



Watershed = Foodshed

By Brian Snyder, Executive Director

Every year as we prepare for our next *Farming for the Future* conference, we work hard to develop a theme that will serve as an organizing idea. Then we pick our keynote speakers according to some aspect of the theme, and work extra hard to have them understand what we are trying to achieve.

Not uncommonly I'll have keynote speakers say to me after giving their speeches that they really "had no idea how significant the PASA conference really was," sometimes wishing they had put more time into preparation. This year we had the very pleasant experience of an opening keynote speaker, Raj Patel, who absolutely nailed the intent of the theme in his remarks, and a closing speaker, Bern Sweeney, who was so moved by the conference itself that he actually reconfigured his remarks on the spot.

Bern, who is a highly respected specialist on watershed protection, knew we wanted to explore the analogy between how a watershed functions and how we might conceive of and support a "foodshed." He inserted into his slide presentation an image containing the title of this column, "Watershed = Foodshed," explaining that he suddenly realized this was the natural state of things in any wholly undisturbed ecosystem, and is perhaps a worthwhile goal for our future

efforts to build new food systems.

That insight seemed straightforward enough at the time, coming as it did after three intensive days of studying the several aspects of "Finding Your Foodshed." But I have not been able to get the idea out of my mind since, and it continues to stimulate my thinking.

There certainly was a time when watersheds everywhere provided their own needs for nourishment and recycling of the specific nutrients required to sustain life. With only minor exceptions this would have continued even into the time when humans roamed the planet, as waterways served also as the major living centers and transportation routes. Indeed, life as we know it was once attached to free-flowing waters wherever they could be found.

Here in ridge-and-valley central Pennsylvania, even the first human-constructed roadways did not change the fact that for most people, their sources of food and socialization existed between the ridges. There are still many people in this part of the country who live in one end of a valley and vacation in the other.

But of course, the situation with our food has changed dramatically over the years. Mountains themselves are no longer considered obstacles to the road builders of the modern era, and anyone wanting to map out a foodshed would have to do so according to the rivers of carbon-burning traffic rather than those that carry our life-giving water. Truth is, even much of the water for human consumption comes by highway now.

With this change has come a multitude of problems, including especially the flagrant disregard of watershed health in most aspects of life. It's troubling that production of food for shipment across the country often occurs with indifference regarding the local water source, perhaps quite predictably.

There are other problems that have come about due to our new "rivers of concrete," including food safety issues, the spread of both animal and human diseases, invasive plants (notice all the Spotted Knapweed along the interstates!) and of course global warming. In fact, one could jump off here and talk about how our financial, healthcare and even governmental systems have been negatively affected by a diversion from the

watershed-as-foodshed ideal.

But I am far from feeling fatalistic about this situation, and believe instead that the merging of food and water health in our minds, and daily lives, offers a solution we might not have anticipated.

The key is to insist on implementing an attitude with respect to food in our own communities that is the diametric opposite of the "out of sight, out of mind" tendency of conventional food systems. If we insist on eating only food from sources that are very much "in sight," using methods that are truly "mindful" of the resources involved, we can begin to reverse the disturbing trends that we have lived with for so long.

The scope of such an effort would have to cover a broad range of situations. For instance, beginning with an insistence on obtaining as much food as possible from one's local watershed makes a lot of sense, beginning for many people with nourishment coming from their own backyards. Developing local associations that connect the ideals of good watershed and foodshed management should be a priority. Communities served by such groups could develop specific goals for achieving benchmarks in terms of both water and food quality available within their immediate vicinity.

Further afield we will need to assure ourselves of the growing health of our larger water/food-sheds by implementing standards and best management practices that can be adhered to by participating farmers and verified publicly. We could do this by combining PASA's regional *Buy Fresh Buy Local* programs and our new strategic partnership with the Food Alliance of Portland, Oregon, to bring sustainable certification to the Mid-Atlantic region.

It may be impossible to restore a situation in our world where watersheds and foodsheds are literally one in the same. But all of the true advancements made by the human race to date have resulted from our ability to utilize metaphorical language, very often inspired by nature, to bring meaning into our lives.

The idea of life-giving water flowing through our communities, used as a way of understanding the importance of connecting with our sources of bodily nourishment as well, is a metaphor whose time has indeed arrived. ■