

A DRAFT DESCRIPTION OF THE FARMSCAPE ECOLOGY PROGRAM

GUIDING THEMES/JUSTIFICATION

What we hope to do & why. The Farmscape Ecology Program seeks to *encourage an informed, compassionate connection to Columbia County's changing natural, social and agricultural landscape through participatory research and outreach*. Change happens, it can be guided consciously or happen spontaneously. We believe that there are important reasons for being conscious of how Columbia County is changing and for incorporating that perception into efforts to shape change. For that reason, the Farmscape Ecology Program considers itself to be an information advocate (rather than issues advocate) – our goal is to get people to think about how their surrounding landscape is changing and to consider its future without explicitly telling them how they should think or, *a priori*, what sorts of change are good or bad.

How. We try to do this by providing appealing, accessible, and accurate information about the past, present, and potential future of the County's natural and social landscape. By exploring ecology, agriculture and sociology simultaneously, we hope both to provide a more holistic image of the landscape and to attract a broader diversity of people to its exploration. Central to building this appreciation of the County is knowing the County and developing a love for it. Compassion and knowledge intertwine – knowledge can be a foundation for love of and compassion for place; conversely, compassion can build a will to know. Knowledge can be a tool for fulfilling compassion, because it can provide the understanding that provides the potential to shape change.

To the degree possible, we try to use participatory research as an outreach tool. By involving volunteers and interns in our work, by facilitating a farmers' research circle, and by striving towards (we ain't there yet!) an interactive web presence, we hope to involve people directly in aspects of our research so that there is greater chance of learning on all sides.

The role of agriculture in our work. Our work has an agricultural bent. In part, this is a legacy of our location at Hawthorne Valley Farm, however we also believe that a viable local food system is one component of the long-term sustainability of a landscape. Agriculture, more than any other land use in the County, has had and continues to have a large influence on our nature. Conversely, for at least certain types of agriculture, natural processes and conditions continue to exert a large influence on the success of farming. In addition and perhaps most importantly, agriculture is common ground. In a county of changing demographics where urban second homeowners about long term residents and differing views of the landscape bring debate, agriculture enjoys a widespread appeal. If it can stay relevant for all sectors of the population and not take on elitist connotations, then it can have a positive convening effect, bringing together diverse elements of the County's society.

What is "farmscape ecology"? In our books, 'farmscape ecology' refers to the patterning of life on our landscape and the interactions resulting from that patterning. Ours is a landscape in which farming has played and does play a large role. We emphasize that role by calling the resulting mosaic of fields and forests of varying ages a "farmscape". Given that the vast majority of our land was once opened for agriculture, agriculture's legacy, if not its current imprint, has defined much of the current human settlement pattern and native species ecology.

Farmscape ecology includes those aspects of human ecology that relate to our use of the land and the growing of food upon it. Thus, we look at studies of our local food system as one way of describing the nature of our landscape. Likewise, farmscape ecology also includes description of how other animals and how plants distribute themselves on the land - where do they find homes? how do they get nutrients? how do they move about? And, foremost perhaps, *farmscape*

ecology includes looking at how the patterning of human and non-human ecologies interact, how does our activity, for example, determine where plants and animals can exist? How do those plants and animals, in turn, influence our existence? Where are there synergies, where are there disconnects between our own use and that of other organisms?

Farmscape ecology happens at a variety of scales. For individual properties, the interactions of nature and use determine both impacts on and potentials of that piece of land. At the scale of the County, these interactions partially determine the fate of nature conservation and local human endeavors (e.g., the ecological services that wild organisms provide to nature). Studying farmscape ecology means trying to understand how human and non-human ecology can best be configured on that landscape so as to provide healthy, economically feasible (for consumer and producer) human sustenance while also providing a livelihood for the other species that share this land with us.

THE GENERALIZED COMPONENTS OF OUR WORK

Given the above rationale, we consider our work to have the following general components:

Gathering Information – Having chosen themes based upon their actual or potential interest to the public, gather, through historical research, sociological studies, natural history exploration and other means, information on aspects of place.

Sharing Information – Design and realize creative information sharing tools including articles, web presentations, walks, lectures, participatory research, and discussions; consciously focus on diversifying that outreach so that it is accessible and appealing to a broad audience.

Encouraging Compassion – Choose themes and means of presentation that encourage people to internalize and become attached to components of their landscape.

Facilitating Thoughts of the Future – Facilitate, based on an understanding of place, the developing and sharing of visions for the County's future. We have not yet reached the point of explicitly creating such avenues; this will be a major next step.

CURRENT COMPONENTS OF THE FARMSCAPE ECOLOGY PROGRAM & THEIR INTERACTIONS

(See Venn Diagram at end)

The Distribution of Native Plants and Animals: Special Places for Native Species

This component includes ecological mapping, monitoring of ecological change, and understanding and facilitating public appreciation of the County's nature. This information provides a backbone for the agroecology work and also relates to people's perception of the land (i.e., the two other components described below).

Gathering Information: During the 1930s, botanist Rogers McVaugh did extensive work in the County; this became the basis for his Flora of the County. Using that publication and a copy of his field notes, we are returning to places which harbored rare plants during his era and are evaluating change. In conjunction with this, our "participatory natural history surveys" have formed a small group of volunteers, who meet twice a month to explore the plants and butterflies of places identified by McVaugh or others as 'special'.

Aside from documenting the natural history components of 'special', we are also planning public surveys in order to better understand which local natural areas are important to people.

Sharing Information: This is shared via numerous natural history walks, posters, a web page, newspaper articles and direct outreach to volunteer field biologists.

Encouraging Compassion: The program has a strong emphasis on building compassion through knowledge and appreciation, in large part through the direct involvement and training of a core group of citizen scientists.

Facilitating Vision: This information will be applied to discussions of the future through activities such as conservation value mapping.

Agroecology

This component looks specifically at how agriculture and wild species interact and at how management/use and landscape context affect this interaction. It bridges to both the native species component (above) and the people and the land component (below) because it focuses on the ecological aspects of one particular human use of the land.

Gathering Information: Information is gathered through direct field research and, when assessing past conditions, through historical census, maps and other documents. Specifically, we have conducted ecological surveys to evaluate the value of select agricultural land covers and habitat for specific groups of native species and, more recently, we have begun looking at the role of native (or at least wild) species in providing 'ecological services' to farmers.

Sharing Information: Specific agricultural mapping and farm management observations are shared directly with land owners and farmers. Derived generalities are shared with the general public via reports, newspaper articles, a web page, walks and presentations.

Encouraging Compassion: We try to build stories of the landscape by considering historic farming and resultant ecological interactions and building that narrative up through the present day. We also try to talk about specific organisms and provide interested people with the tools for observing those organisms themselves.

Facilitating Vision: This information will be applied to towards thoughts of the future by, for example, simultaneously attempting to map the agricultural land use needed to create important habitats for native species and for a viable (a word which needs to be defined) local agriculture.

People & the Land

The component looks at the use that people make and have made of the land. It has a major focus on agriculture. More broadly, it attempts to explore the factors influencing human perception of and interaction with the landscape both on an individual basis and as communities. This component provides the sociological perspective for understanding the non-ecological motives of human land use that affect the distributions of native species and the nature of current agroecological interactions (i.e., the above two components).

Gathering Information: Information is gathered through sociological field research and the use of historical and current documents. Some of this research has involved the participation of volunteers in, for example, mapping food outlets and gathering food price information. We have also begun an oral history project which aims to better understand the personal experiences of local farmers – how has agriculture changed and what factors have influenced that change?

Sharing Information: Aside from information that is shared with volunteers, networking has been an important avenue – there is substantial local interest in public nutrition, local foods and food access; several organization of arisen around

these themes and their meetings provide fora for sharing. Results are shared with the general public via participatory surveys (part of the research, but also an outreach tool), reports, newspaper articles, a web page, walks and presentations.

Encouraging Compassion: People connect with other people’s stories. The oral history project is one way of creating a story line that numeric data can then provide background for. Conversely, the significance of numerical analyses are more easily felt when accompanied by accounts of personal experiences.

Facilitating Vision: The mapping of current and historic agricultural production and food systems, provides the basis for understanding the land base and infrastructure that has been and is a component of the local food system. Such data provide the potential for envisioning how land use and infrastructure might change if the local food system shrinks or expands.

A Diagram Sketching the Farmscape Ecology Program’s Components and their Interactions.

