

Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference 2005
A Celebration of Hope & Opportunity
By: Linda K. Schneider

They came from all over the world. Four hundred and twenty like minded women got together in Burlington, Vermont for two and one half days to discuss sustainable agriculture. It was held at the Sheraton in Burlington, last weekend. All states in the USA were represented, countries as far away as Kenya, and as close as Mexico and Canada, just to name a few.

Faces as diversified as agriculture should be: Native Americans, people of all colors; Black, White, Yellow and Red. Many ethnic backgrounds were present.

Why women in agriculture? But men run the big machines that make them be called farmers in our country. Women through time have always been the gatherers and growers of food, farmers, nurturers, and creators of life. Women know food.

Women are verbal communicators. Talking, laughing, crying, reaching out and turning inward to reflect, then some more talking. Stories were shared; many success stories, some of failure, repression, and hurricane disasters. Ideas were thrown about like butterflies in the wind.

Mostly all female, although a few brave men did attend. Job titles varied; farmers, teachers, community leaders, and all levels of government organizations. When the room fills with women, what do you get? *Certainly not quiet*. Everyone knows these women; they are the movers and shakers of your community.

US Representative Bernie Sanders introduced the key note speaker: Frances Moore Lappe, author of several books; *Diet for a Small Planet*, *Hope's Edge* and most recently, *Democracy's Edge*. The opening message was: Lessons of Hope in Action. Lappe taught to trust common sense and let it grow from there. Women need to be willing to walk with the fear of difference. When Monsanto-like large corporations were mentioned, a hiss rose from the crowd. Lappe gave wonderful examples of women around the world, acting in responsible ways to combat this huge problem. Women in Bangladesh and Brazil created kitchen gardens to feed local organic food to their school children at lunch programs providing better nutrition. This single act has dropped the child mortality rate by $\frac{1}{4}$ less than in India.

The next two days were spent in workshops, forty workshops. Women know food. Discussing how local, organic, sustainable food just makes good common sense. How do we get back to it? Many of the workshops were set up to be small interactive group learning venues. Involvement was encouraged. The topics were numerous and varied. Sample topics; *The Dirt on Soil*, *Fast Food from the Farm*, *Diversified Farms: How to Weave It All Together*. Information on Federal Funding programs for farmers was available. Trust that all forty workshop topics were superb choices.

Pamela Kingfisher delivered the closing address, with ritual and bravado. Her message brought back basics. The Cherokee activist and storyteller mentioned the four ingredients to Cherokee life: soil, sun, corn and water. Spoken from the heart, Kingfisher reminded these women that behind every larger than life politician or CEO of a large conglomerate is a woman; mother, wife, sister or daughter. Kingfisher said, "If you are afraid of the big powerful politician man, talk to his mother. Get your voice heard."

What follows are a few small examples of what you might be capable of doing in your community to build sustainable agriculture: Grow a kitchen garden for your family or to share with your community like the women in Bangladesh and Brazil; find a way to connect farms and schools in programs such as composting; start a kitchen meeting to discuss ideas like, farmers markets, organics, CSA= community supported agriculture; attend alternative energy workshops and community discussion groups. Sign up for Cow Power with your local electric company; put up solar panels or a small wind mill on your property to get water from the well as a back up system. Learn about kitchen table medicine like the Cherokee women from our elders and herbalists.

This network of women is going to go back to their respective communities to share what was learned. Things are going to start happening towards sustainable agriculture. Women will make sure of it. Common sense will again prevail.

*Linda K. Schneider is the District Manager at Ottauquechee Natural Resources Conservation District located in White River Junction, Vermont. This District covers 18 towns in Windsor County and one in Rutland County. Phone: 802-295-7942 x11
Email: linda.schneider@vt.nacdnet.net
<http://vacd.org/onrcd>*