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Claire Hope Cummings:
Putting the culture back in agriculture

In the 1930's, Hawai'i was completely food self-sufficient. Today, we import 90-95 percent of what we eat. At a time when that lifeline is threatened by our dependence on non-renewable resources and manipulated by corporate claim jumpers, people are beginning to recognize the importance of finding a different, sustainable approach to agriculture. Can Hawai'i feed itself? Environmental and native land rights lawyer and journalist Claire Hope Cummings says yes. The former attorney for the U.S. Department of Agriculture has served as general counsel for numerous environmental organizations including The Cultural Conservancy, which she also founded. She will give a talk on "Food Security: Hawai'i's Sustainable Future" at Patagonia in Hale'iwa on Saturday Apr. 8 at 6:30PM.

How did food crops leave the hands of local community farmers and turn into an experimental playground for biotech companies?

What drives this is a perceived need by universities to do research to improve crops. The real perspective is that indigenous people and farmers have always done the research themselves. In the last half of the 20th century, universities took over that function. It used to be in cooperation with farmers and farm organizations, but in the ’90s, corporations took that over and the whole research system became privatized. That was partly because of the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act [that] allowed universities to benefit by taking out patents on their “inventions.” As a result, it put profit into the whole picture. Once profit became the motivating force in agricultural research, it changed a lot about what questions get asked and why certain crops are developed and why others might be neglected.

So profits have driven us to treat plants and crops as commodities… Can we lose the idea of ownership?

Our private property legal system came out of economic imperative. Given climate change, the end of oil, and environmental issues we’re facing now in the 21st century, we’re going to have to come up with a new system. The good news is the system we had before is not set in stone. We made it up in response to certain exigencies. We can make up another one that works better now for restoring ecological balance.

How are the patents encroaching on the rights of indigenous peoples?

The concern with the utility patent-like the ones UH has on the taro-is that it doesn’t just apply to the particular genetic structure that was altered. For example, it’s kind of playing out that Syngenta owns x number of varieties of rice. They’re asserting ownership not only on the genes they’ve manipulated, but on the genes that nature provided the world and that indigenous people and farmers who developed rice varieties over centuries provided.

What’s being disregarded is the relationship between the people and the plant, between the farmer and the taro. When the farmer goes out and chants to his taro, when he observes how it reacts to snail infestations, when the schoolchildren learn their taro heritage-those cultural relationships are what’s important. Economically, [the GMO] model hasn’t proven itself. What I’m concerned about is the whole love affair with technology and the sacrifice of culture.

As far as policy is concerned, what changes should be made?

I’m a big fan of an architect by the name of William McDonough. He basically says that regulation is a design flaw-if you have to regulate, you’ve got a design problem. So I would rather re-design than re-regulate. The re-design would encompass allowing assertions of sovereignty by native people over their biodiversity. They could have informed consent and decide to participate in prospecting, but it’s really important that they also have a right to decline: They could say, no, this is sacred, we don’t allow any tampering, it cannot be removed.

Are you optimistic that change will happen?

The agriculture system we have is zombie agriculture. Twenty-six billion dollars worth of subsidies are making this look like it's a living system, but it's been dead for a long time. I just read a report by the USGS that says U.S. farmers are putting 1 billion pounds of pesticides on the ground every year, and now 90% of all the rivers and streams in the US are contaminated with cancer-causing pesticides…. And now with the World Trade Organization and peak oil, there's huge pressures on this industrial agriculture system. It has to change. Change is inevitable.

How long will it take?

A decade. We are at an agricultural tipping point. There are a few ingredients that have to come together like policy, investment, technology. Is the technology there? Yes. Do the communities have the ability to do it? Yes, communities all over the world have revitalized their local agriculture. Oil is going to drive this, the end of subsidies…. We now have the technology to provide all the fuel and power we need with existing alternative fuel technology, and we have the technology and the know-how to provide food for everyone on the planet using sustainable growing methods. The collective knowledge of 30 years of organic farming has proven this productivity.

So, we're there. The missing piece is leadership. We're used to thinking of leadership as Gandhi or Martin Luther King. The way leadership is happening now is going to come from thousands and thousands of small organizations becoming self-aware and networking.