II. Community Partner:

Morris Farm Trust: Midcoast Maine’s Organic Community Farm  
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III. Introduction:

Over the course of the semester, we have engaged in a service-learning partnership with the Morris Farm, located in Wiscasset, Maine. Morris Farm is a community-owned farm, devoted to the preservation of the rapidly disappearing traditions and lifestyle of the small, independent farm. The farm makes ample use of its fifty acres, devoting space to organic raspberry and garden patches, a small apple orchard, and a variety of organically raised livestock including Jersey milking cows, seasonal flocks of pasture-raised turkeys, chickens (“broilers”) and laying hens. It also raises pigs and has an American Guinea hog.

In this service-learning project, our role has been to serve our community partner by tackling a number of tasks assigned to us by the farm staff. In the course of our service, we have gained valuable knowledge of the environmental issues that our community partner attempts to address. Our tasks have been to aid the farm by researching information for an enhanced self-guided tour of the grounds, researching the health benefits and risks of human consumption of raw milk to create an informative flyer on the subject, and researching the history of dairy farming in the state of Maine. In its own small corner of Maine, Morris farm addresses (and
resists) a multiplicity of national and global trends in agriculture including the rise of corporate agribusinesses, the rapid increase in pesticide use, and the disassociation between food consumers and the origins and preparation of the foods they consume.

IV. Environmental/Social Issues:

The main goals of Morris Farm are to prevent the further industrial development of the land, to provide demonstration of and education on sustainable farming practices, and ultimately to promote a stronger connection between the community and the land. These reflect a general nationwide reaction against the current dominance of agribusiness in our society’s food production. Agribusiness has created a situation in which the community has become increasingly removed from both the food it consumes and the land on which it lives, a problem Morris Farm works to rectify.

‘Agribusiness’ is characterized by massive corporate ownership focused on large-scale food production. Up until 1950, most agricultural production was still labor intensive. These highly diversified farms devoted most food production to feeding the farm family. However, between 1950 and 2000 a revolution of farming occurred. The transformation during those fifty years far exceeded any progression over the previous two hundred years of US history. In such a short time, two-thirds of the family farms vanished and the number of workers on farms declined from six million to two million. While the farmer once received 50 cents of every dollar sold, he now earns only 10 cents for every sale (Jager, 2004). This is a result of lengthened commodity chains (Conca, 2002, p.139) which increase the separations of people from their food and farmers from their profits.

More specifically, our current agricultural system can be described as the “Farm Food Complex.” This supply system includes almost everything harvested from the earth for human consumption. It operates on a global scale, providing cheap food across the world. In doing so,
it threatens not only local ecosystems, but also a way of life (Jager, 2004). Before World War II, the majority of food production was “locally-oriented”—production and consumption occurred in the same geographical region (Kramar and Smith, p. 3). The modern day arrangement of food production and consumption and the “restructuring of the world food system under corporate control” (C. Francis, 1990, p.175) have forced the development of a dichotomy between what Jager describes as the “System” and the “Resistance” (2004).

The System includes all agribusinesses, corporations, and their global adjuncts that organize and administer food production, packaging, and marketing. Principles of the System include consolidation, specialization, vertical organization, and globalization. Currently, 46% of all of pork and 50% of all broilers raised in the United States come from just four large corporations (Jager, 2004). Totalitarian tendencies prevail. A few corporations rule with the weapon that is scale economy efficiency—an overarching and internalized value that can devalue equity, sustainability and cultural connections to the land.

Standing in opposition to this System is the Resistance, composed of innumerable small parts, decentralized and diverse, that form an aggregate and collective whole (Jager, 2004). The idea is to promote “‘small scale on a large scale,’ by allowing for space for more community-based economies to flourish and spread” (Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield, Gorelick, 2002, p.105). Resistance, therefore, includes food produced and purchased within a more localized geographic area. It can include food we grow ourselves (in our own gardens), organic food produced for local consumption, farmers’ markets, and direct farm to restaurant/consumer enterprises, (e.g. Consumer Supported Agriculture). The Resistance is not limited to alternative ways of growing and processing food but also places a strong emphasis on the need for increased public knowledge and awareness of the System. The disconnect between production and consumption inhibits “knowledge, information, and contextual understanding of the production process…. As
a result, consumers lack the information and incentives to behave in a more sustainable fashion even if they are otherwise disposed to do so” (Conca, 2002, p.144). Community education can provide a greater contextual understanding and emphasize the benefits of knowing how and where the food you eat is produced. This can lead to a fuller understanding of the current status of agricultural production, the many ways to resist, and the reasons why resistance can be beneficial.

The environmental, economic, and social ramifications of the System’s takeover of agriculture are far reaching and, often, to the detriment of local environments and communities. Environmental impacts have grown because of increased pollution from greater transportation distances and increased pesticide use. The decline of small farms, compounded by the trend of increasing migration from rural to urban areas, has impoverished rural economies (C. Francis, 1990, p. 175). Many social and economic benefits of small-scale farming and locally-oriented agriculture have been lost. The “sense of interdependence, characteristic of real community” (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002, p. 81.), fostered by direct links between many members of a given region, has been weakened as rural services and social and economic institutions (e.g. post offices, schools, clinics, and bus services) have disappeared (Norberg-Hodge et al., p. 82).

The shift away from a locally-focused economy has severely separated the individual from the community and the food consumer from the land. Wendell Berry summarizes the problem of the System:

When the interests of local communities and economies are relentlessly subordinated to the interest of ‘business,’ … the people are increasingly estranged from the native wealth, health, knowledge, and pleasure of their country…. [and] the country itself is destroyed (1993, p. 10).
The agribusiness conception of the land as a purely profitable and exploitiable resource prevails. Such a perception devalues the notion of land as a legacy to be passed on from one generation to the next (Schwenke, 1991, p. 1) and threatens the long-term health of the soil.

Sustainable agriculture tries to overcome man’s estrangement from the land. As an important part of the Resistance, it is one of the fastest growing areas within U.S. agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is not a commitment to return to the past; conversely, it is focused on stewardship, biodiversity, and a reliance on mixed farming systems to promote a healthier and more environmentally-conscious future. A definition of sustainable agriculture developed at a 1989 meeting of the American Society of Agronomy states: “A sustainable agriculture is one that, over the long term, enhances environmental quality and the resource base on which agriculture depends; provides for basic human food and fiber needs; is essentially viable; and enhances the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole” (D. Francis, 1994, p. 5). While organic farming is not a requirement of sustainable agriculture, it is a mechanism through which farms, like Morris Farm, pursue sustainability.

The development or maintenance of biological diversity and the “purposeful maintenance and replenishment of soil fertility” (“Frequently Asked Questions”, 2004) characterize organic farming. Organic certification includes the annual submission of an “organic system plan and inspection of farm fields and facilities” (ibid.). The National Organic Program of the USDA has established a system of regulations. As a general rule, all natural substances are allowed in organic production and all synthetic substances are prohibited. Morris Farm is currently certified organic and thus is participating in the fastest growing sector of agriculture. Over the past decade, sales of organic foods have shown an “annual increase of at least 20%” (ibid.) and approximately two percent of the U.S. food industry is grown organically. Furthermore, certified
organic cropland has doubled between the years 1992 and 1997 to over 1.3 million acres (Dimitri and Green, 2002, p. iii).

The prohibition of synthetic chemicals is an important characteristic of organic farming. Animals raised within organic operations must be fed organic feed and given access to the outdoors. They are given no antibiotics, growth hormones or medication unless they are sick. Morris Farm is part of the 15% of Maine dairy farms that produce organic milk, the highest proportion found in the United States (Libby, 2004). Organic crops are raised without using most conventional pesticides and fertilizers. Extensive deleterious environmental and health effects have encouraged food producers to reduce synthetic chemical use. The EPA, in its Citizens’ Guide to Pesticides of 1987, claimed, “Pesticides are not ‘safe.’ They are produced specifically because they are toxic to something” (“Field of Dreams”, 2001). Problems with pesticides generally occur when their toxicity extends beyond the target organism. Some pesticides (organochlorines, specifically) are lipophilic. They are easily taken up by organisms and are magnified through the food chain (biomagnification) causing problems to minute organisms as well as humans.

Human health effects can be both acute and chronic due to ingestion or direct contact with pesticides. Acute symptoms, occurring shortly after exposure, can include

Eye, throat, and skin irritation, nausea, headaches, diarrhea, flu-like symptoms, respiratory distress, and in extreme cases death. Chronic symptoms, occurring much longer after exposure and persisting, can include cancer, reproductive impairment, and neurological damage (Field of Dreams, 2001).

The current regulation of pesticides in the United States is also problematic. It does not operate on the precautionary principle. Such a principle is based on the idea that one “does no harm” (Libby, 2004) by not putting anything on the land unless he is certain there are no ill
effects. Unfortunately, regulation of pesticides in the United States fails to uphold this principle and, therefore, accepts certain levels of risk:

Even if we know that a pesticide causes severe health and environmental impacts, including cancer and genetic damage, it may still be allowed for use. The EPA may determine that a cancer-causing chemical may be used despite its public health hazard if its ‘economic, social or environmental’ benefits are deemed greater than its risk (“Field of Dreams”, 2001).

While the chemical industry can and does test for a wide range of environmental and health impacts, the majority of pesticides currently on the market have not been fully tested. As of March of 1997, “only 148 of 604 pesticide active ingredients had complete environmental and health impact studies as required by law” (“Field of Dreams”, 2001). Such scientific uncertainty about the relative toxicity or safety of pesticides is grounds for pursuing organic farming. Fertilizers can potentially contaminate groundwater through the leaching of nitrogen/nitrates from the soil to aquifers, thus threatening the health of humans and the ecosystem (Dorsey, 2004). The risk of groundwater contamination is severely decreased when the use of synthetic fertilizers is discontinued as is required by organic certification.

The Morris Farm further places emphasis on awareness and understanding of sustainable agriculture through its environmental education programs, which include an after-school program for local elementary school children. This is a direct response to the need “for creative and long-term planning in our total educational system with regard to natural resources and how we use them to human advantage” (D. Francis, 1994, p. 460). Such programs result from an increased recognition that “many habits are developed in the early years, and a healthy concern about food safety, caution in resource use, recycling of wastes, and creating fewer wastes can all begin as early as preschool years” (ibid.). In this way, Morris Farm does its part to oppose the current agribusiness conception of farming by promoting healthier farming practices, educating
the community on sustainability and instilling a sense of environmental consciousness among younger generations.

Thus, Morris Farm, through its community outreach programs and sustainable farming techniques, provides opportunities for the community to reconnect with the processes that provide it food. Morris Farm, as a part of the Resistance, attempts to challenge the negative impacts inherent in the agribusiness model, such as the alienation of the consumer from food production, the loss of biodiversity, and the poor management of natural resources. To some extent, Morris Farm has recognized that “people realize their full identity and meaning only in the context of the broad social values and experiences of their community” (Helleiner, 2002, p. 266). Reestablishing agriculture in a localized setting and providing a space where people can directly interact with the land, Morris Farm helps to better steward the environment and strengthens the social fabric in which it is located. It increases awareness of sustainable agriculture and provides opportunities for the community to learn how to better protect and conserve its natural resources.

IV. Morris Farm History:

For the many thousands of tourists that make their way north on Maine’s coastal Route 1 in the summer months, a one-mile detour north and west would bring them to The Morris Farm. Any visitor that may have happened to pass the farm or even stop-in over the past ten years would have witnessed a lively, functioning, and sustainable community farm. These visitors would have every reason to believe that The Morris Farm has existed as this integrated organic farming operation and educational center for many, many years. However, the Morris Farm has a long history and it was not until 1995 that this fifty-acre piece of property came into its current form.
Prior to 1995, The Morris Farm had been managed as a private family farm. Located one mile outside of the village of Wiscasset, Maine, the farm was put on the market after its most recent owner, Forrest Morris, passed away in 1994. Before Forrest, Al Morris, Forrest’s father, ran the farm. He purchased the farm in the 1930s from the Albee family and ran it as a productive dairy, regularly shipping milk via rail north to the Turner Creamery in Turner, Maine.

When the Maine Yankee Atomic Power Plant opened in the late 1960s, the farm changed from milk production to raising cattle for beef. There was a concern expressed by Maine Yankee that perhaps Morris’ dairy would not be suitable any longer with the opening of the power plant. Forrest Morris raised beef for several decades until the 1990s when he became ill and passed away (Leslie, 2004).

Morris had grown up on the farm that he came to own in adulthood and was a well-known personality among Wiscasset residents. When Morris passed away, his land went up for sale. At this stage in the history of the farm, as well as in the history of American farms not just in Maine, a distinct threat was posed to the land – that of development.

The pattern of rural development in America often begins with the sale of large pieces of land that were formerly unused for purposes other than farming. These lots are then often bought by developers who subdivide the property to build units that can then be re-sold to greater numbers at higher prices, creating a profit. Beyond generating income for the developer, however, this process of land-use conversion in rural areas fundamentally alters the character of the land. It also creates consequences for the ecological habitats of these areas, affecting plant and animal life in addition to human lives. According to Lizbeth A. Pyle, in her study of The Land Market Beyond the Urban Fringe, “rural landowners play a pivotal role in the [land-use conversion] process because they decide how their property will be used or when it will be sold.
for someone else to use it” (Pyle, 32). In the case of The Morris Farm, Forrest Morris’ death created a dilemma for those interested in maintaining the land’s rural character.

Often times, farmers like Morris will look to sell to “persons who expect to continue agricultural usage of the land” (Pyle, 36). With Morris’ death, however, the future of the farm became out of the control of any party with a vested interest in the land’s agricultural history. For, it is the sellers in these situations that hold the upper-hand. They are able to determine to whom they will and will not sell based on the prospective buyer’s intentions. In effect, according to Pyle, the sellers “set the course for changes in the human settlement pattern” (Pyle, 32) in the US.

Just next door to the Morris Farm used to be another small, family farm owned by the Blagden family. The Blagdens ran a dairy, just like the Morris family once had, but sold the land to the village government, which was in need of a primary school at the time. The land where the Blagden farm once was underwent a process of land-use conversion, and though its current function as a public school is arguably equally as valuable, the area nonetheless fundamentally changed in its character.

In the story of the Blagden farm, the seller, the Blagden family, played a role in the process of the land’s conversion to a civic rather than an agricultural character. In the case of the Morris Farm, the seller, then passed away, was removed from the equation of land development. The town had expressed an interest to Forrest in purchasing the farm in order to expand the school’s playing fields. Though this may have been a legitimate option for Forrest Morris and an addition to Wiscasset’s public school system, a value was instead placed on the land’s agricultural character. An interest was aroused by Morris’ passing in maintaining the land’s rural qualities and continuing the tradition of agriculture in Wiscasset as well as in Maine and the nation.
With Forrest Morris’ passing, proactive action was needed from a party, or parties as it were, besides the traditional seller. For this reason a group of committed Wiscasset community residents formed the Morris Farm Trust in 1995 with the purpose of buying the land that was once Forrest Morris’. In June of that year the Trust was able to purchase the land. The Trust’s goals became more than just acquiring the land and stopping developers by including a desire to rejuvenate the agricultural history of the area. As laid out in the group’s mission, The Morris Farm seeks to promote local, sustainable and organic farming as a way to educate the public in the value of these endeavors. Recognizing the “threatened” nature of this way of life, The Morris Farm has sought to revive an interest in farming not just in Wiscasset but also in Maine and America.

The farm’s programs have evolved over the past ten years. The fifty-acre property is small by modern standards of large-scale, monoculture, agro-business farms, but the Trust has been able to establish the farm as a player not just in the food-service industry in the Wiscasset area. Arguably, the more dominant business of the Morris Farm is in its educational and community-building programs. Nevertheless, the farm does market products for consumption that are available at the Farm itself, sold on an honor system with the products kept in self-service refrigerators for customers to access. In addition, the farm has been able to produce enough raw milk to sell to a few groceries in the Mid-coast region, including Morning Glory in Brunswick. Morris Farm is able to provide most of its products organically (except for the pigs). Because their production is oriented toward local markets, it can maintain its organic practices with greater ease (Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002, p. 44). Locally produced food must not be taken for granted. Russell Libby, a leader within MOFGA (the Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association), stated that if just $10 per week per family was spent on locally produced food, $100 million that otherwise would have left the state would stay in the Maine economy (Libby
And think of the ways communities, schools and other services could improve with such added resources! If consumers become more aware of local food, if they have local resources like Morris Farm, they may begin to make changes in their consumption patterns. Why eat food that typically travels between 2,500 and 4,000 kilometers from the farm to your plate (Halweil, 2002, p. 5) when you can stop on by your local farm and pick up milk, eggs and produce grown not more than a few steps from where you purchase it?

Unlike conventional farms, however, the Morris Farm does not solely produce a product for sale. Integrated into the process of production, and arguably the most important aspect of the farm, is its community outreach through educational programs. Involving local students and community members in the process of agricultural production has allowed the Morris Farm in the past ten years to connect people to their food in meaningful and educational ways.

The educational programs offered by the farm have expanded in its relatively short, decade-long history. After-school programs, a summer camp, and shorter vacation camps held during school recesses in December and April form the core of the farm’s educational offerings along with partnerships with local primary, secondary, and home-school groups. Students participate in the daily functioning of the farm – collecting eggs from the chickens, tending to garden patches. By making the basis for their educational programs work-oriented, students learn not just about the academic or scientific aspects of land-use, plant-growth or animal-care, but also about the practical (and often fun) components of farm life and operation.

Endemic to all of the farm’s efforts is a belief that just to produce and to sell to abstractly “operate” is not enough. Though the Morris Farm could have easily become a Home Depot or a housing development, it could have almost just as easily simply passed hands to another private farmer. The Morris Farm Trust, however, makes a compelling case in favor of committing to more than being just the anti-housing development. A private farming operation is not to be
shunned in any way, but an organic community farm is able to go a few steps further. Through education and community involvement in farm life, the farm is able to connect people to their land, their food, and their neighbors. Often this is facilitated through demonstrations and workdays where community and board members, families, and neighbors are invited to help on the farm. The work can range from trimming raspberry trestles and pruning the raspberry bushes, to help with the demonstrations. Whether you want to learn how to press cider or slaughter turkeys for Thanksgiving, help with these workdays and demonstrations not only provide extra labor power, but also offer an educational opportunity. Through experience and direct participation, participants have the opportunity to learn about the techniques and tradition of their labor. At the root of it all is an enabling educational experience for everyone who visits the land, participates in programs or just buys some milk.

A 1990s report from the Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association articulates that there is a deeper need in America for farms to do more than just provide food. “Our existence is primarily dependent on farming,” (Trauger and McFadden, 6) it says. And yet, only 2% of Americans in 1990 were included as part of our nation’s farming population. The report continues: “As farming becomes more and more remote from the life of the average person, it becomes less and less able to provide us with clean, healthy, life-giving food or a clean, healthy life-giving environment” (Trauger and McFadden, 6). The Morris Farms’ programs seek to remedy locally the situation of detachment from food and its consequences, by involving people directly. The Trust’s mission details, “there is an intensifying need to support agriculture that is sustained from the work and wisdom of people within our community” (Mission Statement).
V. Group Project Definition:

Our project is focused on enhancing community awareness of the issues surrounding Morris Farm. Our main task was to work with a planning committee designed to refurbish/reinvent the self-guided tour. This tour is meant to allow visitors to learn about the purpose and practices of the farm through an interactive, self-led, tour of the different facilities on the farm. We directly participated in further research of the different “stations” of the tour. This information potentially will be included on new, fully portable placards or window boxes.

In order to increase community awareness, we researched the history and issues surrounding the production and consumption of raw milk. Ultimately, the research will be incorporated into a pamphlet/flyer to be distributed to the local venues in which Morris Farm milk is sold and potentially included in the self-guided tour.

The third part of our project will involve research surrounding the Maine Dairy Industry. We will focus on why it is important to keep the industry local, how this affects Morris Farm, and will incorporate this researched information (along with Morris Farm history in particular) in a Power Point presentation that Morris Farm will then be able to use when presenting in a range of locations.

VI. Relating Morris Farm with course material:

One important aspect of working with The Morris Farm is how it enhances our understanding of material covered in this course. In many ways the farm provided us with a chance to observe and further understand a real-world application of the issues we have discussed in class. Some of the readings most pertinent to our project are Brulle, Funes et al., Princen et al. and Proctor.

Morris Farm creates concrete connectedness and relationships between people and nature. As often happens in certain environmental movements, discussed by Robert Brulle,
nature is seen solely as something for humans to use, not as necessitating or deserving an interdependent relationship. In this sense people argue to preserve/conserve nature for its usefulness to humans, not granting it intrinsic value. Morris farm bridges this gap through its education programs, and work-days. During the time people spend on the farm they can learn that the nature they are interacting with is of use to them. Through such direct experiences they often develop a sense of a deeper reason to treat the land and the animals humanely. It is not just some land and animals, but this land and these animals. Fond identification with a place often promotes increased feelings of respect and concern for its well-being.

Fernando Funes et al. describe how Cuba serves as an inspiring example of sustainable agriculture in action. In many ways it seems that The Morris Farm is a miniature version of the growing movement in Cuba. Morris Farm, as a strong example of efforts to promote sustainable agriculture, and more community involvement, is in a prime place to inspire people to think more reflectively about the food they purchase and consume. At the least, visitors will leave with more thoughts devoted to the ideas of local, organic farms. At the most, those visitors will move beyond reflection and make more of an effort to support local, organic farms.

The main goal of Morris Farm is not to be a large producer merely selling its products. Its greatest emphasis is placed on creating and facilitating a community space and a place to learn. Therefore, although the farm does indeed sell medium potential commodity goods (arguably they are not high potential since they are more dependent on the “particularity of geography or culture” (Manno, 2002, p. 71) associated with Wiscasset), it most values its low potential commodity service: community engagement and education. When people come to the farm as kids for an after-school education program or as adults on a “work day” they should soon realize that humans are in fact dependant on nature and a part of it, as their actions directly affect the health and/or balance of an ecosystem. This relationship or bond that is formed often makes
the difference when considering buying products at a slightly higher price from a local/organic farm.

Proctor suggests that humans do not necessarily see justification for taking action on environmental issues unless some part of nature that is being threatened is seen as valuable, for instrumental purposes to humans, for its own sake, or a combination of these. Our social construction of nature is always in flux and changes not only the way we think about nature but also dictates the way we choose to care for or treat nature. Morris Farm accepts both reasons as necessitating action to counteract current trends toward environmental degradation. Those who get to visit the farm automatically get to learn about (and come to appreciate intrinsic value) and work with nature. In a way these people who visit the farm, either on a regular basis or just once, are chiseling away at the myth of the separation between production and consumption and also humans and nature. Morris farm does not only contribute to creating a healthy, organic and environmentally friendly environment, but also helps strengthen social ties within the community.

**VII. Future collaboration:**

There is so much potential for Bowdoin to continue working with Morris Farm. To maximize our returns with the farm as a community partner, the establishment of clear expectations and goals is essential. Beyond that, greater levels of personal interaction should take place. This can be sometimes difficult with the physical distance, but only through direct experience and interaction (as stated in the paper above) can one begin to truly identify with and understand the work that Morris Farm does. Academically, an empirical investigation of the extent to which Morris Farm fulfills its mission could clarify where adjustments on the farm are needed.
References:


