

"CONSERVING COMMUNITIES"

by Wendell Berry

(an excerpt from an essay he wrote, "Another Turn of the Crank")

How can a sustainable local community (which is to say a sustainable local economy) function? I am going to suggest a set of rules that I think such a community would have to follow. I hasten to say that I do not understand these rules as predictions; I am not interested in foretelling the future. If these rules have any validity, it is because they apply now.

Supposing that the members of a local community wanted their community to cohere, to flourish, and to last, they would:

(1) Always ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?

(2) Always include local nature - the land, the water, the air, the native creatures - within the membership of the community.

(3) Always ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbors.

(4) Always supply local needs first. (And only then think of exporting their products, first to nearby cities, and then to others.)

(5) The community must understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of 'labor saving' if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.

(6) If it is not to be merely a colony of the national or the global economy, the community must develop appropriately scaled value-adding industries for local products.

(7) It must also develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm or forest economy.

(8) It must strive to produce as much of its own energy as possible.

(9) It must strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community, and decrease expenditures outside the community.

(10) Money paid into the local economy should circulate within the community for as long as possible before it is paid out.

(11) If it is to last, a community must be able to afford to invest in itself: it must maintain its properties, keep itself clean (without dirtying some other place), care for its old people, teach its children.

(12) The old and the young must take care of one another. The young must learn from the old, not necessarily and not always in school. There must be no institutionalized 'child care' and 'homes for the aged'. The community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.

(13) Costs now conventionally hidden or 'externalized' must be accounted for. Whenever possible they must be debited against monetary income.

(14) Community members must look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like.

(15) They should always be aware of the economic value of neighborliness - as help, insurance, and so on. They must realize that in our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone.

(16) A rural community should always be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.

(17) A sustainable rural economy will be dependent on urban consumers loyal to local products. Therefore, we are talking about an economy that will always be more co-operative than competitive.

These rules are derived from Western political and religious traditions, from the promptings of ecologists and certain agriculturalists and from common sense. They may seem radical, but only because the modern national and global economies have been formed in almost perfect disregard of community and ecological interests.