

► **DirecTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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## Going Local to Improve Diet and Health

**N**ayarit, Mexico, is a study in contrasts. On one hand, it is the Mexican state where reportedly much of the black tar heroin destined for the U.S. originates. On the other hand, it provides a glimpse of the possibilities when society rallies around solutions and is a testament to human determination. Take the North Pacific humpback whale that was once threatened with extinction—they now number in the tens of thousands. From my vantage point high above the Bay of Banderas, I can see dozens of graceful spouts of water vapor from humpback mothers and their calves. This example is indeed a successful testimony to what is possible when humans cooperate and collaborate.

If we can save the whales, I'm perplexed why we can't do the same for ourselves, starting with something we all have in common: eating. Reliable estimates suggest that around 70% of American adults are overweight or obese. The implication of this state of largesse is sobering. Roughly 18% of the U.S. gross domestic product is consumed by the healthcare industry, and a sizeable percentage of that total is related to treatments associated with metabolic diseases directly linked to poor nutrition. You are probably all too familiar with the health effects: cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes, among others. Poor nutrition, arising from overconsumption of prepackaged and processed foods, is generally accepted as a major contributing factor to our poor national health status.

I'm struck by how important food is to our way of life. Roughly 50% of the world's assets, 50% of all employment, and 50% of

*Small urban farms and community gardens provide a multitude of benefits.*

consumer expenditures are related to the food system. These assets include greenhouse gas-producing transportation vehicles as our average mouthful of food travels an estimated 1,500 miles from farm to fork.

In the U.S., it is also generally recognized that farms are fewer in number now compared with the early 20th century. After peaking at 6.8 million in 1935, the number of U.S. farms fell sharply until leveling off in the early 1970s to around 2 million. Over the same time, farms have generally grown on average from 155 acres to around 240 acres each.

To be clear, larger farms are an essential part of our national food chain, and while efficient for the yield of a single crop, they are overall less efficient than their smaller counterparts. For every country where data are available, smaller farms are anywhere from 200–1,000% more productive per unit area. Smaller farms also tend to have crop mixtures that employ techniques requiring less herbicides, fertilizers, and pesticides. The result is a healthier and more diverse food crop, which is less inclined to deplete the soil of its nutrients.

At the intersection of small farms and human health lies an opportunity to improve the well-being of our communities. So, what do these issues have to do with our profession? If we really care about the environment and health, we should revitalize our efforts to support local agriculture with a focus on eating produce that's seasonal. Locally sourced food keeps money in the community, reduces greenhouse gases associated with transportation and storage, and is likely fresher and more nutritious than its counterpart that has been part of a distributed food production network originating in another part of the U.S. or the world.

A few years ago I spent a month as a practicing locavore, eating food grown within 100 miles of where I was living at the time. As part of the process, I took a 1-month subscription to a community supported agriculture co-op. The experience was life changing. I sampled a true free-range egg, whose yolk was a brilliant orange color, with a vibrant flavor to match. While the cost was more than what I was used to paying at the local grocery store, I found myself eating lower on the food chain as I benefitted from a cornucopia of fresh fruits and vegetables. I blogged my experience and had visitors from over 60 countries visit my site.

Even the Motor City is in on the action. As late as 2007, Detroit had lost almost one half of its population with as much as a third of the city's land comprised of empty lots and dilapidated buildings. Enterprising and committed entrepreneurs have created mini farms

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Finally, NEHA is hosting its Second Annual Lobby Day on Capitol Hill on May 1, 2018. The entire NEHA board of directors will be coming to Washington, DC, to meet with representatives and senators to discuss improving environmental health and protecting the profession that saves lives and money every single day. A summary of the event will be published in the July/August 2018 *Journal of Environmental Health*. Please visit NEHA's website at [www.neha.org](http://www.neha.org) for more information about the event.

Whew, what a roller coaster this past year has been. NEHA's Government Affairs will continue to represent you in Wash-

ington, DC, to ensure that the environmental health profession always has a seat at the table, as well as stays off the proverbial chopping block. With midterm elections coming up, if you happen to talk to your congressional representatives, make sure you ask them, "What are you doing to support the environmental health profession?" I would love to hear what they say and ask that you contact me with their response at (202) 270-6193 or [jzurcher@neha.org](mailto:jzurcher@neha.org). It is truly my honor to work for you and our noble profession. 🐜

## Did You Know?

If looking for foodborne outbreak environmental assessment training and resources, this video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah8i0zuzw7I&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah8i0zuzw7I&feature=youtu.be)) is a guide to navigating trainings and resources on environmental assessments conducted as part of foodborne illness outbreak investigations. The video summarizes trainings and tools from NEHA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Colorado Integrated Food Safety Center of Excellence. After watching the video, you will be able to identify the environmental assessment resources that meet your training needs and the needs of your environmental health team. More information can be found at [www.neha.org/eh-topics/food-safety-0/environmental-assessments-and-training](http://www.neha.org/eh-topics/food-safety-0/environmental-assessments-and-training).

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and largely self-sustaining communities with greenhouses and canneries. In the early 2000s, I visited one of the many hundreds of urban gardens in Havana, Cuba. These community gardens were created as a matter of desperation in the aftermath of reduced Soviet Union economic subsidies. Many of these gardens produce over two dozen different varieties of organic vegetables. Fresh, homegrown, and nutritious food at an affordable price.

There are many benefits to small farms and community gardens beyond healthy and nutritious food. A review of published literature suggests that they offer a focal point for community organizing, which can help address other concerns such as lead paint and safe walking routes to schools. Children can practice their math skills and learn where food comes from, such as I observed in post-Katrina New Orleans. In fact, the local school district introduced the idea of an



*Mexican shaving bush tree. Photo courtesy of Angela Dyjack.*

edible schoolyard, a concept they imported from schools in San Francisco. Participating schools in New Orleans promoted healthy eating by encouraging children to grow their own crops on school property. After harvest, the children were taught how to prepare and cook meals with the vegetables. These were nutritionally rich meals to which children might not otherwise have access. School-

based gardens represent an inexpensive activity that bring our children closer to nature and create opportunities for students to interact with each other in meaningful and physically productive manners.

Nayarit is not the only study in contrasts I've reflected on over the last few days. In recent history, America has supported policies that have incentivized large corporate farming over smaller family operations. Undoubtedly, economies of scale provided by large agribusiness have their advantages at the grocery store cash register. At the same time, small urban farms and community gardens provide a multitude of benefits to the places where we live and raise our families. Less greenhouse gases, less processed food, and more nutritious delights all realized in our local communities. That's a whale of a deal. 🐜

*Dave*

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