

AGROECOLOGY

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MASTER'S OF SCIENCE (UMB)

WHAT IS AGROECOLOGY

The academic field that bridges agriculture, nature and society.

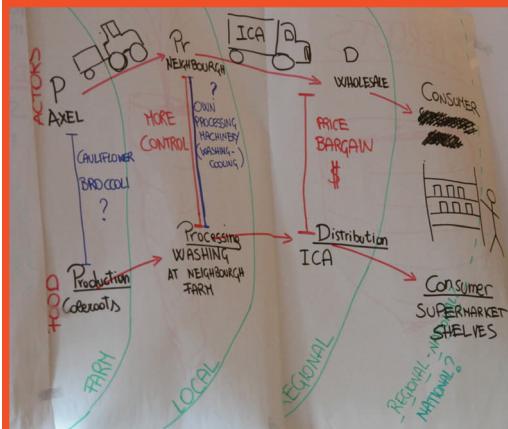
Agroecology is the field that links theory and practice using social and natural sciences to describe, analyze and manage complex agroecosystems. The program focuses on integrating ecology, organic and conventional agriculture, socio-economics and culture with the ultimate goal of sustaining production, food security, community and environmental health.

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FOCUS ON FOOD SYSTEMS



This month's newsletter highlights the food system, the subject of the second agroecology course of the semester. The article on open-ended case studies describes the methodology used by students to enter the food system. There is also a description of the revised project work for the class, which is based on a new collaboration with the national Norwegian Økoløft initiative. Finally, we salute one of the authors read by agroecology students in the course. Wendell Berry's "The Pleasure of Eating" is used to introduce the idea of eating responsibly, which is at the crux of the food systems curriculum.

OPEN-ENDED CASE STUDIES: FOUNDATION FOR AGROECOLOGY LEARNING

By Chuck Francis

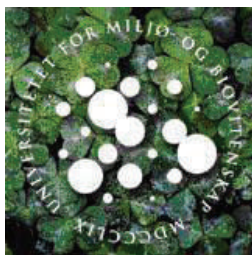
Most case studies have been designed to reach a certain conclusion, and for this reason they are often called "decision cases." The solutions or decision is already known to the instructor, and when the case involves a farmer or other key client the answer is probably known to them. Your task as a student is to figure out what has already been decided or done. What distinguishes the agroecology farming systems and food systems projects or case studies is that the solutions are not known by either the instructor or the clients. The learning process entails that everyone work together to best understand the present system and a more desirable future situation, then develop several scenarios that will help the client move potential ideas into action. This could be called "convivial learning" using a term from philosopher Ivan Illich (1926-2002), where we could say that everyone in the course – instructor, student, client – is both a teacher and a learner. This type of learning is used in our autumn agroecology classes in Norway, the summer travel course in agroecosystems analysis in the U.S. Midwest, and in a number of medical schools. Our instructor team is preparing a paper on this learning strategy for one of the education journals. [with Geir Lieblein, Tor Arvid Breland (UMB), James King (UNL), Lennart Salomonsson, Nadarajah Sriskandarajah (SLU), Mary Wiedenhoef (ISU) and Paul Porter (UMN)]

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FOOD SYSTEMS COURSE GETS AN ØKOLOFT

By Karen Adler

The Agroecology MSc autumn semester is constantly evolving to adapt to societal changes and opportunities. This year, the project work for the second Agroecology and Food Systems course (PAE 303) was revised to encompass a new government project called Økoløft, or Eco-uplift.

Before this semester, students worked to understand and promote the food goals of a Norwegian county in the food systems course. This included objectives like increasing market access and consumption of organic, locally-grown and traditional specialty foods within the region. During the project work, students interviewed county stakeholders related to production, consumption, distribution, processing and recycling, as well as national level actors such as the government, large supermarkets and processing cooperatives. While this proved an interesting way to view and improve the regional food system, it also comprised a large area and number of stakeholders. The county boundary provided a rich, aggregated problematic situation for students to analyze, but it also made defining goals and suggesting improvements to the region challenging.

This year the agroecology class has collaborated with a national project called Økoløft, which aims to raise awareness, production and consumption of organic products. The initiative was designed by the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the Ministry of Municipalities to enable the government to reach the goal of 15% organic production and consumption by 2015. It is a two year program where equally matched national and municipal government funds are allocated to municipalities (Norwegian kommuner) to support organic food initiatives. Some examples are increasing organic meals in schools, hospitals, and municipal cafeterias, providing capital for small ecological processing/distribution centers and raising awareness about the benefits of organic food. The specific plans for each project are determined by the municipality administration, which developed the Økoløft proposal with the local stakeholders of the community.

The students have just finished a 'client document' for the interim or permanent leader of the Økoløft project in the municipality that they have visited. This report is both an assignment for the course and a document suggesting their vision and action steps to meet the goals of increased organic and local food production and consumption in the municipality. A national mid-project conference to share results will take place in February 2009, and some students may also present their findings at this forum.

Projects like this are an essential part of the food systems course. We don't know yet if this initiative will be successful, but the students' work assessing strengths and weaknesses and suggesting improvements can result in lasting changes that facilitate the achievement of the national 15% organic target. The Agroecology department plans to continue in the future to work with the Økoløft project and other programs that support the national goal. For students who are interested in pursuing food systems-related research, this kind of work can also be done on a more detailed level for the Agroecology MSc thesis.

WENDELL BERRY: FARMER, AUTHOR & PROFESSOR

By Chuck Francis

Kentucky farmer and author Wendell Berry is one of the most influential people from the last century in promoting sustainable agriculture. His integrative and insightful thinking has been shared with hundreds of students through classes at universities and lectures in many venues. His message of simplicity, local food systems, and environmental concern has impacted the thinking of many of us working with agroecology and organic farming. Best known for his many books, Berry is the author of *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*; *The Gift of Good Land*; *Home Economics*; *Citizenship Papers*; *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*; and others. Wendell Berry is perhaps the most articulate advocate writing today on local food and resource use, preserving our rural heritage and culture of agriculture, and the need for permanence in our lives. He is quoted as saying, "My work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place."