

Editorial for Volume 33 (2)

During October 24-26, 2008, a very significant event in sustainable agriculture took place in Jaén, Andalucía, Spain. An organization known as ECOLIVA held its VII International Conference on Ecological Olive Agroecosystems. The event took place at a time when there has been dramatic growth in alternative agriculture in all European Union countries, especially in Spain. Agroecological and agronomic research has helped many farmers carry out the transition from conventional farming to organic at the farm level. But there are many issues confronting the transition elsewhere in the food system.

In the ten-year period from 1995 to 2005, the area in ecological olive production in Spain grew from 3,520 ha to 41,516 ha, and continues to follow a similar increase today. 60% of this land and 40% of the producers are concentrated in the Andalucía region of the country. The market for ecological olive oil continues to grow whereas other sectors of agriculture are stagnant, but most of this market is from exports. Only a small amount is consumed locally.

Meanwhile, though, there has been an emergence of ecological olive oil production in other countries, especially Argentina, Morocco, Chile, and even China. Most of these countries are able to produce oil at a much lower price than Spain. Spain's dominance in the ecological olive oil market will soon be tested. Other options and actions must be taken to add sustainability to the olive oil sector in the country. There was much discussion at the conference of what these options might be, including:

- Continue supporting research that helps farmers redesign their farming systems and solve production problems.
- Develop alternative markets that more directly link producers with consumers, reducing the number of intermediaries, hence increasing returns to the farmers and improving prices for consumers.
- Increase domestic consumption of ecological olive oil and reduce dependency of export markets.
- Create a system of "labels of origin" so as to identify products with the uniqueness of each growing region.
- Identify the health benefits of consuming ecological olive oil.
- Form cooperatives or grower associations to give more strength to the small farm sector.
- Develop more equitable opportunities for rural women, labor, and youth in all aspects of the olive chain, from field to market.
- Promote ecological olive oil through market innovation, media presentations, and the use of information technologies.
- Push for local, regional, and national policies that promote and protect land, farms, and farming communities.

Most of these issues and options are designed to move the entire olive oil chain towards sustainability. But sustainability itself was not addressed directly. Much of the conference focused on growing, producing, and selling oil. There was some discussion

of the need to address some of the other “values” of oil besides its market value. Environmental quality, health of rural communities, preservation of the long history and culture of olive oil, and maintenance of the olive landscape were some of these needs.

Interestingly, it was the producers who were the most optimistic about the future. They talked about diversity, oil quality, short market chains, reclaiming control of their products, taking advantage of projects and support from the government, and most importantly, organizing themselves in cooperatives and associations so they had strength in numbers. There was talk of educational programs directed towards consumers, where a focus of “to know is to value” helps develop more conscious consumerism and preference for products that embody more of the elements of sustainability.

What occurred at ECOLIVA in Spain needs to take place in all parts of our food systems. There is a need for a systemic, agroecological approach to building an agriculture that integrates the social and ecological aspects of agroecosystem design and management, with a goal of sustainability in all sectors. There is lots of work to do, but the change process has begun.

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