

## Beyond Local – Part III

### Sustainable Foodsheds for the Future

Brian Snyder – April 6, 2010

In this series of columns I have tried to focus on some of the shortcomings, or at least major challenges being faced by the so-called Local Food Movement. I have argued that our efforts to create a new food system based on local resources are nonetheless indelibly linked to efforts made elsewhere in the world, looking across both time and space to find partnerships that are keys to our own success.

My intent has been twofold: 1) To make sure we don't take the concept of "local" so seriously that we shut ourselves off from important resources found elsewhere in the world, and 2) to literally raise awareness that all of reality as we know it is necessarily interconnected, and not just in "real time." It's worth noting that proponents of industrial agriculture would tend to agree with me on the first point, but the second would leave them totally befuddled, since this is where industrialization ends and genuine sustainability begins.

Setting aside criticism of industrial food systems for the moment, however, I have become increasingly aware in recent weeks and months that we have some shortsightedness to overcome ourselves. This is especially the case as we imagine any food system that can be truly, and strictly "local," at least without a much more comprehensive understanding of that term. I get weary very fast of hearing someone talk about seeking all their food from local sources if they seem not to care very much about how it is being produced, and how communities both near and far might be affected by those production methods.

If we want the movement to succeed, we need to get very serious about defining and, in a sense, packaging the products, or ideas, we are trying to sell. We must also be committed to measuring our progress in ways that are easily understood and broadly recognized as significant. To these ends, I have some specific theories and suggestions to offer that I think will be helpful.

First, I propose that we stop thinking about "local" in the strict sense, just as we must also avoid the abstractions of "global" food systems that our counterparts in industrial agriculture would tend to emphasize. In fact, I think we can retrieve and utilize the significance of both concepts if we focus on food production/consumption units in a more regional way, evoking the increasingly popular idea of a "foodshed" as an expression of where the food comes from to serve the needs of any given population.

There are other foodshed definitions being used out there, but I have my own to suggest. Looking at **Figure A** you can get a visual idea of my definition, in this case from the point of view of sustainability in particular.

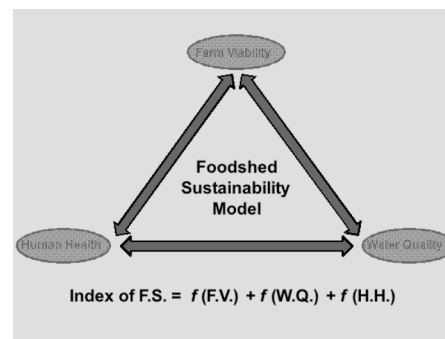


**Figure A**

My definition of a “sustainable foodshed” is any defined geographical region in which the concepts of *economic development*, *environmental restoration* and *public wellbeing* are understood as representing dynamic, overlapping realities expressed and further interrelated by a thorough understanding of the balance of food production and consumption within that same region.

I really don’t conceive of there being any such thing as a foodshed that is not sustainable, but use the terms together here for the sake of emphasizing that they are indelibly linked. In other words, the concept of “foodshed” implies sustainability, although not every foodshed would meet such an assumption to the same degree . . . which raises again the necessity of being able to measure progress along these lines.

It should be noted that all three spheres of the foodshed definition are themselves compilations of several different potential factors (for elaboration at another time), but also that in each case, very specific indicators do exist that are recognized by the various sciences involved. To be more specific about it, **Figure B** shows a “Foodshed Sustainability Model” with an aim to narrow things down quite a bit for the sake of this discussion.



**Figure B**

If we think of a foodshed with the specific overlaying consideration of how food is produced, processed and delivered to the consuming public within the defined geographical region, then we can talk about 1) economic development in terms of the viability of a region’s farms, 2) quality of water available in that same region as a prime indicator of environmental restoration efforts, and 3) statistics concerning the health of citizens in the affected region, demonstrating a fairly well-defined interrelationship with the other two legs of this model. It’s not hard to imagine, for instance, how the success of a region’s farms and quality of its water could impact a variety of health issues, including rates of obesity, cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

In fact, all three legs of the model are interrelated to the point where you can see each one is rather dependent on the other two as either an indicator or driver of progress, or both. I have further defined a potential “index” of foodshed sustainability as the sum of functions needed to further describe each of the three legs – a purposeful oversimplification leading toward further description and specific mathematical expression in the future. Hopefully you get the point that a numerical expression of such an index is well within the realm of technical possibility.

With these definitions assumed, we must then look at an idea of what scale of geographical region should be considered. The answer, I believe, is that any region within which a foodshed

is defined and its sustainability measured must in fact be scalable to suit the needs of persons or entities (e.g. governmental agencies) to maintain the information and pursue desired outcomes.

Let me make very clear at this point my belief that normal municipal boundaries, whether for a township, county, state or nation, are almost always more harmful than helpful to the process of understanding foodsheds and/or the sustainability of food and farming systems in general. More emphatically, I think such boundaries have the potential to do significant damage in all three spheres of sustainable foodsheds as defined in this column.

Neither is it helpful to think of a geographically significant region in terms of food production and consumption occurring within a certain number of miles from an urban center. Thinking this way might be better than relying on municipal boundaries, but it vastly understates the reality of how human populations relate to the landscapes in which they dwell. Our model tells us this . . . if we expect human health to be related to both water quality and the success of certain farms and/or farming methods, then the farms, the water and the relevant populations must be linked by more than an abstract measurement of distance.

In **Figure C** an idea is expressed that I first heard mentioned by Bern Sweeney of the Stroud Water Resource Center when he gave a keynote address at our annual conference in 2009. Since then, I have come to think of watersheds and foodsheds as a synonymous concept, at least in a completely natural setting, i.e. without artificially imposed structures like highways, railroads and airline travel available. This reality was so much better understood – if taken for granted – when rivers provided the principle means of transportation.



**Figure C**

I have shown an outline of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed because it illustrates the points I am trying to make here about foodsheds, but also because it is one of the most significant facts of agricultural life in the Mid-Atlantic region. Farmers in this part of the country derive much benefit from this watershed, but their daily activity also poses a significant threat to its existence as a healthy ecosystem.

You can observe the structure of the Chesapeake Watershed, comprised as it is of six states plus the District of Columbia, and understand why it is so difficult to get a handle on what's best for the bay and the entire region . . . these are public entities that often do not always get along with

each very well, particularly on this subject. But you can also observe the watershed from another perspective – that of a living being with beating heart located right where you'd expect, in the population centers along the Washington – Baltimore corridor and on up to Harrisburg in Pennsylvania.

Looked at as a living organism, it's easy to see how the strength of the economy would be linked to environmental soundness and quality of life in the context of such a watershed. You can also understand why the health of populations in the urban centers and viability of farms in rural areas would depend on each other in a very real and inseparable way, even if these linkages have dimmed over recent decades due to the non-local/regional nature of the food supply.

There are other watersheds, like along the Mississippi River, where the river itself acts as a state boundary through most of its length, and the resulting political conflicts forever affect the health of the ecosystem. Such rivers should rather be seen as the middle, not the extremity of the systems in question. Is it possible that natural watershed boundaries could ever become more significant than state lines in determining the prospects for economic, environmental and public wellbeing in a given region? One can certainly hope so.

In terms of agriculture and foodsheds, however, it seems imperative that we move on from our “modern” ways of thinking in so many ways. It's not hard to understand, for instance, why a political entity like a “state” would want to emphasize products being exported (e.g. farm commodities) or people being imported (e.g. tourism) as economic solutions. But both strategies are shortsighted and bound to be ineffective as compared to a watershed/foodshed view that would look at how a defined region, anywhere in the world, can feed itself and keep its own farms, waters and people vibrant and healthy.

This is also a perfectly scalable measure of success, since watersheds can be as tiny as a rivulet running through the back pasture and affecting one's neighbors, or as large as an entire planet, the health of which may imperil an entire civilization. For all of us who prefer to think in “local” terms when it comes to food systems, our attention is needed at both ends of this spectrum, and at several points in between, all at the same time.

In the end, we will either move beyond our colonial past, our conventional thinking about food systems and parochial ways of trying to solve problems, both local and global, or our children will end up paying a huge price. The solution, I believe, is to look both downstream and upstream to see who our real neighbors are, and to start thinking about just how far-reaching our individual and collective actions can be in determining the future we must all endure together.