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Article published Dec 14, 2008

Our planet in common

By Alan Betts

Sitting just inside the Tropics in southern Brazil, I am looking out across the green hills from a farm I have been visiting occasionally for the past 25 years. Brahman cattle graze in the pastures below, and mango and tangerine trees line the farm roads. The rainy season has started, and all is green. I may be far from Vermont's hills, but the environmental concerns for the future are similar all over the world.

I have been invited to Brazil to talk about the impact of climate change on the Southern Hemisphere. I've also spent a week at the national weather forecast center and attended a conference in Manaus on the Amazon River in the heart of that vast forest. The conference was huge — a thousand researchers, mostly from Brazil, discussing Amazonia: its ecosystems and biodiversity, forestry and agriculture, and the economic and cultural concerns of its people. The Amazon River drains a vast area about two-thirds the size of the continental United States. Charting a sustainable path for the future of this region is an enormously challenging task. Human needs and economic pressures must be balanced with preserving the forest and the rich life it sustains.

In the western state of Amazonas (twice the size of Texas), plans for a sustainable future are under way. Village by village, the people are gathered to discuss their basic needs and the need to preserve the forest. These community discussions, including dance and song, are held until agreement is reached. If the community makes a unanimous commitment not to cut the primary forest and to protect it from fire, the state pledges to help them with a community clinic, micro-financing for projects and a small monthly payment to families (represented by the wife). Funds for this plan are coming from several sources, including oil-rich countries like Norway, who understand their responsibility to the planet as a whole.

The couple who own the farm I am visiting were atmospheric science students in Colorado 30 years ago when I met them. She is now the director of the national weather forecast center, and he is the director of the national supercomputing center. Ninety years ago, his grandfather cleared the forests here to start a coffee farm, and later the land was grazed. Agricultural practices in Brazil, like Vermont, were not as good a century ago, and Brazil has millions of acres of degraded land. But with careful management, land can be restored. Twenty-five years ago, I rode across these hills on horseback. Now coffee is grown in neat rows along contoured hills. The contouring maximizes the infiltration of water, because there is a long dry season. The rows are mowed and mulched to increase the organic matter in the soil. Some slopes have tangerines, and five varieties of delicious mangos have been planted on the hilltops. The hills are now carpeted with productive trees and plants. What is left of the native forest has been preserved.

Because my friends are mindful of the need to help the local economy and community, a sizable fraction of the mangos are sold locally, well below the cost of trucking fruit from distant wholesalers. The local market for fruit has grown substantially. The coffee is marketed through the local co-op in a neighboring town. A well-managed farm can restore the landscape and enrich the local community — but it takes years of sustained effort.

External pressures are everywhere. Fertilizer prices have been rising … but these higher prices have the beneficial effect of driving diversification and a shift towards organic agriculture. Global commodity prices for coffee fluctuate wildly. Wages are rising, so the farm, which pays above minimum wage, must look for ways to manage with fewer people. Perhaps they will plant some eucalyptus, which grows so fast with little management, that it can be harvested for paper in only 5-6 years or for timber in 8 years.

Readers in Vermont will recognize many common themes. How do we balance local needs and global pressures? How can our farms prosper, and how will we deal with the growing demand for forest products? We all live in one world with common needs and hopes ? a world that is connected by the air, rivers and oceans, a fragile economic system and an electronic web. We have a long journey ahead of us to restore the balance on this planet. It will take time, but so do all things that we value. They must be built, stone by stone, or planted and nurtured with care. This takes vision, effort and patience.

We are full of hope that the new administration understands these global issues. But we are enmeshed in unsustainable economic and financial systems that are not designed to work for the well-being of the whole. We must revisit our goals and patterns of behavior both individually and as a society. It will take wisdom and patient creativity to recreate a sustainable society and rebuild what we have lost. An important step is to reconnect to the natural world with more understanding and respect for her diversity, patterns of organization and generosity to us and all of life.

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