

## **A Reprieve from the Rain**

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The rainy season is our winter, and a time to catch up on reading, planning, or even starting seedlings, but it's also a special time to reflect and ponder on our future as well as our past. We're part of a bigger community, and you can take it as far as you want. You just keep it in Hoolehua or Molokai as a whole, or expand it to Hawaii, the Pacific, and the world. We all have a different world view of things. There are so many things happening around us, and in many instances, we care to choose what we want to know and what we don't care to know.



The other day, a farmer came in and wanted to know about growing some fruit trees, designing a propagating bench, and other things. Alton and I start bombarding him with information and I really wanted him to understand some of the basics as well; everything from what is a navel orange, they all come from one original tree, to water requirements for avocado, and what kind of emitter is best for a seedling table.

After he left with most of his questions answered, Alton tells me, "Too much information", meaning we probably overloaded his brain, but he left smiling and enthusiastic moving forward with this relevant information, but I looked at it as a teachable moment knowing he will use the information and not just file it away in his information bank. It reminded me of my daughter, after explaining something to her in great detail telling me, "**TMI!**", **T**oo **M**uch **I**nformation!

In our jobs, there are many situations when we don't know how much information someone wants or needs, so I take the tact that more is better and they can dump the stuff they don't need versus giving them too little and they don't get the whole picture. Getting the whole picture is important! If you're farming with someone's recipe and you don't quite understand why you're doing things, when there's a problem in the system, you cannot diagnose the problem or trouble-shoot because you don't understand the system. This is why understanding the science or the system will help you solve the problem, such as too much water, too much fertilizer, and so on. Otherwise we can just show you what to do in the field, and you don't have to attend class to learn the theory behind the system. But this is only getting half the picture, which can do more harm than good.

In reality, we'll never get the whole picture, but we continue to grow and seek out knowledge through doing and also through observation. But the other issue is how accurate is the information and is it in a form that we can comprehend? I spend a lot of time scanning through books and articles that I think would benefit new farmers, and a lot of times, it's easier to rewrite them because either the ideas are not in one place or it's written at a level that new farmers might not comprehend. But some books and articles are so on-the-money that I could not have done a better job even if I tried.

This is what happened recently when I read some articles from Dr. John Ikerd, retired agricultural economist from the University of Missouri. Dr Ikerd is considered the Father of Sustainable Agriculture, and he was talking about this concept when everyone was still stuck in the paradigms of 'bigger-is-better' and 'high input is equal to high return'. He helped farmers get bigger because this was what the whole system of education and the policies of our nation was advocating, but somewhere along the way, he realized this was not the way to go as he saw many farm families losing their farms and the whole rural way of life disappearing as new trade agreements and the global economy the government was advocating was eating away at the profits of farmers and destroying whole rural communities.

Growing up in a little rural town, and attending a one-room school, he exemplified and embraced everything that was good about rural communities, and this realization hit him at the heart of who he was and his beliefs that were deeply cultivated in the rural soil. He saw many things change in these rural communities, including special skills and knowledge in these communities replaced by services and products from elsewhere.

This whole concept and a loss of rural independence ate at him, and he started to change what he believed was not only his job, but his mission in life. Many ostracized him for the things he started advocating, and many isolated him from their circle of friends and colleagues, but others saw him as a voice in the forest or the voice of reason. Now, he was taking on the whole system if not the whole developed world.

Several years ago, I got to meet and spend some time with Dr. Ikerd on Oahu, a distinguished country boy with white hair and a strong presence. He was a breath of fresh air with so much relevant knowledge on how we should move forward, not only as farmers, but also as members of a rural community on this special island. Instead of trying to explain it to you, I've copied snippets from one of his many presentations. What's so provocative about his articles is he seems to be talking about Molokai. So here goes:

*"Based on a life time of experiences, I have come to the conclusion that most people change only when three conditions are met. First, they must become convinced that what they have been doing isn't working and isn't likely to work in the future. Next, they must have a realistic idea or vision of something fundamentally better they could do instead. And finally, they must believe that it's possible for them to make the transition from what they are doing now to what they would rather do – they have to have hope for a better future. Real change is always difficult and often risky. Lacking any one of the three, people just keep on doing what they've been doing.*

*Change is even more difficult for communities of people. It's not enough for just a few people in a community to conclude that something is wrong; there has to be a community consensus that change is necessary. It's not enough for just a few people to have a new vision for the future; there has to be a common vision of a better future for the community. Finally, the people of a community must have a shared hope that their common vision is possible, that together they can create a new and better future for themselves and for their community.*

*The process of community change is made even more difficult by the fact that real change is rarely initiated by those in positions of greatest influence. The people with political and economic power have gained their positions of influence because the status quo is working for them. They may be willing to tinker around the edges to appease their critics but they are quite logically defensive against any real change. So, change in rural America will have to come from the common people...Change in rural America will take a revolution of the common people, beginning with revolutionary thinking. This revolution must begin by confronting the truth about rural economic development.*

*Large multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of rural people under the guise of economic development. These corporations use their economic and political power to dominate local economies and local governments. Irreplaceable and precious rural resources, including rural people and rural cultures, are not being developed but instead exploited to enhance the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations have no commitment to the future of rural areas; they are interested in extracting the remaining wealth from rural places.*

*The industrial practices of corporate agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, and poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes. Once the remnant resources of rural America have been depleted by corporate agriculture, the corporations will simply move their operations to other areas of the world where land and labor costs are cheaper. Rural farming communities will be left with nothing but polluted and depleted streams and aquifers...and farmers who no longer know how to farm.*

*But where is the new vision for better future needed to motivate change? Fortunately, fundamental change is taking place in the larger economy and society? A growing number of people are coming to realize that industrial development is not sustainable because it is rapidly running out of natural and human resources to extract and exploit. The trends of the past simply cannot continue into the future. Everything of economic value comes from either nature or society, both of which are finite and fragile. Once the productivity of nature and society has been depleted, there will be nothing left to support economic development. Furthermore, those who are rebelling against its continued extraction and exploitation are creating a new vision of a better future, including a new vision for the future of rural America.*

*Change is inevitable. Everything on earth tends to operate in cycles – physical, biological, social, and economic. This is one of the most fundamental principles of science. All long term trends eventually reverse themselves and move in opposite directions during times of fundamental ecological or societal change. We are living through such a time of change, within agriculture, within rural communities, and in the larger human society. The current transition is being driven by questions of sustainability. We simply cannot continue to extract and exploit. We must find ways to meet the needs of the present without compromising the future.*

*The dominant public issues of today – economic recovery, global climate change, depletion of fossil energy, growing economic disparity – are all symptoms of the same basic cause. We are rapidly depleting the natural and human resources of the*

*earth... We must shift from a wasting, discarding, disposing society to a conserving, reusing, and recycling society. We must abandon the pursuit of narrow economic self-interest and individual wealth for the pursuit of economic opportunity with equity and justice for the common wealth. We must accept our God given responsibility to care for others, including those of future generations, as we care for ourselves. Meeting these challenges of sustainability will create new opportunities for people in rural communities. In the vision of sustainable economic development there is a new vision of a fundamentally better future for rural America.*

*Sustainable economic development must be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable... Things of nature also are interdependent; relationships are mutually beneficial. Mutually beneficial relationships among people are relationships of choice, not necessity. Sustainable communities of the future, urban and rural, will have their own local economies. These communities will not be self-sufficient but locally owned and operated businesses will be capable of meeting most basic day-to-day needs of the community. Local farmers will provide sustainably-grown foods. Energy-generating residences and locally-owned utilities will meet most of the energy needs of the community.*

*beneficial. The new communities will be*



*Sustainable communities of the future will be neither independent nor dependent; they will be interdependent. They will form mutually beneficial relationships of choice with other communities and with outside investors, rather than relationships of economic necessity. People will deal with people in other communities that they personally know and trust. Communities will not be forced to submit to economic exploitation but will engage in relationships that are mutually economically sovereign.*

*Perhaps most important, the social relationships among people in communities respect the principles of human nature. Positive human relationships must be built upon core human values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect, and compassion. People within sustainable communities must have the moral courage to be trusting and kind rather than cunning and ruthless. In the process of building positive relationships, people will come to share a sense of common purpose for their community, not just an individual purpose to be fulfilled within the community. They also will come to appreciate the fact that their lives are made better by relating to each other in ways that serve their common good, not benefiting one at the expense of another.*

*Sustainable community development is a dynamic, living process. Community members of the future will devote time and energy to the community, as well as to their own endeavors. They will nurture the children of the community, as well as their own, for the long run benefit of the community. Each generation of leaders will nurture the next generation of leaders, each generation committed to the long run sustainability of the community. Community members will understand that it is in their own enlightened self-interest to help sustain a desirable quality of life for the community as a whole, both now*

*and in the future. They will not focus solely on their own success, but will help each other succeed, so the community can meet the needs of the present without compromising opportunities for those of the future.*



*Their business decisions will reflect not only their individual self-interests but also their interests in the well-being of their communities and the future of humanity. They will be enlightened thinkers who understand their well-being is inseparable from the interests of society and humanity. Communities, like nations, will be granted both the right and responsibility to protect their resources and their people from extraction and exploitation.*

*This is not some idealistic dream. The only logical, reasonable reality for the future will be something at least similar in nature. Current approaches to rural economic development quite simply are not sustainable. If rural communities are not sustainable, agriculture is not sustainable, and without adequate food, humanity is not sustainable. A number of rural communities have already made the decision to localize their economies using the concepts of sustainability and thereby regain control over their future.*

*Sustainable rural community development will not be quick or easy, but many rural people are already working to make it happen, and it certainly makes sense; in this, there is hope. The defenders of the status quo are powerful and there may be no cause for optimism, but still there is cause for hope – in even the possibility of a fundamentally better future for rural America. Regardless of the odds, life is simply too precious to permit it to be devalued by living pointlessly, without purpose or meaning, without love, and finally, without hope.”*

More of Dr. Ikerd's articles can be found at <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/papers/>