

If The Global Food And Farm System Could Talk, What Would It Say?

by Rich Schell
April 4, 2020

Posted on LinkedIn

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/global-food-farm-system-could-talk-what-would-say-rich-schell/?articleId=6652240632058310656>

“If success or failure of this planet and of human beings depended on how I am and what I do...
HOW WOULD I BE? WHAT WOULD I DO?”
— R. Buckminster Fuller

There's a profound past, present and future irony in the corona virus, and its potential effect on the global farm and food system. If you are interested in food and farming and history, eventually you run across, Guns Germs and Steel by Jared Diamond. Diamond hypothesized that the history of the world turned, in part, on a quirk in the food system: Throughout their history Europeans had domesticated and lived cheek by jowl with most of the animals that could be domesticated, and this close proximity, over the course of thousands of years, meant Europeans caught and recovered from many of the diseases the animals had. So when the Europeans landed in the New World, they had some resistance to many diseases. Sadly indigenous populations did not, and they suffered horribly from these diseases as a result of that lack of exposure.

The present irony is that, even after all of our progress, we are facing a pandemic that is related to food. Perhaps, it will turn out that one of the major sources was, indeed, a shrimp seller in a wet market.

These ironies are not limited to the past or the present. In the future set movie, “Interstellar”, humanity has to confront the end of its food supply on earth. Matthew McConaughey's character is a pilot and an engineer. He's talking to his daughter's school principal. And the principal says, “You're a well educated man, Coop, and a trained pilot”, and Coop says, “and an engineer.” Lately, I've been thinking a lot of the principal's reply, “The world doesn't need any more engineers we didn't run out of planes and television sets, we ran out of food...”

Later, in the movie, the lead scientist urges Coop to confront the realities they face: “We must think not as individuals but as a species”. Some writers on the internet have described Covid-19 as a species event. I think thinking about the global food system as a species concern is a good thing to do. And, this is a good time to ask species level questions. Our survival as a species depends on this fabulous complex, interwoven, and, oh so possibly fragile, global food system. Furthermore, I think if that global food system could talk, and we could ask it, “What do you need, right now to be ok? The answer would be very direct and in the form of a short checklist of the following essentials.

1. Healthy Productive Farmers and Food Workers.

We're used to thinking of farming in terms of acres and crops and food production in terms of factory and output, but really both farmland and factories are worthless without trained, healthy, working people. So, protecting the food supply has to begin with protecting the health of farmers and food workers. We need to treat farmers and food workers like health workers, and we need to protect them as a strategic resource. Delivery people like Instacart, warehouse people like Amazon's, chicken processors in Mississippi and grocery store workers need testing, support when they are sick, and work places where they can work safely.

Our food system probably won't collapse because of the risks in grocery stores, but it would collapse if the logistics people, grocery people, food production workers and farmers were too sick or too worried to work anymore. Many of the grain farmers in Illinois are older than 50 and would not necessarily have a backup in case they became ill. The dairy industry would be in infinitely worse shape if their workforce collapsed. Dairy farming is a living breathing example of concentration of farm resources with the top dairy farms producing the majority of milk in the U.S. To do this, large dairy farms may milk in several shifts which can require 24 hour coverage. If there are no workers because they are ill, there is no milk. And, don't forget the vegetables, a huge amount of produce is still picked by hand, if there are not enough farm workers, then the food will rot in the fields. Lest all of these concerns be written off as silly fear mongering, it's important to remember that in 1919 during the Spanish Influenza, farmers were too sick to harvest, crops rotted in the fields, and the shortages went on for months.

2. Preserve and Protect Key Logistics.

We need to preserve logistics infrastructure. The fundamental reality of the food and farm business—is that it is a logistics business. Walmart excels for a reason, it's because Walmart is really really good at logistics. As they reported during Hurricane Katrina, if you needed bottled water, go stand in the Wal Mart parking lot because they will get shipments through—FEMA?, Not so much. As the old military history axiom goes. “Beginners study tactics, amateurs study strategy, professionals study logistics.” The food version is just as simple: Beginning food entrepreneurs study production, amateurs study marketing, and professionals study logistics. This means preserving social order so supplies can move. It would, also, require protecting the health of the logistics people who keep the food moving.

Now is, also, the time to inspect critical bridges, locks and dams, rail connections and airports. The hard reality is that if any of the logistic links in the food system fails, then the whole thing can fall apart. A food journey may indeed be a journey of a thousand miles that begins with the first step from the farm, but without the last step of the last mile to the grocery store, the other 999 miles don't matter.

3. Create Resilience and Redundancy With Local Food.

We need to create redundancy in the supply chain by creating more resilience in the food supply chain by producing more local food. While we do live in a global food system, nobody on the planet eats globally, we all eat (or don't eat) locally. As such, surely after what we have seen with health care workers wearing garbage bags, and people crowd sourcing masks by scrounging through high school chemistry labs for masks, we can see the folly of only sourcing manufactured items from China. Food is the same, surely on some level it is folly for states like Illinois to rely on California for almost all of its lettuce. Illinois could produce more food here, and if it did, then there would be a backup food supply. We should not abandon global markets, the corn and soybean markets Illinois has created are a good thing, but we should make a strategic decision to create local food sheds capable of producing staples for us during times of emergency as a national priority. Now is, also, the time to encourage modern victory gardens, urban agriculture and artisan food, important food resources that [are] all arguably “nice to have” things in the food system, but now they could well be essential for food continuity. If you

thought the toilet paper dearth was bad, wait till the food anxiety buying starts. It's also time to begin thinking about top soil the way we think of oil. The developed world manages its access to oil with exquisite care because it would be madness not to. And yet, we haven't effectively confronted the global nightmare of declining top soil. Just as we obsess over access to oil, we should contemplate what would happen if the top soil kept disappearing as so many have warned.

4. Preserve free trade and free movement of people across international borders.

It's a scary time and we need to take sensible precautions. But, we must face reality and accept that the workforce for food often doesn't come from the country that produces it. We have to address the realities of food production in the U.S. as the global food system it is. Much of produce, meat, and dairy, and some grain depends on immigrant labor. And just as those sectors depend on food being able to move across borders so we depend on international trade in food and farm products across borders. If countries hoard food, the consequences for other countries could be disaster. We eat chocolate in the U.S. even though we don't grow cocoa. Taiwan doesn't grow corn or soybeans, it buys them from the U.S. If this free movement of people and product stopped, the global food system would grind to a jarring halt.

Just as we need a free flow of goods, we need a free flow of services. The U.S. needs to preserve and expand its food and farm immigration system. We should overhaul the H2A visa program immediately to make sure that all farm sectors including dairy can meet their personnel needs in an emergency. Meat, poultry and essential food businesses should be eligible for a streamlined H-2B that allows for a fast way to bring healthy workers in to the U.S. during an emergency. Of course, many will say, "don't be silly with unemployment as bad as it is, laid off workers from Macy's will learn how to pick lettuce and milk cows once they get hungry enough." It won't happen, and if they were hungry and desperate enough to try, they would not know how, and they would not last long. The idea that somehow desperate people will, out of hunger, summon the skill, stamina, and ability to do the work that keeps the global food and farm system going is an utter fallacy. It would be like people saying that, "You know when they get hungry enough, they'll figure out how to engineer software or build cars."

So if the global food and farm system could talk, it would say, "I Need Help Now."

Rich Schell grew up in a farm family, teaches Food Law, and co-wrote the [Illinois Legal Guide To Direct Farm Marketing](#).

International food law at Illinois Institute of Technology
<https://www.iit.edu/directory/people/rich-schell>

Research interests:

International food and agriculture; agricultural and food entrepreneurship, including organics and green/sustainability initiatives; food and farm traceability; farmland ownership; legal and regulatory compliance as a competitive advantage for food companies and entrepreneurs. Past president of The Chicago Farmers, an agricultural business organization that focuses on educating people and companies on agribusiness and farmland ownership. Author of the "Illinois Legal Guide to Direct Marketing for Food Entrepreneurs."