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Nurturing human and ecological communities in stormy times

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Food Sovereignty and Climate Change: Nurturing Human and Ecological Communities in Stormy Times

Cooper Institute's 3rd Annual Social Justice Symposium
March 11, 2017 – Milton Community Hall

REPORT

Welcome: Leah MacLeod, member of Cooper Institute and chair for the day welcomed everyone, acknowledging that we were gathered on Mi'kmaq territory.

Marie Burge spoke about Father Andrew MacDonald, one of the founders of Cooper Institute, in whose memory the annual social justice symposium is held. Andrew was a priest whose ministry was sustained by working for social justice. A feminist, he was dedicated to ecological justice. He was a singer and songwriter, and loved music in all its forms. In 2016, we lost Marie Hendricken, another founding member of Cooper Institute, a farmer and activist, long-time member and leader in the National Farmers Union.

Teresa Doyle performed two songs, "Ship of Fools," and "The World is in a Pickle".

Keynote Speaker: Nettie Wiebe

Reg Phelan introduced keynote speaker, Dr Nettie Wiebe, who, with her family, farms organic pulses, grain and raises cattle in Saskatchewan. She is a proud grandmother, and travels the world as a member of La Via Campesina. She has written extensively on food sovereignty, women's equality, human rights, and peace. Nettie has served in the leadership of the National Farmers Union and was the first woman to lead a national farm organization in Canada. She recently retired from teaching ethics at St. Andrews College, the University of Saskatchewan.

While it may be a struggle to find ways to engage in conversations about climate change without descending into some kind of bleak and apocalyptic discourse, we know the force of life that we have embedded in us is not nearly defeated. This is important to remember. We must not lose sight of the life-giving resilience of both human and ecological communities.

Language is important – *global warming* describes a global trend, and certainly the last 6 years were the hottest on record – but it gets quite cold in Saskatchewan, and some would welcome more warmth. *Climate Change* is a more neutral and flexible term, but may not be threatening enough – change can be good! *Global storming* more accurately describes what is happening, with major weather events – severe droughts, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, blizzards – reported with unprecedented frequency, around the world.

2016 was the hottest year on record, and was preceded by 3 other hottest years. We're living in a time of rapid and radical climate change. The latest [IPCC](#) report stated with 95% certainty that humans are the main cause of global warming and most likely responsible for 100% of the increase in temperature. It has a huge impact on farmers. The Agriculture Canada website, lists "opportunities" (presented by global warming) for farmers. An article in the February 2015 edition of the *Western Producer* noted that climate warming will make it possible to plant more crops. This is entirely misleading.

As farmers, we are not just victims, but also perpetrators. 30% of greenhouse gases are derived from the food system, and 15% of that is from agriculture – almost entirely from industrial agriculture. Monoculture and intensive large-scale production is intensifying, using more water, more pesticides and herbicides, more diesel fuel and chemical fertilizers. It is a huge contributor to climate change, soil degradation, water pollution, and ecosystem destruction.

As the number of family farmers decreases, and as corporate concentration and control over food increases there is a loss of democracy in the food system. Land is taken out of the hands of family farms and placed in the hands of corporations.

Eaters – people who buy, cook and eat food – also have an effect on climate change. 80% of greenhouse gases produced as a result of the food system come from transportation, packaging, and food waste.

The current food system is environmentally unsustainable and it is unjust. It is extractivist and exploitative, of nature and of people. It is not feeding the hungry people of the world, despite the push for more industrialization and GMOs to respond to crisis. La Via Campesina – the global movement of small-scale farmers, peasants, rural workers, indigenous peoples, women – points out that production is not the problem, and ramping up industrial production is not the answer.

La Via Campesina understands that this is a political conversation, and in 1996 introduced the concept of Food Sovereignty. It's about taking back the food system from corporate agribusinesses and financiers and placing it back in the hands of small-scale farmers – the people who grow food, care for the land, feed families and communities. Food is for nutrition; it should not be treated as a commodity for trade and profit. The focus should be on producing culturally and ecologically appropriate food for local communities.

When sources claim that agriculture is not feeding the people, we need to ask the question, “Who is not feeding whom?” It's not just a question of who controls it, but how we do it, and this is where farmers come in – are we working against nature, or are we working with nature? Who are we within the context of food production? Are we looking to extract? Or are we working to enhance and harvest?

If the challenge is to produce enough food for growing populations, without causing more damage and without contributing more to the problem of global storming, we need to change our methodology.

Agro-ecology is about working with nature, enhancing biodiversity, respecting and integrating traditional knowledge and methods of food production – it's not anti-science or anti-technology, but it is about pro-living, diverse, natural, organic, complex, and it is highly interdependent systems. Agro-ecology is more than a technique. It is about valuing and working with nature. It is about changing not just our methodologies, but also our relationships. Despite our great scientific knowledge, we are profoundly ignorant and arrogant when it comes to other creatures around us. We're told that it's all there for our exploitation. We must remember that we came out of nature, that we are not separate from nature. Agro-ecological production is just as productive as high-input monoculture, if all farm products are counted. And it is ecologically sustainable.

[What Plants Talk About](#) is a video by JC Cahill, a plant ecologist in Alberta, about the complex communication systems within ecosystems. We don't understand them, because we are ignorant and dismissive. We are therefore violent and destructive.

Nature is diverse and interconnected. Industrial agriculture requires an extremely standardized product. To achieve this in nature you have to be draconian, and intervene at every level, and suppress diversity. If we considered these life systems our neighbours, we would see this as incredibly violent and brutal.

To really meet the challenge of global storming, to increase biodiversity and therefore resilience, to really be at home in this world, we need to fundamentally rethink who we are and who those others are around us. We should stop thinking of corporations as persons, and “expand our view of ‘personhood’ to the natural world”. – [Kenny Ausubel – Bioneers](#)

We need to understand ourselves as not just producers of commodities. We have a huge responsibility to respect and cherish the biodiversity around us, to understand ourselves as living communities of human beings among other communities, and recognize interdependence rather than domination. Lyle Watson (biologist) once said, “We did not come into this earth. We came out of it like buds out of branches and butterflies out of cocoons.” We need to use tenderness, which is not part of industrial agriculture. We need to change our technologies and change our ways of working.

We are in an oppressive political climate, and this is hard. **But**, if we change our relationships with other beings and ecosystems, we have a good chance of mitigating and sheltering each other during the climate storming. We need to begin to see ourselves as part of the kinship group – all our relations. Solidarity with each other, and with other ecological communities will help us to understand ourselves better and change the way we live in the world and what we eat. This is about relationships: how we relate to each other, and how we see ourselves in relationship with the natural world. **Warmer more loving relationships will lead us to a cooler, calmer climate.**

Discussion:

- 1) This week students in PEI schools took part in a webinar featuring Monsanto’s Arctic Apple, presented by the group [*Agriculture in the Classroom*](#) which is sponsored by corporations such as Cargill and Syngenta. The focus of the film was the potential for GMO foods to feed the world. They ended up changing the content once there was outcry from the public.
- 2) Canada’s Food Guide is being revised, and part of the process involves discussion about sustainable diets. Not just about reducing meat consumption, but also about buying organic, etc. As we try to shift dietary patterns, what about the price? How do we make foods accessible to everyone?
 - In Canada, we have some of the cheapest food in the industrialized world. There is an issue of priorities. Another issue is that price and cost are not connected anymore. The bulk of the cost of cheap food is borne by the environment. Nutrition and price are also disconnected. If we really wanted to make sure that people are food secure, we would make sure everyone had adequate income. Cheaper food is the wrong answer, since cheaper food is more costly in every other way.
 - The trend is to fewer and fewer food producers, and they have less voice. Some are food insecure. The food system is in need of democratization. People need to be food producers, even gardeners. The way we structure our time in society is also a problem. It’s interesting that farmers seem to be “cool” now - we need to keep changing the image of what it means to be a food producer.
- 3) What is the root problem? Why don’t we talk about it? In real life, history, economics, and other topics are all connected. We need to talk about capitalism, socialism, democracy, wars and peace. Do we really have a say? We need to start talking about economics as if we really have a say. There is a history of people taking action and responsibility. Climate change needs to be addressed. We need to talk about capitalism – 8 or 80 of the richest people in the world own all the wealth. We know it’s intrinsically unfair. We know this.
- 4) You can farm with GMO or you can farm without it. In Germany people have higher levels of the pesticide RoundUp in their urine. I think we can produce food without RoundUp. We don’t need to grow GMOs. People are bio-accumulating the chemicals and heavy metals from industrial agriculture. It’s not going to stop, people need to be aware.
- 5) Preserving food skills, buying real food, and learning to cook it, eating less meat, all go a long way towards addressing climate change and food security at the same time.
- 6) Prime Minister Trudeau has said he believes in a guaranteed annual income. We should challenge him to establish a Basic Income Guarantee pilot project in PEI. Then people could buy food, feed their families. We just need to do it.

- 7) People talk about how we need to grow more food, but in reality, 30% of what is grown doesn't get out of the field, and 40% of the food at home is thrown out. We don't need more food, but we do need to not waste the food that we grow. We have the technology to feed the world, but not the will. There's an "us" versus "them" attitude, and a manufactured scarcity. We need to do something or the multinationals will just keep getting bigger, such as we see with the Bayer-Monsanto merger. If that sort of thing keeps happening, we're screwed. Everyone has the right to the bare necessities of life. We need to change, for people and for ecosystems.
- We shouldn't rely on education. One of the problems with designing global systems is that they're brutal and wasteful. We're so far away from the living systems that sustain us. Some of the (cheap) foods we consume make us complicit in child labour and really wasteful practices. One way we can change is to grow our food or know where it's grown (as locally as possible). We can't all know the details of banana production in Honduras, but we do need to know what's going on around us. We need more people closer to the ground. Right now we fear corporate power, which is a debilitating stance. They're getting bigger – the Dow-Dupont, Bayer-Monsanto mergers for example. Government is profoundly inefficient at intervening in this. The agro-ecological movement is working to build the younger generation's involvement in the food system.
- 8) Has the food system been hijacked by the hydrocarbon industry? How do we get away from this?
- Farms, historically, used animal power. The odd thing about the human imagination is that we forget what we knew already. You can grow food without diesel power and pesticides. It was done relatively recently. People (farmers) who are skeptical about growing organically forget their grandparents did the same. So to divest from the trajectory over the cliff, we need to remember what we knew already. And, we eat better, less expensively, and less wastefully, when we eat together. Individual packaged meals are taking away from eating and cooking together. Caring relationships are part of the picture.
- 9) Part of the problem is that we don't grow half the things that we eat anymore. How do we get back to consuming more of the food that we produce in PEI and Canada? It's getting worse, it's going the other way. How do we get back to food sovereignty?
- Yes, it's systemic. Including agriculture in trade agreements globalizes the food system, and disenfranchises everyone. We need to reexamine this, and also not allow the mergers of giant agribusiness corporations. We know that a lot of government policy is hostile to small-scale agriculture. We need control over resources and local networks of distribution, and we need governments that stand firm against the global tide. The idea that the richest economies in the world are somehow unable to regulate agriculture and trade systems is false. We need to engage government in a change of direction - to regulate corporations. The corporations are not allies in this. If we are able to make this change, we may survive. We're allowing land to be treated as a commodity, promoting land grabbing. This is the wrong direction for food sovereignty. We have instruments to restrict foreign investment in land. There used to be a law in Saskatchewan that you can't own more than 10 acres if you don't live there. It was changed in 2004, and now out of province investors are grabbing up land. There is a lack of regulation and protection of food producing resources.

Leah thanked Nettie, and Teresa played two more songs, including her song, "Leave it in the Ground".

Food Sovereignty and Climate Change – local perspectives:

Leah introduced **Byron Petrie**, organic vegetable farmer, NFU member and District Youth Director, member of the NFU Youth; **Hannah Gehrels**, environmental educator with the Sierra Club, board member of the Environmental Coalition of PEI. **Ann Wheatley**, member of the PEI Food Security Network and Cooper Institute.

Ann Wheatley:

- The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in 2013 published a report that said the best way to improve food security is to improve the status of women. The majority of small farmers worldwide are women, and as such they need equal access to land and credit and to the programs and supports that allow them to do the work of producing food and raising healthy families. The NFU Youth released a survey of new farmers in 2015. A high percentage of new farmers are farming ecologically, and almost 60% of them are women. Women who are producing, processing and distributing our food need equal pay, affordable childcare, parental leave - from the production side of the food system we need to pay attention to women's equality. And, from the "eater" side of things too. Levels of food insecurity are very high, especially in Atlantic Canada and especially in households with children with a lone parent who is a woman. We need to address women's equality- equal pay for equal work, and supports such as childcare in order that women can participate in a food system that is good for the planet. People aren't food insecure because food is too expensive, it's because they don't have money to buy food. We need to stop relying on charity to deal with food insecurity, and take a systemic approach. Charity does not put a priority on local food systems, and is tied up with large corporations. Cheap food has a high environmental impact.
- Basic Income Guarantee: this is hopeful, as the idea is gaining traction around the world, in Canada, and in PEI. Providing people with a livable income empowers them to take part in a food system that is more local and that causes less environmental damage.
- One of the opportunities we have in PEI is our strong networks or groups that bring different perspectives and understandings to the table, on important issues. The more we can do this, recognizing how interrelated our issues are, the more effective we can be.

Byron Petrie:

- Farmers face very, very many challenges as a result of the changing climate. One of the main ones is erratic and extreme weather – late frosts in spring, or early spring, and unpredictability in terms of planting. Once we have crops in the ground, conditions lead to other challenges such as blight. Climate change is affecting every aspect of the farms. When and where should we plough or not plough, cover-cropping, dealing with the impacts of storms, and of course fuel costs.
- What gives us hope – more people than ever are doing at least some of their shopping at farmers' markets – and more people are aware that something is not right. But, even so, it probably has to get worse before it gets better. No matter what we do, nature will find a way to survive. We might wipe ourselves out, but nature will survive. New farmers are encouraging. There may have been a generation gap, but more new farmers (many of whom are women) – are selling directly to their customers rather than dealing with brokers and the commodity market. Past generations have been robbed.
- Opportunities: saving and swapping our seeds. Seed is a crucial part of our future. The NFU and Cooper Institute, and La Via Campesina – these are great organizations. Moving from mono-cropping towards diversified crops, and intercropping. Adding diversity wherever we can. Bringing back the mixed farm. We grow flowers, vegetables, we have some hens, and hopefully soon pigs and chickens. We put organic matter in the soil, and use raised beds. For the greater community, people can get to know farmers, shop at the farmers market. Community Supported Agriculture – joining one, shopping locally, going to a seed swap, growing a garden. You can grow a lot without a lot of land. It doesn't

necessarily take as much time. Barter and trade whenever possible. Protest – ask questions of politicians and businesses. Stay critical and keep asking. We can't be complacent. Everyone should scream for 2 seconds. We need to do that more, in uncomfortable settings. (And then we screamed!)

Hannah Gehrels:

- As an ecologist I'm struck by how much knowledge we've lost. Research is often about problems that have commonsense solutions (e.g. adding flowering hedgerows near blueberry farms increases crop production via native pollinators).
- We've also lost values. A lot of our food comes from women and other folks of colour - farmers and labourers around the world who often don't have the same access to information and land rights as men. PEI, through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program welcomes workers from different parts of the world. Many are women of colour - they work in fish plants, in agriculture. This is an exploitative program that doesn't allow workers clear paths to permanent residency. Their permits are tied to one employer, they can't speak out about unfair treatment or poor housing because they could be sent home. Some workers pay recruitment fees, putting them in a cycle of debt. PEI doesn't have legislation banning this practice. Workers don't always have access to health care. Our collective values around food sovereignty, and who we deem to be 'Canadian' or 'non-Canadian', around the values that we place on how our food is grown and harvested and who is doing that work, link very directly with how we set up with TFW program to, in systematic way, exploit people of colour and place them in vulnerable situations. This is a challenge that gets in the way of nurturing human & ecological communities.
- There is reason for hope. People are working together to improve the TFW program, workers across Canada are speaking out about the injustices they face. They were successful in getting rid of a rule that forced workers to leave Canada after 4 years. A lot has to do with people like us examining our values around human rights, around where our food is coming from, and how our actions can effect change.
- There are other opportunities for building resilient communities. Local farmers and Cooper Institute created the PEI Seed Alliance to save and sell local and mostly organic seeds. We are teaching folks how to save seeds, connecting us in different ways to the food we eat.
- When we talk about hope, we often talk about kids, and about education. The Sierra Club programming connects kids to nature. It's not just 'educating' kids about nature, it's about kids immersing themselves in nature and really getting to experience. There are other programs like this - Macphail woods nature camps and the Start with a Seedling program at Prince St School.

Small Table Talks – Challenges, Hope, Opportunities

After clustering at our tables to discuss challenges, reasons for hope and opportunities to nurture ecological and human communities, one person from each of the groups presented a brief summary.

Challenges:

- In future, how will the Carbon Tax affect agriculture?
- A measure of success for food banks is the absence of clients. Could there be some kind of trading of skills for food?
- Protecting land for agriculture – the challenge for young farmers to have access to land for farming. It's easy to rent, but hard to buy because you need a lot of money. Saskatchewan used to have a land bank.
- Agency of people – connection to the government, and how we engage as citizens in government decision making

- Things that are bad for the planet get subsidized – we should stop subsidizing pipelines, for example, and start subsidizing things that are good for the planet.
- Slowness and reluctance to be awakened to issues that are not affecting our daily comfort.
- Accessibility – how can we make local healthy food accessible to everyone – including the working poor and single parents?
- Until government gets out of bed with the corporations, nothing changes.
- Public opinion- too many people don't care, and don't have time.
- International trade agreements promote and reward unsustainable agriculture.

Hopes:

- Organizations such as the NFU are a strong voice for changing trade agreements.
- Young people are involved. Young people are living closer to the earth.
- We're hopeful for population health becoming a priority for Canada, as it is in other countries.
- Young farmers like Byron learning from older farmers like Reg.
- Strong community, and the people participating in public consultations when they have a chance to.
- In 2015 the Home and School Federation passed unanimously a resolution to call for a universal school food nutrition program.
- We are an island - people are close to one another. BIG could happen here.
- Learning to save seed - the different work that's been done by different folks is really important.
- Young farmers like Byron – people moving from gardens to small farms.

Opportunities

- New Farmers Markets
- Farm Centre & Legacy Garden - people learning to grow their own food, and the PEI Food Exchange.
- More consumer awareness of where our food comes from
- Networking, groups working with other groups to grow a movement and more awareness
- Create a process for calculation and awareness of the true cost of food, so we're more prepared and better able to make choices.
- Engage in robust conversations and the sharing of knowledge as often as we can
- Take advantage of the fact that within schools there is desire for experience-based food system awareness
- Institutions could be buying locally produced food.
- Cooperatives in communities – farming cooperatives.
- Urban agriculture – food not lawns

Closing remarks from Nettie:

- What a lovely, vibrant afternoon, so much information, hope, and commitment in the room. Thank you for allowing me to be part of this!
- People who are not already members or associate members of the [NFU](#), you should join!
- Thanks to the organizers! Eat well!

PARTICIPANTS

Adam MacLean
Alex Davies
Alfred Fyfe
Ann Wheatley
Anne Gillis
Arthur Davies
Barbara McDowall
Ben Sinnamon
Breanne Stevens
Brian Turner
Byron Petrie
Callista Tan
Carol Stevenson Seller
Charles Murphy
Chris MacLeod
Connie Thurber
David Best
Dawn Wilson
Debbie Theuerkauf
Debi Stevenson
Doug Brown
Doug Campbell
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Fredericks Seller
Gary Clausheide
Hanna Hameline
Hannah Gehrels
Heather Best

Irene Burge
Irene Doyle
Janice Harper
Jeanne Maki
Jennifer Taylor
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Kevin Hooper
Kris Rochford
Leah MacLeod
Leo Broderick
Linda Pearce
Lisa MacDougall
Lou Richard
Marie Burge
Mary Lou Griffin-Jenkins
Maureen Larkin
Michelle Fyfe
Mike White
Miriam Lank
Morgan Palmer
Myrna Wicks
Nettie Wiebe
Reg Phelan
Rob Saunders

Ron Toombs
Rosalind Waters
Ruth DeLong
Scott Smith
Selvi Roy
Shirley Smedley Jay
Stella Shepard
Sue Humby
Sylvie Arsenault
Tanya Sheridan
Tara Callaghan
Teis Murphy
Teresa Doyle
Tina Davies
Wayne Easter
Whitney Allison
Yanira Green

GROUP DISCUSSION NOTES (COMPILED)

CHALLENGES

- Fear of change and where that can lead us – fear of the unknown
- Many don't care because it's not an issue to them on a daily basis – indifference, and hesitation to make things less comfortable
- Slowness in becoming aware of our part in the system and of how to act for change
- Polarization and politicization of society
- Questions about how the carbon tax will affect agriculture, individuals and households
- Lack of understanding of where food is coming from and the costs of bringing it here
- Unpredictable weather
- Lack of cooking skills
- Food banks – they are successful when they don't have any more clients
- Although everyone can grow a garden, many people, especially on low incomes, don't have the time or energy
- Food is not too expensive, it's about lack of income - healthy eating is not cheap
- For people on low income, the priority is on bulk and convenience, not quality
- Cannot talk about food security in isolation – we need to talk about food sovereignty
- Trade agreements promote and reward unsustainable agriculture – government's international trade agenda supports the corporate mantra that small farmers can't feed the world
- Walmart pursuing local & organic produce + their "lowest price guaranteed" motto
- Capitalism, role and power of corporations (e.g. Irving and McCain contracts), lack of separation between government and corporations
- Expectations. Entitlement.
- Propaganda
- Modification and processing of food to make it more convenient
- Access to land for farming, access to money for land – need to protect land for agriculture
- Agency- - how do we engage citizens in decision-making?
- Too much choice (imported products)
- How to encourage people to be more intentional about their choices?
- Subsidies for things that are bad
- Lack of political will
- Inequality and poverty and feeling hopeless, trapped – inhibits imagination, forces people to make choices that are bad for the environment and for health

HOPE

- Byron & how many young people are getting into small farming and gardening
- Mentorship of experienced, older farmers
- Urban agriculture
- The next generation - young people will be more vocal
- Renewed values/shared goals/cooperatives
- Renewed interest in local food
- National farm institute – a lot of good policies that have stood the test of time
- Millennials not shopping at box stores

- NFU has been a strong voice challenging trade agreements
- Food exchange programs, community kitchens & gardens, gleaning
- Social Media - groups and information about local food & food security issues
- Locally adapted seeds, seed sharing & saving, PEI Seed Alliance
- Community gardens – education and shifting values, re food – fosters relationships and intergenerational transfer of knowledge
- Inclusive in intent – tight communities of farmers working together
- PEI Home and School Federation – 2015 resolution calling for a universal provincial school nutrition program
- Farmers markets
- High participation of people in consultations on land, energy and water policy
- Today – different faces in the room, many young people
- Diversity of people becoming involved - there are small groups of people everywhere taking action on a variety of environmental issues
- Vibrant communities talking about these things, eg school closures issue is bringing people together – people who would never have come together otherwise

OPPORTUNITIES

- Farmers markets are growing – Downtown, Farm Centre
- Encourage government to continue the Future Young Farmers program and make it permanent
- Bring people together for robust conversations and sharing of knowledge
- Formalized education – attempts to integrate real-life experience - Farmers in schools –inform the content (not include GMO)
- Cooperatives
- Local fruits to replace exotic
- Island potential for organic
- Chefs – farm to table
- Seed library and sharing
- Shifting consumer awareness
- Use information technology
- Organizations work together around food sovereignty
- Calculate and expose the true cost of imported, processed, “cheap” food, to empower people to make a choice
- Take advantage of awareness of the link between poverty and food insecurity
- Trade rules that promote locally produced food (in the supermarket) and a local food system
- Policies – tying together land, water and local food
- Institutional buying of locally produced food
- Engage local groups for advocacy
- Reclaiming our history of self-sufficiency, rediscovering what existed in the past