

# **The Seven Deadly Myths of Industrial Agriculture**

**"The Seven Deadly Myths of Industrial Agriculture" is excerpted from Fatal Harvest, a new book that chronicles the disasters of industrial farming.**

## **Introduction**

Industrial agriculture is devastating our land, water, and air, and is now threatening the sustainability of the biosphere. Its massive chemical and biological inputs cause widespread environmental havoc as well as human disease and death. Its monoculturing reduces the diversity of our plants and animals. Its habitat destruction endangers wildlife. Its factory farming practices cause untold animal suffering. Its centralized corporate ownership destroys farm communities around the world, leading to mass poverty and hunger. The industrial agriculture system is clearly unsustainable. It has truly become a fatal harvest.

However, despite these devastating impacts, the industrial paradigm in agriculture still gets a free ride from our media and policy makers. It is rare to hear questioning, much less a call for the overthrow, of this increasingly catastrophic food production system. This troubling quiescence can be attributed, in part, to the enormous success that agribusiness has had in utilizing the "big lie," a technique familiar to all purveyors of propaganda. Corporate agriculture has flooded, and continues to inundate, the public with self-serving myths about modern food production. For decades, the industry has effectively countered virtually every critique of industrial agriculture with the "big lie" strategy.

These agribusiness myths have become all too familiar. Most farmers, activists, and policy makers who question the industrial food paradigm know the litany of lies by heart: industrial agriculture is necessary to feed the world, to provide us with safe, nutritious, cheap food, to produce food more efficiently, to offer us more choices, and, of all things, to save the environment. Additionally, when confronted with the indisputable environmental and health impacts of industrial agriculture, the industry immediately points to technological advances, especially recent achievements in biotechnology, as the panacea that will solve all problems. These claims are broadcast far and wide by way of industry lobbying efforts, product promotions, and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns, including television, newspaper, magazine, farm journal, and radio ads. Moreover, as the industry becomes more consolidated - with biotech companies owning the seed and chemical businesses and a handful of companies controlling a majority of seeds and food brands - the strategies for promulgating these myths become ever more concerted and the messages ever more honed. Archer Daniels Midland is now known to us all as the "supermarket to the world," while Monsanto offers us "Food, Health, Hope."

These myths about industrial agriculture have been, and are being, repeated so often that they are taken as virtually unassailable. A central goal of this book is to debunk the myths that have for too long been used to promote and defend industrial agriculture. This myth-busting is an essential step in exposing the impacts of current agriculture practices and educating the public about the realities of the food they are consuming.

Many people in the sustainable agriculture community have been instrumental in publishing and disseminating factual information to counter these myths. Here, we

identify the seven central myths of industrial agriculture, note their assumptions and dangers, and provide direct and clear refutations. This myth-busting section is specifically designed to provide consumers, activists, and policy makers with clear, compact, and concise answers to counter the industry's well-funded misinformation campaigns about the benefits of industrial agriculture. We encourage you to utilize these seven short essays whenever you are faced with the "big lies" being used by corporate agribusiness to hide the true effects of their fatal harvest.

### **Myth one: Industrial agriculture will feed the world**

The truth:

World hunger is not created by lack of food but by poverty and landlessness, which deny people access to food. Industrial agriculture actually increases hunger by raising the cost of farming, by forcing tens of millions of farmers off the land, and by growing primarily high-profit export and luxury crops.

There is no myth about the existence of hunger. It is estimated that nearly 800 million people go hungry each day. And millions live on the brink of disaster, as malnutrition and related illnesses kill as many as 12 million children per year. Famine continues in the 21st century, though few of us are aware of the truly global nature of the problem. In Brazil, 70 million people cannot afford enough to eat, and in India, 200 million go hungry every day. Even in the United States, the world's number one exporter of food, 33 million men, women, and children are considered among the world's hungry.

There is, however, a myth about what is causing this tragic hunger epidemic and what it will take to alleviate it. Industrial agriculture proponents spend millions on advertising campaigns each year claiming that people are starving because there is not enough food to feed the current population, much less a continually growing one. "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? 10 billion by 2030" proclaimed an old headline on Monsanto's Web page. The company warns of the "growing pressures on the Earth's natural resources to feed more people" and claims that low-technology agriculture "will not produce sufficient crop yield increases to feed the world's burgeoning population." Their answer is pesticide- and technology-intensive agriculture that will produce the maximum output from the land in the shortest amount of time. Global food corporations, they say, will have to serve as "saviors" of the world's hungry.

### **Hunger in a world of abundance**

A deeper look at the root causes of hunger will reveal that any claim that world hunger is caused by a lack of food is simply a self-serving agribusiness myth. In reality, food production has kept pace with population growth. Studies conducted by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) clearly indicate that it is abundance, not scarcity, that best describes the world's food supply. Every year, enough wheat, rice, and other grains are produced to provide every human with 3,500 daily calories. In fact, enough food is grown worldwide to provide 4.3 pounds of food per person per day, which would include two and a half pounds of grain, beans, and nuts, a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk, and eggs.

What about the pace of population growth in the future? Although many argue that we should curtail population growth for ecological and socioeconomic reasons,

history has not yet borne out the Malthusian concept that population growth equals hunger. Indeed, during the last 35 years per capita food production has actually grown 16 percent faster than the world's population. Moreover, as Peter Rosset of Food First states, "We now have more food per person available on this planet than ever before in human history."

### **The real cause of hunger**

If we have plenty of food to feed today's population and to support population growth for the foreseeable future, why do 800 million people still go hungry every day? One basic cause is food dependence. The industrial system has, over centuries and in virtually every area of the globe, "enclosed" farmland, forcing subsistence peasants off the land, so that it can be used for growing high-priced export crops rather than diverse crops for local populations. The result of enclosure was, and continues to be, that untold millions of peasants lose their land, community, traditions, and most directly their ability to grow their own food - their food independence. Removed from their land and means of survival, the new "landless" then flock to the newly industrialized cities where they quickly become a class of urban poor competing for low-paying jobs and doomed to long-term hunger or starvation. The victims of enclosure are becoming ever more numerous. Just 50 years ago, only 18 percent of the population of developing countries resided in cities; by the year 2000 the figure jumped to 40 percent. Unless current policies change, by 2030 it is estimated that 56 percent of the developing world will be urban dwellers. A United Nations report has found that close to 50 percent of this urban population growth is due to migration, much of it forced, from rural to urban communities.

After enclosure, both the urban and rural poor are completely food dependent. Their access to food is solely by purchase. Very often they simply do not have enough money to buy food, so they starve. Increasing agricultural output has little effect on the hungry because it fails to address the key issues of access to land and purchasing power that are at the root of hunger. As summarized in a Food First report, *"If you don't have land on which to grow food or the money to buy it, you go hungry no matter how dramatically technology pushes up food production."*

### **Farmers who can't buy food**

Industrial agriculture causes mass starvation not only among the urban poor but also in the world's farming communities. Over the last decades the chemical and technological inputs and patented seeds brought to farmers in the third world by agribusiness have dramatically increased the costs of farming. Even as the farmer must pay more and more to farm "industrially," higher yields and worldwide competition lower prices paid to the farmer (but because of high middleman costs, the prices of food are not generally lower for the consumer).

Advances in industrial agriculture have therefore put millions of the world's farmers in a fatal bind, as they spend ever more in production costs, yet receive ever less income. The cruel irony is that even as these farmers grow the world's food, they cannot afford food for themselves or their families. This has resulted in mass starvation in the rural communities, epidemics of farmer suicides, and the annihilation of farm communities throughout the globe. Currently, more than half a billion rural people in the third world have become landless or do not have either sufficient land to grow their own food or money to buy that food.

## Exports devour people

Yet another way that industrial agriculture increases hunger is by what it grows. The problem is that corporate-driven agriculture, after it "encloses" land and evicts the farm communities from these lands, does not grow staple foods for the hungry. Global corporations favor high-profit luxury items like flowers, sugarcane, beef, shrimp, cotton, coffee, and soybeans for export to wealthy countries. Local people are often left with nothing. In Africa, where severe famines have occurred in the past decade, industrialized agriculture has not produced foods for the people, but rather record crops of cotton and sugarcane. As export crops and livestock use up available land, small farmers are forced to use marginal, less fertile lands. Staple food production for local use plummets and hunger increases. In fact, one could classify the world's population into three groups: about 1.2 billion "overconsumers" who eat the equivalent of 850 kilograms of grain each year, mostly in the form of animal products or other "luxury" foods; 3.5 billion "sustainers" who consume the equivalent of 350 kilograms of grain in a mixed diet; and 1.2 billion who are surviving on only 150 kilograms or less each year. With this understanding, it is not surprising that during industrial agriculture's prime years (1970 - 90), the number of hungry people in every country except China actually increased by more than 11 percent.

Currently, most government and private efforts to reduce world hunger are focused on the technological quest to produce ever higher yields on agricultural land. This misguided approach is actually increasing the hunger crisis and is causing environmental and social devastation. Equally troubling is that the myth that more food will cure hunger diverts attention from the urgent need for economic reforms, land redistribution, and sustainable and affordable farm practices. We need a major shift in efforts to feed the world, where the focus is on supporting local agriculture, where people live close to (or on) the land, grow food to feed their own communities, and use ecologically sustainable techniques. In other words, hunger can only be solved by an agricultural system that promotes food independence.

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