need your help."

The mid-morning workshops looked at ; farm energy and how farms could also begin to see energy as an income source as well as saving money; a further look at soil carbon issues within organic systems; some alternative methods of raising finance for enterprises; and an overview of the "Food For Life"(FFL)partnership project. Joanna Lewis informed us that the FFL initiative was launched in May 2008 with around 500 schools and caterers applying . They are offered the opportunity attain three different levels of award; gold silver and bronze. To achieve the gold standard they are required to source 50% local and 30% organic produce. Meat dairy and eggs must have organic principles as best practice, and steps to promote vegetarian meals are also required. The silver and gold award winners are invited to a high profile presentation ceremony and in 2008 they were made by Prince Charles. There was no question that the project was starting to transform school culture and introduce many amazing benefits.

After lunch we turned our attention to some "people" issues and how that through re-instating connections to their communities, all our food producers will become more resilient to future challenges. There was discussion on how different religions see food within their different faiths. Some examples of how organising different educational, training and cultural events on farms and holdings can help build these bridges. Jade Bashford presented an overview of how Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes are establishing themselves within the sector. Although a difficult thing to define CSA's are essentially a partnership between farmers and consumers where, at its best, the responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared. She gave some details of a particular project she has been involved with since its inception in 2001. Stroud Community Agriculture operates on 50 acres of rented organic land providing beef, pork, lamb and vegetables for around 200 members. It has an annual turnover of £80,000 with members paying £2 a month plus £8 for a veg box share, and employs 3 farmers on salaries of £19,000 per annum. There is no compulsion for members to be active and issues of development etc. are passed to the core group of members to deal with. The farmers have delegated responsibility for all farming. The emphasis is very much on open access and aims to be fully inclusive regardless of income. Jade summed up the essence of a CSA in that they "pioneer a new economic model based on mutual benefit and shared risk to ensure a decent livelihood for our farmers."

Our closing plenary also provided some evidence of the success of CSA's this time in America. Judith Redmond of Full Belly Farm in California spoke of the way in which schemes such as theirs are much more common place and culturally acceptable over there. Then Catherine Sneed lead us through her incredibly moving account of how she has worked with ex convicts (again in America) and various other society rejects and got them involved in horticultural projects. The results spoke for themselves and you couldn't help but be wowed by her dynamism and complete faith in the ability of horticulture to help these people out of a very bad place into a much better one.

In short a very thought provoking conference. Those of us already involved in the organic sector have been aware of many of these issues for some time and continue to plough a more sustainable furrow. We must remain positive during these difficult times and hold hard to the fact that we already have many of the solutions at work within our systems. Another,final soundbite that has stuck with me; to make 1 tonne of artificial fertiliser takes 108 tonnes of water emits 7 tonnes of CO2 and uses 1 tonne of oil. Food for thought.

All the presentations from the conference are still available on the Soil Association website at www.soilassociation.org/conference

Michael Westrip
January 2009