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Green Matters for the Daily Gleaner

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By Sonya Hull

Sustenance and Sustainability: The Challenge of Feeding our Cities

In his compelling book 'Blessed Unrest', environmentalist and author Paul Hawken analyzes the world food situation and takes aim at those who argue that gastronomy is a privilege of the affluent and hardly a suitable environmental cause; and proposes that food lovers who are not environmentalists are naive.

Have you ever gone into our local supermarkets after a serious weather event in the United States or South America? Or after a storm in the US or Canada that affects transportation links for several days? If you have, you won't forget the scene. Rows of empty bins, or old produce, in the fresh fruit and vegetable section. And this is only one part of the story.

Author and food expert Carolyn Steel's book *Hungry Cities*, states that one third of the annual global grain crop gets fed to animals versus humans, and given projected growth in global population, this is an escalating problem. By 2050, it is estimated that twice the number of us will be living in cities as now. That means twice as much meat and dairy will be consumed - as it appears that meat and urbanism are rising hand in hand. And as we move into cities the western diet, the most unsustainable diet on the planet, is becoming more embraced. This poses an enormous problem considering the earth will have 6 billion hungry carnivores to feed by 2015.

At the same time we know that half the food produced in the United States is currently thrown away. So what this tells us is that despite our food being produced at great cost, we don't value it. In fact, we don't even come close to feeding the planet properly - 1 billion of us are obese, while further 1 billion of us currently starve.

Is there hope? If you believe in it and look for it, there is always hope. Just a few weeks ago Time magazine ran an article called 'Foodies Can Eclipse (and Save) the Green Movement'. The article states that even as traditional environmentalism struggles, another movement is rising in its place, aligning consumers, producers, the media and even politicians. It's the food movement, and if it continues to grow it may be able to create just the sort of political and social transformation that environmentalists have failed to achieve in recent years. That would mean not only changing the way we eat and farm — away from industrialized, cheap calories and toward more organic, small-scale production, with plenty of fruits and vegetables and less meat — but also altering the way we work and relate to one another. To its most ardent adherents, the food movement isn't just about reform — it's about revolution.

What's amazing is how quickly the food movement has become a measurable force in North American society, and the US statistics are striking and encouraging. There are now thousands of community-supported agriculture programs around the country, up from just a handful 1986.

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There are more than 6,000 farmers' markets, up 16% from just a year ago. Sales of organic food and beverages hit nearly \$25 billion in 2009, up from \$1 billion in 1990.

The good news, in terms of positive environmental impact of the food movement, is that as it matures and grows it could end up being the best vehicle available for achieving broad environmental goals. The mass-production, industrialized way of farming today harms our land, our water and our climate. So reforming agriculture and promoting sustainability won't just help us get better and healthier food; it will also fight greenhouse-gas emissions and water pollution.

Brian Halweil, a leading thinker on sustainable food, says, "Environmental and social changes are coming — and they will be served up on our dinner plates."

Here in Atlantic Canada we have great hope and opportunity to re-create our traditional networks of food producers and link them with customers so both can thrive. This work is in solid hands thanks to organizations like Acorn Organic (Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network). ACORN is rapidly expanding their cult following to include mainstream citizens. The word is spreading.

This weekend's 11th Annual ACORN Conference and Trade Show in Fredericton is evidence of that. There will be over 50 organic farming and food-related workshops, an organic banquet, and a kids organic conference as well. To register go to www.acornorganic.org or call 1-866-322-2676.

Food is the center of our life, and we need to begin to use food as a way of seeing. To see our cities as part of the productive organic framework of which they are a part, not just big unproductive metropolitan blobs. If the city looks after the country, the country will look after the city. And if we know 'we are what we eat', then we need to use food as a powerful tool to move our city and our region toward a sustainable future.

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