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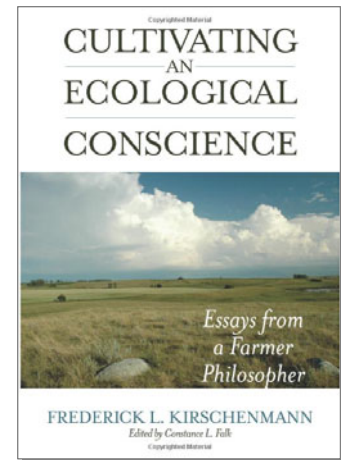
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A better philosophy for the food movement

Book Review: *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience: Essays from a Farmer Philosopher*, by Fred Kirschenmann and edited by Constance L. Falk

Review by Eliav Bitan



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National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” program was brought to me this morning by “Monsanto: helping farmers around the world be more sustainable.” From multinational corporations like Monsanto to the vegetable farmer at my farmers’ market, everyone in the agriculture field wants to talk about sustainability. What does sustainable mean? Do humans influence the environment, or are humans and the environment

Eliav Bitan has worked on farms in Maine, Pennsylvania, and Iowa, and has a degree in history of science with a focus on environmental biology from Columbia University. He has worked on agriculture and climate change policy across the United States by engaging with farmers, researchers, regulators and activists. He has previously written for the Columbia University *Undergraduate Journal of History*, Celsias.com and is co-author of the National Wildlife Federation’s report, *Future Friendly Farming: Seven Agricultural Practices to Sustain People and the Environment*. The views expressed in this review are the author’s alone and do not represent the National Wildlife Federation or any other organization.

constantly influencing each other? When farmers say they “know” how to farm, what kind of knowledge is that? Is that knowledge drawn from years of experience, or from scientific experiment?

Philosophers ask these basic questions about assumptions and knowledge. Fred Kirschenmann has explored how philosophical questions relate to farming in an extraordinarily sensitive, thorough manner, over 40 years of writing, speaking and leadership. In *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, essays and lectures from a broad range of events, journals, and forums come together to form a remarkably cohesive whole.

The essays are always rooted in agricultural practice. For example, one powerful element of sustainable agriculture to which Kirschenmann returns repeatedly is integrating animal and crop production systems. He writes, for example,

Our 3100 acre [1250 hectare] grain and livestock farm has 114 beef brood cows. The beef cattle are fully integrated into the cropping system. We feed our cattle no cash grain, only forages and crop residues. We generate, on average, [US]\$300,000 gross revenue annually, and we haven't borrowed any operating funds in twenty years. (p. 64)

This is classic Kirschenmann. You can almost smell the manure. And he makes his argument in terms that any farmer can understand: dollars and cents. For decades, conservationists have been discussing the improvements to soil and water that come when forage crops like alfalfa are included in a rotation. Kirschenmann seems to have the most effective way to make that argument: from his own farming experience, in hard economic terms. He asks in almost every essay in this book, "how does all of this knowledge apply to my farm in North Dakota, or to farms in Iowa?" Kirschenmann's farming experience makes his lament all the more powerful when he bemoans that "we know almost nothing about the ecological wealth, encapsulating our farms in the form of various natural organisms, that could be linked to biological synergies that could drive our productivity" (p. 98). The loss of biological wealth is not an abstract concern in these essays, but rather a very financial damage to farmers. Perhaps this practical wisdom is why Kirschenmann has been so effective in creating and leading sustainable agriculture groups, from the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society to Agriculture of the Middle, and from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture to the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture.

It is cliché to complain about information silos, where farmers and researchers do not share their unique knowledge with each other. All the organizations Kirschenmann has been involved in have sought to connect on-farm knowledge with research and policy. For example, he repeatedly mentions how he increased production without new costs by growing wheat and flax together on his farm, rather than as monocultures. He relates this to an article in the journal *Science* about a

research experiment using a similar principle with rice production in China. In each case, the secondary crop adds about 20% to the production of the field. In the rice example, the increased diversity protects the crop from a potent fungus, enabling farmers to give up the use of an expensive, toxic chemical.

Throughout his essays, Kirschenmann retains a focus on the philosophical issue he studied and taught as an academic. Readers are just as likely to enjoy an explanation of the late-nineteenth century German philosopher Edmund Husserl as contemporary scientific literature. From his discussion of crop mixing, Kirschenmann deftly maneuvers to philosophical ideas about "nature." When nature is viewed as pristine and impractical, farmers and researchers alike fail to see value in the diversity of a natural system. Instead, they focus on artificial monocultures. Kirschenmann brings this philosophical idea directly to bear on our nation's agriculture policy. He is proud of his work in the federal Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program to propose more interactions between farmers and researchers. And he wishes there were more policy support for such integration.

While Kirschenmann's specific policy proposals, like increasing SARE funding, are not uncommon throughout the book, they are better in the later pieces. In 1978, two years after quitting his promising career as a professor to return to his family's farm in North Dakota, Kirschenmann spoke at an informal gathering of organic farmers. He sketched out the dismal state of current farm economics, where he lost money on each bushel of wheat he grew. He compared farmers' failure to diversify their operations and build soil organic matter to the practices that caused the ecological devastation of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. And he tried to propose a solution: a soil depletion tax credit modeled after the oil depletion tax credit given to large oil companies. This obscure policy proposal, developed by University of Missouri soil scientist William Albrecht in 1955, garnered little support. The reader is challenged to understand how such a policy would work.

In contrast, in a 1999 talk in Lincoln, Nebraska, Kirschenmann presciently highlighted the trend for farmers to become contract workers for their “customers.” He noted the broiler industry, where farmers often contract with consolidated processing companies to ensure a customer for their products. These contract farmers find their entire operations dictated by their buyers, with none of the independence Kirschenmann and other farmers value so much. Kirschenmann is concerned that grain farmers will grow products genetically engineered for such specific end uses that they will similarly become beholden to their buyers. He advocates instead for “some kind of universal collective bargaining” (p. 158). He compares current farm groups to unions: “Airline pilots never use their union dues to get more people to fly. They use them to get a fairer share of transportation profits” (p. 158). In contrast, farmer check-off

programs try to increase demand for farm products, and farmer groups reliably talk about increasing production to feed the world.

Kirschenmann suggests that commodity groups should instead bargain with processors, wholesalers, and retailers for a greater share of food spending. Currently, farmers receive 8 cents of every dollar spent on food. How could this amount increase?

After reading *Cultivating and Ecological Conscience*, I could not help but wonder how the food movement would look if this were its primary text, rather than Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Might we be more understanding of, and interested in, farming itself? Might we focus more on deeper philosophical issues at the root of our agricultural system? 