

Food Insecurity in Our Climate-Troubled Times

by Ron Weiss, MD

Here I sit at the Jersey shore in the waning days of summer as the tide gently washes over my feet. The beach is only an hour's drive from our organic vegetable farm in Long Valley, yet it's a world away. The broad stretches of white sand and endless sea offer a remarkable contrast to the green, cropped fields, deep forests, and high ridges of our valley. It is late afternoon on the beach. I look up at the sun, but it doesn't look quite right to me; it has this apocalyptic red glow from the western fires that have been burning all summer long.

As I write this piece, the largest of the fires, the Dixie fire in California, has been burning for over a month and is still only 40% contained. Even here in New Jersey,

3,000 miles away, the air quality has been significantly degraded due to the fires.

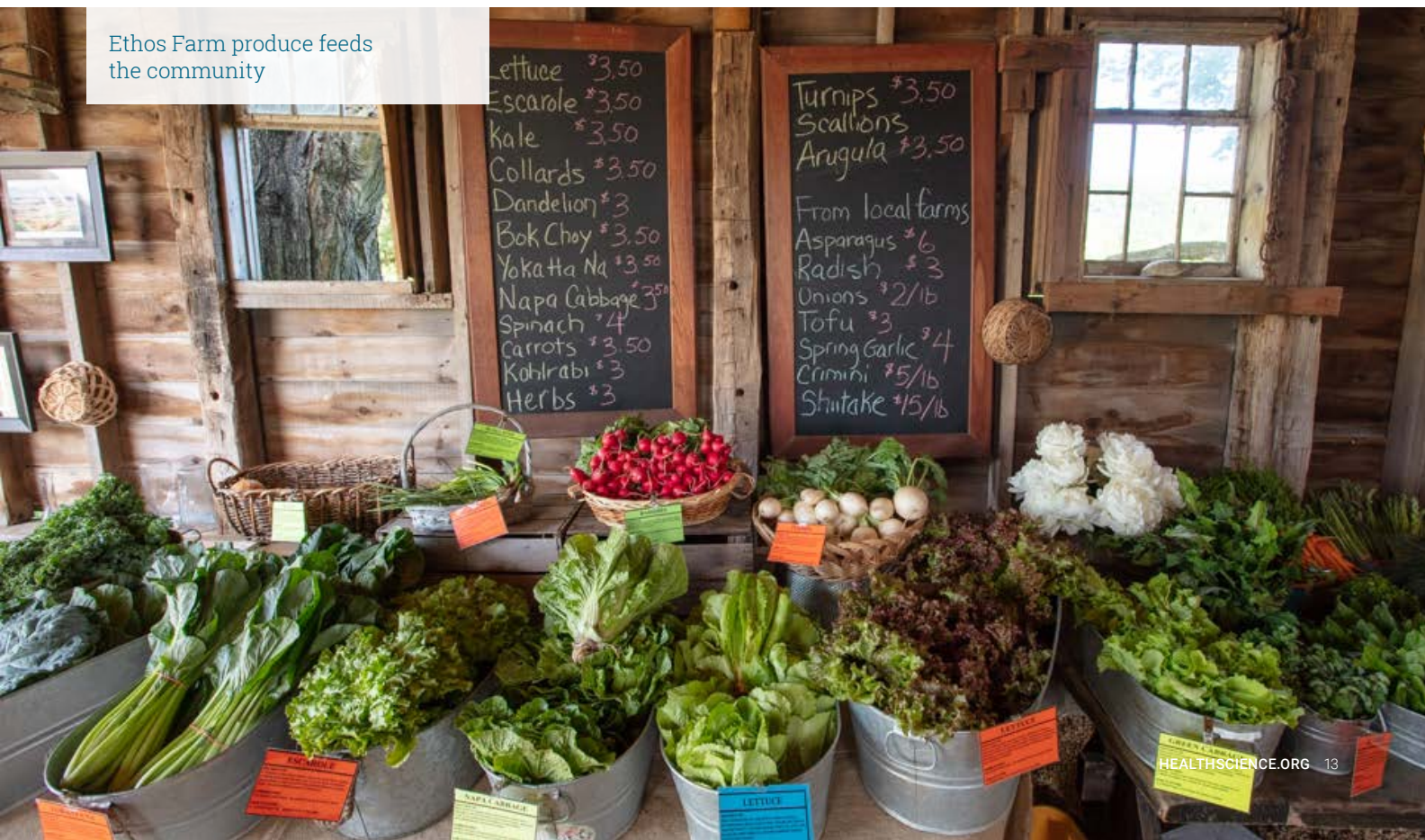
I think about the report published two weeks ago by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicting more dire consequences than previously imagined if the world does not act immediately to reduce greenhouse gases. And my thoughts turn to food—because it is food that is essential for human survival, and now environmental decline is threatening what most of us every day take for granted: reliable access to fresh, health-giving food.

There's a good reason why New Jersey is nicknamed the Garden State. In the old days, my beloved state not only grew enough food for her own citizens but also fed the

great metropolises of Philadelphia and New York. We grew the market basket of produce, ranked nationally as top growers of tomatoes, eggplant, spinach, sweet corn, sweet peppers, asparagus, sweet potatoes, blueberries, cranberries, and peaches. Even during my childhood in the 1960s, New Jersey ranked as the most productive agricultural state in the nation per acre, outstripping even California.

Today, New Jerseyans can no longer feed ourselves. For the most part, we are dependent for our produce on the West, which is drying out and on fire, or Florida, which is increasingly battered by more destructive hurricanes. From this perspective, all New Jerseyans suffer from food insecurity and lack of food sovereignty.

Ethos Farm produce feeds the community



On top of this, the USDA has estimated that by the end of this decade, the U.S. will be importing 50% of vegetables and 75% of all fruit we consume from overseas. In terms of produce production, our nation will no longer be self-sufficient.¹

Ceding the responsibility for feeding ourselves to other nations requires us to consider many issues, among them increased vulnerability in times of global crises such as pandemics and extreme climate events, the loss of our farming culture and know-how, and our national security.

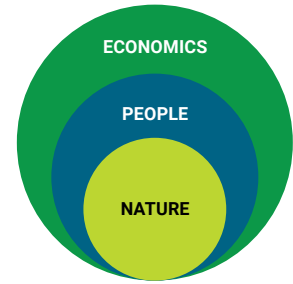
And now a recent analysis of our current food system reveals that its inefficiencies account for a vastly larger carbon footprint than previously thought. Our food systems are responsible for one-third of global carbon emissions, according to a collaborative team composed of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, NASA, Columbia, and NYU. We can all install solar panels and drive electric cars, but with that large a chunk of emissions coming from our food system, we will not avoid the catastrophic consequences of climate change without drastically changing it.

Last year, Ethos Farm Project was chosen by the Rockefeller Foundation as a semifinalist from more than 1,300 global applicants to envision a new food system to be in place by 2050.

The Ethos Farm Project Food System Vision considers in depth the six intersecting and interdependent subsystems of economics, culture, environment, nutrition, policy, and technology and restructures and combines them to create a new overall food system that is regenerative. It is more localized, equitable, and health-giving, and—you guessed it—plant-based. But most importantly, its core guiding principle is The Rights of Nature model,² which proposes that nature has inalienable rights which must be prioritized.

For a moment, let's consider what I believe are the three most consequential subsystems of the food system: economics, people (culture), and nature (environment). In our current extractive and destructive food system, the rights of nature are subordinate to the rights of people which are subordinate to all-powerful economic rights.

FIGURE 1: HIERARCHY OF OUR CURRENT FOOD SYSTEM



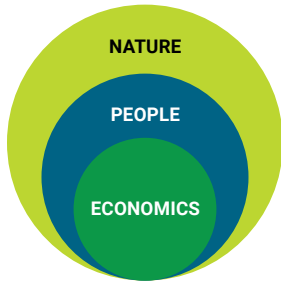
The realities of this system are that enormous corporations control what we eat, there are the haves and have-nots, and our planet is rapidly being degraded. The instability of such an arrangement becomes apparent when you consider that of the three subsystems, nature is the only one that doesn't need the other two. The other two are wholly dependent on nature, yet nature is relegated in our current food system to an afterthought, if even considered at all.

The Ethos Farm Project Vision stands this arrangement on its head:



For decades, this field at Ethos Farm produced conventional GMO corn and soybeans, outgassing tons of carbon annually into the atmosphere. Under this sea of dandelions lies 100 acres of native prairie grasses planted last year. The grasses are now removing tons of atmospheric carbon every year and burying it into the soil. This field is part of the Ethos Farm Ecosystem and Carbon Trial (EFACT).

FIGURE 2: PROPOSED REGENERATIVE FOOD SYSTEM



In a food system based on the Rights of Nature model, restoration of the environment is of primary consideration, as it should be. Our lives and the lives of our children are critically bound to the restoration of our environment. The environment provides us humans with our life support; it should be clear from this summer’s events that the very air we breathe and the water we drink is in jeopardy. Unless we do something now, food will be the next domino to fall. It is time to prioritize the restoration and preservation of our Mothership. 🌱

What can you do to help?

1. **Three times a day, think about what’s on the end of your fork.**
Strive to make it whole plant foods produced by your local farmer using organic regenerative methods.³
2. **Have a talk with your local regenerative organic farmer and offer to volunteer.** There are a million ways you can help, whether it’s getting excess produce to the local food bank or assisting with computer work from the comfort of your home. Regenerative farmers need reliable, dedicated volunteers.
3. **Educate yourself further about our food system issues** by attending our Ethos of Eating webinar in November 2021.
4. **Come on down to the Farm!** On September 16–18, 2022, the first annual Ethos Festival for Regenerative Living will be held. You will get to tour Ethos Farm, participate in a variety of eye- and mind-opening activities, dine on delicious whole-plant cuisine, and hear from many of the world’s leaders in food and the environment and health, including many of your plant-based heroes.

For more information, please visit **EthosFarmProject.org**.



¹ Mortenson J. Most of America’s Fruit Is Now Imported. Is That a Bad Thing? *New York Times*. Mar 13, 2018. [nytimes.com/2018/03/13/dining/fruit-vegetables-imports.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/dining/fruit-vegetables-imports.html).

² theecologist.org/2017/may/09/natures-rights-new-paradigm-environmental-protection

³ rodaleinstitute.org/regenerative-organic-certification/



RON WEISS, MD, is a physician and farmer. He is the founder of Ethos Farm Project, a farm-based healthcare system that connects human health to the natural world and promotes mindful, healthy ways of living. At the center

of this system is Ethos Farm, a 280-year-old working farm in Long Valley, New Jersey, which grows produce using regenerative methods. These “living medicines” are used as part of an evidence-based diet of whole plant foods to reverse and prevent chronic disease. Dr. Weiss is a diplomate of both the American Board of Internal Medicine and the American Board of Lifestyle Medicine. He is also Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. On most days, if he’s not planting, you can find him practicing and teaching lifestyle medicine in an old wooden farmhouse right in the middle of the growing fields. Visit **EthosPrimaryCare.com** and **EthosFarmProject.org** for more information.