

Alternative farming- A Solution Beyond Food



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Factory farming is currently harming a lot more than cattle- excessive food waste, water poisoning, and air pollution are just a handful of the negative outputs of the excessively industrialized state of the farming industry. We're reaching a point where, not only are the practices unsustainable, but they have to be changed for the livelihood of our planet. Countless forests are being torn down for land, and approximately 14.5% of greenhouse gases come from farming and butchering cattle. These issues have extended beyond the farms for quite some time- dumping and runoff have resulted in polluted oceans, another factor of worsening climate change. This negative output is social as well- often, these farms and their warehouses are placed in or near disadvantaged communities. Issues of environmental racism are worsened when communities are infiltrated by the low wages, smog, and space that the farm industry takes up. Despite this, these communities don't even get to benefit from close access to so much produce. A study at Yale University found that, in lower-income communities, lower-quality produce and unhealthy foods are much more common than in higher-income neighborhoods. The current state of farming is truly a vicious cycle- we will continue to run our resources dry and harm our environment until the negative output extends outside of lower-income communities and into the rest of the world, only cutting more and more corners in the process. Now more than ever, we clearly need to practice sustainable and alternative farming methods. By giving more rights to farmers and effort towards sustainable farming, we would not just see our climate heal, but we would see our communities heal as well.

In order to contextualize what I mean by sustainable farming practices, as well as the current mistreatment of farmers, let's take a look at Oregon. Recently, Oregon has been making a consistent effort to use new, more sustainable methods of farming, and to positive results. Pesticide use has dwindled in numerous industries. With fruits, the use of pesticides on pears has gone down by two-thirds what it used to be, while still yielding great produce. For livestock, the controlling of poisonous weeds has saved that industry nearly \$5 million. Onions are being grown in a method that saves water and preserves topsoil, resulting in incredibly large, high-quality onions. There's a clear benefit from caring about sustainability, as not only do you help preserve the earth, but you produce a higher quality product while doing so. While not inherently an alternative farming method, being mindful and changing the output of harmful pesticides and wasted water has benefited Oregon's economy greatly. However, farmers are still not as incentivized to care as they should be, as they face pressure from two sides: the government, and consumers. The government is creating issues for farmers because they simply do not supply them with the support they need to try and fix their outputs. According to Tony Brown of the National Farmers Association (NFA), "If the farmers are given tax breaks to offset the expenditure, then they would willingly accept the new practices." Despite having the ability to subsidize farmers, farmers are often left with no incentive to fix their practices other than the general want to better the planet. Even though bigger corporations are more guilty of contributing to the negative outputs of factory farming, they leave it up to farmers to pick up the slack. This proves that there is a real reason to support local farmers, and markets that sell more sustainably produced goods- if we don't, it's unlikely anyone else will. This ties into the pressure farmers face from consumers. According to OSU entomologist Rick Hilton, "Consumers are rightly putting more and more pressure on the industry to change its reliance on chemical

pesticides, but they still want a picture-perfect product”. In order to make alternative farming more common, we have to culturally get over the idea that slightly imperfect foods are dirty and gross. Even if they may not be as bright and colorful as advertised, sustainably making organic produce will lead to getting it into communities that currently deal with truly poor-quality produce.

One example of an incredibly beneficial form of alternative farming is rice/fish farming. Rice/fish farming is a type of farming in which plots of water are segmented into rows of growing rice and streams of fish. This creates a symbiotic relationship between the two- the rice becomes food for the fish, and the fish improve the climate that the rice grows. This ends up yielding more, higher quality, nutrient-rich products on both ends. This process also prevents the use of pesticides, as the symbiotic relationship between the two lowers the presence of harmful bacteria. On top of all this, it uses far less water than our current process of fish farming, with none of the waste and pollution. When compared to the current way we harvest fish, rice/fish farming seems like a no-brainer. The open water cages we use to catch fish in the middle of the ocean “produce pollution thanks to fish excrement and liberal use of antibiotics which are required to keep fish alive in these highly unnatural conditions” (The Human League.org). Intruding on biodiverse parts of the ocean is soon going to no longer be an option. According to Robert L. Miller of the University of Michigan, “Extinctions of 3 genera, 27 species, and 13 subspecies of fishes from North America are documented during the past 100 years”. We are quickly running ourselves into a hole, but with all of these seemingly great options right at our disposal, it’s depressing to see how greedy the industries that benefit from factory farming truly are.

As frustrating as it is to hear about the potentially life-saving changes we could be making to our current farming industry being wasted, it's important to not give up hope. States like Oregon are making a real, concrete effort to help change the way we perceive farming. Even just one state becoming more mindful has led to economic benefits, improved produce, and of course, less harm to our planet. Rice fish farming is just one example- there are many methods of clever, older farming techniques that produce a higher quality product at a lower carbon footprint. It's about time that we stop viewing food production for its yield in profit, but for how it accounts for harming our planet.

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