

“It only takes a single spark.”

SEED I

SUSTAINABLE LIVING, RENEWABLE RESOURCES, AND THE FUTURE OF IOWA

By Dan Armstrong

Little by little, there is growing evidence of a ground swell of action across the United States. Grass roots community awareness is coalescing. Concerns about a changing climate, the social and economic pressures connected to peaking oil production, unsustainable agricultural practices, and a hopelessly corrupt and misdirected government are gradually waking the American public from its long slumber. If anything is going to be done to change the direction of this nation, it is becoming increasingly clear that it will not originate in Washington. It must arise at the community level. This is happening, perhaps slowly, perhaps under the pressure of already ringing alarms, but it is happening. The SEED I (Sustainable Ecological Economic Development) Conference in Cedar Rapids, Iowa at the end of October was sure proof of this.

Under the working title of *Sustainable Living, Renewable Resources, and the Future of Iowa*, SEED I was a three day event (October 26-28, 2007) in the New Bohemia Art and Cultural District of Cedar Rapids. The gathering was designed to get members of the community talking about and acting on the kinds of local projects that will be necessary as petroleum prices climb and related food security issues increase. Long time activist and Soyawax entrepreneur, Michael Richards was the organizing force behind SEED I. Richards took it upon himself to bring structure to the movement he saw building in Iowa—hoping that this one spark, SEED I, would kindle similar meetings and action groups in other parts of the country. Mud City Press was there to help this happen...

I traveled to Cedar Rapids with friend and fellow author William H. Kötke on Thursday the day before SEED I would begin. That morning, the two of us stood outside the security zone at the Eugene airport wondering how we would be received by the guards at the electronic entry. There was growing concern within the alternative culture that the names of radical activists and writers were accruing on a list—that there were people the government was watching and would not allow to fly. If this was indeed the case, both William Kötke and I had some reason to fear. Kötke’s book *The Final Empire: The Collapse of Civilization* had been out since 1993. He had lived his entire life as an activist of one kind or another, union rep, anti-war protester, adjunct to Native American tribes in the southwest United States, and member of Earth First. He hadn’t been on a plane or in an airport in nearly ten years and there was no telling how his name would scan through the system. I was little more than a loud-mouth website editor living in Eugene with opinions on everything from Lee Harvey Oswald to no-till agriculture to the impeachment of King Dick and his sidekick George. I had traveled within the calendar year with no problem, but that was before I’d launched the website. Unfortunately there was no way of knowing what would happen at the check point without our actually going through.

I walked the gauntlet of TSA officials first, showing my boarding pass, driver’s license, removing my shoes, belt, jacket, wallet, and loose change and pushing it all through an electronic scanner with my one piece of luggage. I then passed through the metal detector—with a momentary wave of trepidation—and moved on into the secure zone with no other hassle than gathering up all my belongings and putting on my shoes.

Kötke watched all of this from the outside, then with a little nod to me entered the labyrinth. Wearing hemp pants and carrying a medical marijuana card from California, a true American mutant, he passed easily through the first stages of the process, showing his driver’s license and boarding pass, but the metal detector went off as he passed through the sensors and he was immediately pulled aside.

“Damn,” I thought as I watched a TSA officer wave an electronic wand around Kötke’s body. The wand beeped several times and the TSA officer gave him an intimate pat down. Kötke rolled his eyes at me as this transpired, but maintained his calm. He was then told that it was his suspender clips that were setting off the metal detector and he was asked to remove his suspenders. This solved the problem and we headed off to board the first of three flights that would get us to Cedar Rapids. So much for paranoia...

The first flight was a puddle jump to Seattle. The second flight, from Seattle to Minneapolis, was three hours. The seats were arranged three on either side of the aisle. I took the window seat. Kötke got the center seat, and a young man in his early twenties by the name of Colin took the aisle. Fifteen minutes into the flight, Colin informed us he was a private in the U.S. Army and was headed to Iraq in the next month. I nodded soberly and he grinned “no-fear,” saying he was eager for action and with Christ as his savior he was sure he would return safely. Kötke looked straight ahead keeping his thoughts to himself, and I nodded again in sympathy for him and the rest of the world.

The earth was suffocating with carbon emissions and the United States was fighting a religious war in order to sustain an economy based on petroleum. I had to wonder how the Prince of Peace would reconcile this kind of systemic hypocrisy. Oh well, Kötke and I were environmental flag wavers traveling in a giant carbon eating and exhausting beast. What was our excuse? Make no mistake, we all offer our little concessions, but short of living entirely off the grid—which Kötke will soon be doing, we’re all contributing to this horror show.

Michael Richards met us at the airport in Cedar Rapids Thursday night. He was a warm, bear of a man with a close-cut beard and a quiet easy manner. I knew Richards only through email exchanges and a few phone calls, but felt like he was already a friend and comrade long before actually meeting him—that feeling of connection would only strengthen in the ensuing three days. He took us to the home of Carolyn Berg where Kötke and I would stay for the duration of the conference. (Many thanks to Carolyn for her hospitality and generosity.)

Friday afternoon at three, the thirty-six conference presenters met with Michael Richards at the Matyk Building on East Third Street in Cedar Rapids to talk about what would go on in the next 32 hours. It was a remarkable and diverse group of individuals, including farmers, peace advocates, environmentalists, writers, and energy entrepreneurs. We sat in a circle of well-worn couches and chairs on the first floor of this old building in the heart of Cedar Rapids’ New Bohemia District and introduced ourselves. Then we divided up into six small groups corresponding to the six conference tracks ([link to PDF](#)), to talk about strategy, label key issues, and gather another level of acquaintance.

As your basic roving reporter, I had not been assigned to a track, so I sat down with three members of the Ecological Economic Development/Jobs for Seven Generations track that

included Shari Martinez of Cedar Rapids Women for Peace, Molly Cantrell-Kraig, candidate for Alderman at Large for the city of Muscatine, Iowa, and Kimberley Dickey, Environmental Sustainability Manager for Frontier Natural Products Co-op. After an affirmation of what we were there that weekend to do, we decided to focus on an introductory piece for the track the next day. The reference to seven generations in the group's title seemed the best way to set the stage for an open discussion of sustainable economics.

The concept of seven generations came from the Great Law of the Confederacy of Iroquois tribes. According to this law, all decisions and tribal practices must take into account how they would effect the next seven generations of Iroquois. Thus immediate pressures and needs were always addressed through a longer view. In a culture where we hardly ever look any further ahead than the next business quarter and our society changes with each new expansion of computer memory, this is a difficult proposition. But in the big picture of caring for the planet, managing resources, and designing our society, the Iroquois law is an important concept. Even if seven generations is a stretch, looking at least one generation ahead—to the lives of our children—is absolutely imperative. Part of the reason for the SEED Conference was our failure to do just that.

Despite thirty years of foreknowledge, we had neglected all warnings for the effect of greenhouses gases, we had consumed petroleum like it was an infinite resource, and we had gobbled natural resources like there was no tomorrow. But, of course, there is a tomorrow. And that tomorrow is now! If our economic model of unlimited growth needed grounding and some sound advice, our little group decided that it came, aptly, from the Native Americans who had maintained this same stretch of land for thousands of years with little impact. The nation of white men that took their place seemed intent on desertification in less than 300 years. We may not be able to change that in our circle of discussion the next day, but this was the message we would begin with. *Think as far ahead as possible.*

After this initial gathering, we all walked two blocks down Third Street for dinner at a local bar and grill, The Chrome Horse. During the meal, I spoke with Steve Fugate of Green World Biofuels. Steve told me of his Ester Machine System “that enables the operator to turn used fryer or virgin vegetable oils into high quality finished fuel” and can produce 80 gallons in a day. Steve, who designed and marketed the system, used it himself as part of a biofuel co-op. A

group of ten friends would collect used vegetable oil from local restaurants, then get together one day a week and turn out fuel for their personal use. At a time when the price of petroleum products is shooting through the roof, what could be better than having the ability to brew your own from restaurant leftovers? Green World Biofuels was working proof of one of the most basic lessons of these changing times; *there really is no more room for waste*—even that ugly looking grease we fry potatoes and chicken in can be used to good purpose. To me, a mere writer, Fugate’s hands-on technical approach was an inspiring example of what one individual could do through thoughtful innovation.

After dinner, we walked another two blocks to the P-3 Union Hall and reconvened with many others who came to attend and learn. Ken Meter from the Crossroads Resource Center out of Minneapolis, Minnesota was the keynote speaker and his Friday night talk would kick off the conference.

Meter’s poignant presentation, “Finding Food in Farm Country,” put the conference focus squarely on food and farming. In some ways this was the most powerful presentation of the conference in that it revealed in a series of Power Point slides the perverse predicament of small and mid-sized farms in America. He began by drawing an economic picture of agriculture in Iowa. Two trends stood out: farming in Iowa, and the United States in general, has been operating at a net loss since 1998 and some ninety-eight percent of all Iowa farm produce is sent out of state, while a similar portion of all food products that are bought in Iowa come from outside of Iowa. With skyrocketing petroleum prices heavily impacting farm costs, particularly product transportation, this is crazy and unfortunately exemplary of how our economy is designed—back-ass-wards. Relocalizing agriculture is one critical way to turn things around, but, as Ken Meter said, the problems are bigger than localized markets; farm policy (what we grow and how we grow it) and subsidy programs must also be addressed. In net, the world’s greatest agricultural nation is operating at a deficit and survives only because of the existing and wasteful subsidy programs. This disturbing array of facts set the stage for Saturday’s six discussion groups.

As Saturday unfolded, I was able to attend three of the two-hour conference tracks. The presenters and those attending sat in a large circle of 20 to 30 people. Each track began with a

brief statement by the presenters in the group, followed by a round table discussion with the entire group. Talk was free-wheeling and on occasion emotional.

In order, I sat in on discussions about shelter, sustainable farming, and earth-centered spirituality:

Integrating Shelter and the Environment: Community Ecotecture

- 1. Lonnie Gamble**, Coalition for Sustainable Living, Abundance EcoVillage
- 2. Don Otto**, Green Construction Expert, Center for Sustainable Communities
- 3. Martha Norbeck**, Iowa City Architect, Principles of Green Design
- 4. Greg Johnson**, Small House Movement/Resources for Life
- 5. Karen Brook**, Trees Forever, Green Infrastructure in Sustainable Community
- 6. Wayne Petersen**, North Central Research Station of Iowa.
- 7. Phil Hawes**, Eco Architect, Ecovillage design and development

Concerns for rising energy costs, land usage, and building materials have a direct impact on the way we build and live in our homes and our communities. The Integrating Shelter and the Environment track of the SEED I Conference provided those attending with the opportunity to speak with several green builders, eco-architects, and community designers.

In our current “what me worry?” American life-style, too often we find families of two or three living in enormous houses of 4,000 square feet or larger. We are entering an era when this kind of excess can only be described as a negligent waste of energy, land, and building resources. In response to this, Greg Johnson of the Small House Movement presented a slide show of his year living in a 70-square foot home, demonstrating that efficiency in home design can make very livable homes in small sizes. Clearly Johnson’s effort was extreme, but the point was clear. In these times of climate change and energy conservation, we just don’t need giant houses to live comfortably.

Don Otto, a green home builder in Iowa, spoke about new green building materials, passive heating and cooling design, water catchment, and a general overview for changing the way we build our homes.

Eco-architect Phil Hawes provided this tract’s most comprehensive presentation. Hawes, the architect of Biosphere II, is currently building a sustainable ecovillage for 5,000 inhabitants outside Amarillo, Texas. Hawes went through every aspect of his design from water management, waste control, food production, soil building, transportation (electric instead of

gasoline powered vehicles), and community living. Creating sustainable (lasting a 1000 years in Phil's definition), self-reliant, intentional communities is perhaps the most powerful way to lighten the way humans live on the land. Aside from consciously addressing every aspect of our physical needs, *living and working together in an intentional community*—as opposed to being isolated in giant McMansions—*is the necessary direction of the future.*

Sustainable Food, Health and Wellness

1. **Denise O'Brien, 2006**, candidate for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, founder of Women and Agriculture Network
2. **Fred Meyer**, Environmental Advocates/Backyard Abundance
3. **Susan Jutz**, President Practical Farmers of Iowa and CSA producer
4. **Laura Krouse**, Iowa Policy Project/Local Food Study
5. **Janet Coester**, International Advocate for Peace and a Sustainable Society
6. **Ken Meter**; President/Crossroads Resource
7. **Steve Smith**; President/Iowa Network for Community Agriculture

As demonstrated by Ken Meter's keynote presentation, sustainable living begins with sustainable food production. When farms can not be run at a profit on the largest and most productive expanse of farmland in the world, we have a problem. The Sustainable Food, Health, and Wellness circle generated the most emotion of all that I took part in, particularly in the presentations of Iowa farmers Susan Jutz and Steve Smith.

Critical to all that must be done is buying local produce. This was the message Jutz and Smith repeated. Bringing awareness to the populace for the importance of using growers markets and looking for local produce in the grocery store is just common sense when the rising cost of gasoline and diesel will continue to add to the cost of absolutely everything we eat. Right now, on average, each portion of food on dinner tables throughout the United States, that lettuce, that chicken thigh, those hardly fresh strawberries, traveled in excess of a thousand miles to get there. This is nonsense.

Buying produce locally will minimize transportation costs while also including the extra bonus of cutting carbon emissions and creating community.

At the center of the food localization movement is community supported agriculture. CSA has been around for many years but is only now beginning to gather momentum. If you are not familiar with CSAs, the principle is simple. Small farmers sell subscriptions for their produce to people that live in the vicinity of their farm. The subscribers pay either an upfront fee or a

monthly payment that gives them a weekly supply of fresh produce. This enables the farmer to have the capital to plant his crops and run his farm with the foreknowledge of what his subscribers want and how much they can use. The result is getting the best and freshest produce at the cheapest prices while at the same time supporting local farmers and creating a community of buyers. CSAs are becoming more and more prevalent and can be found anywhere in the United States where there are farmers. Find one in your area today!

Fred Meyer of Backyard Abundance described another popular alternative to buying non-local produce, growing your own. Meyer and others throughout the U.S. are preaching the idea of maintaining gardens no matter where you live or how much land you have. Gardens can be planted just about anywhere from the backyard to the roof of your home or apartment. Urban and suburban gardens offer both fresh food and hands-in-the-dirt awareness for what more and more of us will be called on to do: *Know where your food came from.*

Earth Centered Spirituality

1. **Dr. Maynard Kauffman**, University of Chicago, Western Michigan University, Author, *Adapting to the End of Oil: Toward an Earth Centered Spirituality*

2. **Travis Cox**, B.A in Philosophy from Central College, M.A. in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness from the California Institute of Integral Studies, PhD. at Iowa State Sustainable Agriculture.

3. **Angela Clark**, Founder/CEO enrgPATH - Iowa's only resource directory for holistic and sustainable businesses.

4. **Blair Frank**, United Methodist Pastor and Organic Gardener, Land Stewardship in the Christian Tradition

5. **William H. Kötke**, author *The Final Empire: The Collapse of Civilization.*

Building smart homes, farming with awareness for the soil, buying locally, and finding alternatives to petroleum fuels is all well and good. But for this to happen in any meaningful way it must begin with a basic change in mind-set, which in turn will manifest itself in the way we live. At the heart of this change is elevating our awareness for all life on planet earth. We humans must learn the rhythms of the earth, learn to live in concert with those rhythms, and in that way broaden our sense of who we are and what our relationship is to the rest of the community of life. Redefining or clarifying human spirituality is at the center of this change.

I attended the Earth Centered Spirituality track in the last round of Saturday's discussions. Along with those listed above, Michael Richards and his wife Lynette took part in

this circle. While the conference was largely attended by like-minded individuals, of all the discussions I took part in, this group was nearly of one mind.

Environmental activist and author of the recently re-published *The Final Empire*, William H. Kötke expressed it as eloquently as anyone in the circle: “The human species has produced many types of cultures, but the mining of the earth’s fertility to swell the social body, to increase the power, production and profit of the elite who are gathered around the emperor has been a disaster. This grasping after material objects and this desperate need to exert power over other humans is an immature response to life. In our maturity, when we become what we have the potential to be, we would notice that it is the biological processes of life, all life, that provide our sustenance. The loss of only one coral reef and its incubation of numerous fish schools translates its effects to us. The loss of one forest means the deprivation of clean water for us. We simply cannot destroy that which feeds us. In our maturity we would understand that rather than suck biological energy from the earth, we must restore the ecologies of the earth to health and learn to live from their abundance. A healthy earth would be reflected in a healthy human species and a new sense of the human spirit.”

Lynette Richards put her sense of spirit as succinctly and powerfully as possible; she simply tried to help others when she could. And this was really who she was. Lynette seemed the embodiment of right action. Aside from her work as a teacher in Cedar Rapids’ alternative high school and helping distribute food surpluses to local families without adequate food, she was visibly there at the conference as the up-to-the-elbows-in-work head cook. She didn’t have a presentation. She didn’t address the group. She simply fed us.

Friday evening, Michael Richards, in the spirit of the conference’s call for community, requested that attendees buy something at the Cedar Rapids’ farmers’ market the next morning and bring it with them to the conference hall. Saturday morning came with a slow but steady accumulation of bits and pieces, and from that Lynette and a handful of helpers made lunch and dinner for the 100 or so people there for the conference. While talk was lively at the conference and the discussions important, the two meals were full of the real spirit of the day, shared in the breaking of bread and the communion of a healthy meal. This was community building (Track IV on the conference agenda) in its most basic sense.

In the end, my assessment of the conference was that more like it are necessary. It is the beginning of a reeducation program for us hobos on spaceship earth, primarily those of us in the United States where moderation is simply not observed. It is essential for every human to know more about how the planet works, how humans fit in as an implicate part of all life, and how we can add to earth's value rather than detract from it. Waste control is at the top of the list. Even greasy old vegetable oil can't be thrown away. Thinking ahead and smart-minded conservation is about half of what is required. The rest is desire—and that will arise as an emerging property from the process of building community.

And this was the conference's most visceral lesson, the synergy of building community; in forty-eight hours we had a group of Iowans actively networking and educating each other, primarily about food sources, the common thread in all lessons of sustainability. Regardless of race, creed, or personality type, the clear pragmatism of eating a meal unites us all.

We need the same food and energy dialogue that took place at the SEED Conference in every neighborhood, town, and city throughout the United States. We must relocalize, condense our communities and live more efficiently. The price of gasoline will eventually demand it. Either we begin the change now and prepare or we leave emergency to be our inspiration. The SEED I Conference in Cedar Rapids was preparation and inspiration—a single spark in a nation of dry tinder. We must hope that this spark catches; that this movement takes on a life of its own and spreads across this entire nation like a prairie fire.

Hats off to Michael Richards and all those he brought along for this absolutely necessary ride.