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Review of *Planting the Future: Developing an Agriculture that Sustains Land and Community* edited by Elizabeth A. R. Bird, Gordon L. Bultena, and John C. Gardner

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Planting the Future: Developing an Agriculture that Sustains Land and Community. Edited by Elizabeth A. R. Bird, Gordon L. Bultena, and John C. Gardner. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995. xxiii+276 pp. Maps, graphs, tables, and references. \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0-8138-2072-3).

Why should you care about agriculture? *Planting the Future* provides an eloquent description of the current state of this most basic human endeavor so critical to survival. Based on a series of surveys and on-farm studies in the North Central and Western states, the book recognizes the bounty of our conventional agricultural industry. More importantly for the future, it details a series of critical problems in the environment, the distribution of economic benefits, and the social dislocation resulting from the consolidation of lands and heavy reliance on fossil fuels. Today's productivity and cheap food in the market have hidden expenses such as federal subsidies, impacts on the environment and future potential production, and declining rural communities. Dependence on agricultural chemicals and fertilizers is seen by many growers as not only expensive, but one of the fundamental causes for declines in water, soil, and food quality. Large multinational agribusiness has strong control over practices, commodities, and markets, with the majority of profits flowing directly to the food industry. Migration from farms to cities is not only causing a decline for many in their standard of living, but is also increasing poverty and homelessness. The book concludes that this situation cannot endure for the long term.

By "sustainable agriculture," the editors mean "Diversified, flexible, cost-effective, environmentally sound family farming that replaces chemical-intensive practices with on-farm resources, renewable energy, conservation, and skillful management of natural processes." From countless interviews with sustainable farmers across the region, the following concepts seem to provide a foundation for tomorrow's food system: integrating agriculture and nature; creating more regional food systems with local autonomy; decentralizing control of agriculture and farm resources; devel-

oping a higher level of self-sufficiency of farm operators; creating an independence of farmers from chemical inputs and centralized marketing; and establishing cooperation among neighbors and stronger farm communities. The challenge is to implement these approaches to create a more sustainable agriculture, one that is environmentally sound as well as economically profitable and socially viable. The book proposes a number of policy directions as well as environmental regulations to help the U.S. develop toward a sustainable food system.

Planting the Future begins by documenting current agriculture in the region, then focuses in on results of surveys from four states: Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana. There is an evolving consensus that changes in the future must embrace environmental, economic, and social concerns about the impacts of agriculture. A number of practices are described that can help farmers meet these goals. One of the most attractive elements of the book is an extensive series of sidebars offering personal accounts and case studies to illustrate principles in the text. Beyond the discussion of specific practices and farming systems designs, the book explores the complex issues of the structure of agriculture and the policy environment in which it exists.

Why advocate change? *Planting the Future* gives ample reason for a careful examination of our current agricultural production and food system. Based on hundreds of interviews and surveys of dozens of producers, the information available to the authors from farmers and ranchers provides the means for focusing anew on the broad goals of the agricultural sector as well as the larger society. Though burdened at times by a somewhat academic style, the book is nonetheless compelling. Its practical sidebars, embodying the stories of real people and their challenges, attract immediate interest. *Planting the Future* ought to be read by anyone concerned about food and the environment. It makes a valuable contribution to our planning for a sustainable human community that can survive in the ecosystem in harmony with other species. **Charles Francis**, *Department of Agronomy, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.