

Seeds of Destruction

The concentration of more and more of the world's crop seeds in fewer and fewer hands is a threat to global agriculture and everyone's food supply

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In planning a military campaign, the first thing any competent general does is secure the army's supply lines.

That's because, as Napoleon once said, every army "marches on its stomach," a truth he learned when the Russian scorched-earth strategy reduced his Grand Armée to a starving rabble.

None of us is ever more than a few meals from the same fate. Stomachs are why Nazi Germany built its naval strategy around sinking supply convoys bound for Britain and Russia.

Stomachs are why the Battle of the Atlantic -- and Canada's heroic role in thwarting the U-boat -- was the most important event in World War Two's European Theatre. Starving people as a way of exerting control has been a political and military tool since generals first began devastating their enemy's crops.

Even in peacetime, successful captains of industry plan expansion strategies around secure feedstocks. It's a dumb CEO who builds a refinery without first assuring a long-term supply of oil.

And ever since that sharp-dealing Athenian, Themistocles, tried to corner Mediterranean olive oil stocks, it's been an axiom of business that permitting either individuals or organizations to monopolize the supply of strategic commodities -- and thus have the power to artificially manipulate the mechanism of supply and demand -- is a recipe for market chaos and ultimately for an economic train wreck.

So it's fascinating to observe how we appear to be collectively sleepwalking toward precisely such a potential catastrophe with that most strategic of all things, a sustainable, secure, equitably distributed global food supply.

That unpleasant possibility was brought home with remarkable clarity this week when award-winning, British Columbia-based documentary-maker David Springbett left a copy of his latest film in my mailbox.

The last time I wrote about Springbett and his partner Heather McAndrew's work, it was about their troubling and ultimately exalting study of human rights and personal courage, *The Man We Call Juan Carlos*.

That film, which bore witness to the bloody civil conflict in Guatemala, told its story through the lens of a difficult life, that of Wenceslao Armira, a Mayan farmer, teacher, priest and -- his two children were murdered by death squads -- eventual guerrilla.

It showed how our comfortable lives in the safe North are nevertheless connected ethically and morally to those who struggle to survive in the dangerous South. It won numerous awards.

This new documentary produced and directed by Springbett, written with McAndrew and with an original musical score by rising West Coast composer Tobin Stokes, takes on the less visible but no less important issue of food security.

Hijacked Future is to air at 7 p.m. Saturday on Global Television's award-winning documentary series, Global Currents.

Apologists for big business and their sycophants in big government are not going to like it much. It takes dead aim at the question of whether it's in our best national interests as informed, intelligent citizens of a global civilization to snooze while a few giant trans-national corporations succeed in their attempt to monopolize food production.

If we do, say the agricultural experts interviewed for the documentary, we will be permitting a few companies to place our entire global food supply at risk for the short-term profit of a small number of shareholders.

Secure as food supplies now appear to be, Springbett's film points out that everything rides on a few inches of topsoil, which is eroding; a handful of seeds whose diversity is not only dwindling but is being encouraged to dwindle to enable tighter corporate control; and water, which is also dwindling in many agricultural regions.

While these problems expand, amplified by both population growth and climate change, huge corporations that are integrated both vertically and laterally seek to gain control of the seeds from which the world's major crops are produced.

Genetic modifications that make certain crops resistant to particular herbicides, the insertion of terminator genes that make it impossible for farmers to grow and store their own seed for the next crop, expansion of agribusiness monocultures at the expense of biological diversity, the patenting of plant DNA and genetically engineered life forms are all scary enough.

What's truly frightening from a strategic point of view, however, is the tendency for these technologies to concentrate in the hands of fewer and fewer corporate owners who want fewer and fewer seed varieties -- primarily the ones they own and control -- to be available to farmers.

Where there were once approximately 7,000 commercial sources of seed for farmers, Springbett's film points out, about 10 companies now control 55 per cent of the global seed market. Soon, yet fewer companies will control even more -- perhaps 80 per cent.

"Really they are stealing," says Terry Boehm, a Canadian farmer who still grows and saves his own seed from season to season. "They are stealing the heritage of mankind and selling it back to us for a hell of a profit."

One of the concerns explored by Springbett's chilling documentary is that the threat to small farmers around the world is also a threat to global agriculture's greatest asset -- the fact that many small farms adapting their crops to many localized conditions mean we have a vast array of robust alternatives to unexpected change. This is most important when we face a sudden, unanticipated outbreak of plant disease, as happened 50 years ago when a wheat rust pandemic devastated North American crops. Only because scientists found a resistant strain developed by peasant farmers in Ethiopia was a global catastrophe averted.

Today, the film points out, scientists are sufficiently worried about the loss of diversity that they've built what's known as the "doomsday vault." This secure facility buried in the rock and permafrost above Norway's Arctic Circle is hurriedly collecting and storing as many of the world's seeds as can be found.

The stockpile is a desperation ploy. It does preserve seeds. But their ability to evolve and adapt to changing conditions is frozen at the moment they go into the vault.

Meanwhile, as the film points out, "the source of our food -- seeds -- is being hijacked by a handful of corporations from the farmers who have for millennia grown and saved them." And who, over time, have adapted them to cope with different conditions and disease threats.

This brings me back to the competent general, the one whose first objective must be to secure control of the food supply.

The metaphor raises the question of where our governments really stand in shaping national policy in response to this most strategic of global issues.

Watch this lucid, terrifying and yet hopeful film Saturday night and you might just be asking some pointed questions of your candidates in the coming election.

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