A Greener Generation: The Fight to Save a Dying Planet, One Farm at a Time

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To say the smell of manure is a smack in the face when entering Mitten Rock farm in Lagrangeville, located in New York's Hudson Valley, would be an understatement. However, it's not an unpleasant smell; it harbors a sense of connection to both the land and the cows grazing on it. Mitten Rock is a family-run grass-fed beef cattle farm that has been around since the 1940s. It is now being run by a young man from Rockland County trying to cultivate sustainable and ethical beef. Bennet Sippel, 23, stands at about 5' 9" with dirty blonde hair and blue eyes. He has a gentle voice and calm demeanor; it's easy to forget he has the stresses of running a 200-acre cattle farm on his back. Sippel moved to Lagrangeville, NY, in November of 2020, when he was offered a position to run Mitten Rock Farm. He has assumed all of the responsibilities of owning the farm without actually owning it. He lives and works on the property full-time for the owners. His home is just a few steps from his chickens and cows. "It's not a long commute," Sippel said through laughter. The home he and his wife, Zoey, live in is a large beautiful white colonial that has been there for the better part of the century; the evidence is apparent in the chipping paint and falling shingles. The home looks out on the acres of green farmland.

Sippel and his wife, Zoey, petting their dog next to their home in Lagrangeville, NY. (Photo by Jaclyn DeRosso)

Sippel drives a silver truck, stained so deeply with mud it might as well be brown, around the farm tending to the animals. “These animals need me, and I need them,” he said. Sippel gets out of the truck and is nearly knee-deep in mud and manure. He throws bales of hay to the some 70 cows in front of him.

“I feel like a lot of modern life feels fake,” Sippel said, looking out on the seemingly never-ending landscape of Mitten Rock. “ -The further we detach from our resources, the more we become like strangers to the world.”

Such a large part of American life is going to the grocery store, and it’s easy to forget how much work goes into the food on the shelves. Part of Sippel’s mission on the farm is to keep the process of raising the animals as natural as possible, and this means a smaller herd of cattle and less degradation of the land. All of the cattle are free to roam on the large property as they please, grazing on the acres of green grass

A 40-minute drive north from Mitten Rock is Dashing Star Farm in Millerton, NY. Lynn Mordas, 53, runs Dashing Star and has been since 1994. Dashing Star is a sustainable, free-range sheep farm, similar to Mitten Rock. The sheep are used both for meat and wool which is naturally processed. The livestock on Dashing Star are treated humanely and are free-range and fed locally sourced food. Mordas is also in the process of training a 26-year-old farmer on the ins and outs of farming. He has no educational background in farming but she is helping him take agricultural-based courses at Cornell."I find it to be a very rewarding job, people do appreciate what you do, and you can feel good about what you're doing for the environment," says Mordas.

The practice of eating meat is often seen as unsustainable as a whole; however, Sippel and Mordas feel differently. "A cow's sustainability is dependent on the context in which she exists," Sippel says. A significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change as a whole is factory farming. According to the Sentience Institute, 70.4 percent of beef cattle in the United States are raised on factory farms. The dictionary definition of a factory farm is "a system of rearing livestock using intensive methods, by which poultry, pigs, or cattle are confined indoors under strictly controlled conditions."

Factory farms keep animals confined and overcrowded. The treatment of these animals is not only inhumane, it degrades the earth. According to the organization Farm Vs. Factory, "Animals on factory farms create vast quantities of untreated manure...this waste is overapplied to surrounding land, often polluting the air, water, and soil."

Walking through Mitten Rock farm, the cows are free to do as they please. Some graze, some take naps, others curiously explore the land. Sippel's cows live free lives; they also have a large piece in promoting the health of the soil. "When a cow is eating grass on a pasture, its

manure contains essential microbes that digest back into the soil," said Sippel. Mitten Rock farm takes steps to distance itself from the unsustainable practices of factory farms.

According to the Pace Law School Library Research Guide, "Environmental Impacts of Factory Farming," "factory farming is a major contributor to water and air pollution as well as deforestation." Factory farming has become the primary way most Americans get their food. It is convenient and often less expensive to go to the grocery store rather than visit a local farm or market to get food; however, it is much more damaging to the planet. "Factory farms serve as concentrated sources of methane gas emissions. Land and rainforests are cleared to allow livestock to graze and be raised," the research guide continued.

"There's this feeling of despair when it comes to the worldwide issue of climate change. I guess where I have landed is you just have to pick your little corner of fighting, and I've picked mine," says Sippel.

The fight against climate change is deeply intertwined with our food sources, and unsustainable farming practices are not limited to the cattle industry. The ecological meaning of unsustainable refers to any activity that depletes natural resources or interferes with environmental processes. Many large-scale vegetable farms in the United States have adopted unsustainable farming practices. These practices include anything from overproduction to spraying pesticides. According to FoodPrint.org, "Agriculture accounts for ninety percent of pesticide use in the U.S." Many younger generations have picked up on this and have decided to take actions to defend the planet.

"I always tell my team, if I farm 10 percent better than the person who taught me, and you farm 10 percent better than me, that will have an impact," says Larry Tse, 30, who manages and trains new farmers at Dig Acres Farm in Chester, NY. Dig Acres is a farm started by Dig Inn,

a restaurant group based out of New York City that has 30 restaurants among New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Westchester County. Dig Inn works directly with farmers to ensure the freshness and quality of their food. They work with 65 different farms and have started Tse's farm in Chester, NY.

Larry Tse outside a coffee shop in Chester, NY. (Photo by Jaclyn DeRosso)

"It's really gratifying to see people who come into our culture (farming) without really knowing anything about it and leave really liking it," says Tse while sipping a dirty chai latte at a coffee shop in Chester, only steps away from Dig Acres farm.

The view from the coffee shop onto the farmland is nothing but green for miles. The occasional farmer is scattered about the land, but for the most part, it's an empty field filled with crops being cultivated for the next season. The crops being grown on Dig Acres farm use only sustainable farming practices.

Tse walked through the fields of garlic and leeks, explaining the different measures they take to keep pests out of their crops. They've installed low voltage electric fences to keep out

animals and use biodegradable plastic film over the crops to keep out weeds. Tse reached into the ground to pull out a leek to see if it was ready for harvest. His hands were covered in dirt as he inspected it as though it were under a magnifying glass. He brushed the dirt off of the plant and set it back down as if he had decided it was not yet ready to be harvested.

Larry Tse, inspecting a Leek at Dig Acres in Chester, NY. (Photo by Jaclyn DeRosso)

Directly next to Dig Acres is the farm, Choy Division, run by Christina Chan, 32. “For me, I got into farming largely as a tool for social change,” says Chan. The farms name is a clever play on words referencing one of Chan's favorites, the popular post-punk band, Joy Division.

“I learned that you could grow food and teach people that they can use food as a tool to make better choices about their body and the environment,” Chan continued.

Chan grew up in New York City and saw her family plant small gardens where they had space. She always grew up eating and loving vegetables. She started her farming career in 2019 as an urban farmer in Astoria, Queens. She then moved to Chester, NY, and worked with Dig Acres and received training from Larry Tse. Choy Division focuses primarily on farming East Asian crops.

“It's my background; I wanted to do something that had importance to my family and me. Working on the land is our way of reconnecting with our heritage and ourselves,” Chan says.

Choy Division has a wide variety of East Asian vegetables, from bok choy to daikon radishes to chili peppers. Chan uses organic and regenerative practices to farm her crops. According to Regenerative International, “Regenerative Agriculture describes farming and grazing practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity – resulting in both carbon drawdown and improving the water cycle.”

Chan always had an interest in defending the environment. She studied environmental science at the School of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, NY, and began farming shortly after college. “My goal is to restore the land a little bit, to have a balance between what we need from it, but also what it needs from us,” says Chan.

In past decades, the urgency to act on climate change has become more significant. The

lasting effects it will have on the planet are becoming clearer by the day. It is becoming evident to many individuals that our way of life has proven to be too wasteful and too harmful for our planet to endure, especially how people grow and consume their food. “A bunch of America’s farmland is going to be dead in a few years if you’re not putting organic matter back into the soil,” says Bobbie Lochner, 24, who was a farmer at Rise and Root Farm, an organic farm in Chester, NY.

Lochner worked for Rise and Root Farm for about two and a half years. She started just looking for any kind of job but quickly learned it would be much more than that for her. “I just kind of fell in love with it and dropped everything else,” she says.

Lochner has since taken a break from farming to become a teacher's aide but is still heavily invested in improving our environment and hopes to work for Rise and Root in the future. “Even if I am not working there, I want to be a part of it in any way I can. I want to be a part of the solution,” says Lochner.

Another person seeking a solution is Aysha Venjara, 43, who owns and farms more than three acres of land in Chester, NY. “It doesn’t matter if you are a farmer, gardener, or someone with a patio and a couple of herbs, reverence for nature starts with understanding that you are a part of nature,” says Venjara. Venjara lives on the top floor of her home on the property and rents out two apartments on the bottom. She has a large garden where she has all types of produce, from mushrooms to berries to onions. She’s created the cooperative Falaha Center, which works to both educate the local community and feed those in need. In 2019 the Falaha Center donated 300 pounds of produce to the Cornell Cooperative Extensions food access program. Venjara is a practicing Muslim and the root word of falaha, falah, in Arabic means happiness and well-being. Venjara embodies this; she smiles from ear to ear while talking about her mission “It’s not a job

for me. It's a life calling," she says.

Venjara has learned through her agricultural work that the relationship people have with the land must be a symbiotic one if it is to continue. "We've made so many mistakes, and we think we're at the top of the food chain; we're not. We think we can do whatever we want, and we cannot," says Venjara.

The idea of a solution can feel far off at times when frightening climate-related headlines are a staple in the news cycle. However, the fright is warranted. "Scientists in 2013 urged 'immediate adaptation' by farmers to ensure that they can feed the 10 billion people expected to inhabit the planet by 2050," said Marla Cone in The New York Times article, "In a Race Against Warming Growers Try to Outsmart Climate Change." With a growing population, the need for food increases, which puts added pressure on farmers to produce more food. This increase in the demand for food has led to the creation of factory farming.

Venjara in front of her garden in Chester, NY. (Photo by Jaclyn DeRosso)

According to NASA's article "The Effects of Climate Change," "Scientists have high confidence that global temperatures will continue to rise for decades to come, largely due to greenhouse gases produced by human activity." It has become clear that it is imperative that the

ways people obtain their food have to change in order to decrease the effects of climate change.

The concept that humans can affect the earth's climate pattern has been around as far back as the ancient Greeks. They believed that human activity could change the amount of rainfall they received each year. However, it took centuries for claims like these to hold any weight among the general public. In the late 19th century, the concept of a warming planet was an exciting idea to those that accepted it. Many believed warming temperatures would be preferable in colder areas of the world, according to the article “Climate Change History” on History.com. “By the influence of the increasing percentage of carbonic acid [CO2] in the atmosphere, we may hope to enjoy ages with more equable and better climates, especially as regards the colder regions of the earth,” wrote Svante Arrhenius, a Swedish physicist in the late 19th century.

The motto “think local act global” has gained traction in small-town America and among younger generations as their way of making a difference when it comes to climate change. Although climate change is in the media now on a regular basis, the notion that climate change will negatively impact our environment has only been in the mainstream news cycle for about 50 years.

It was not until the 1930s that climate change became a point of dialogue in U.S politics. One of the first points in history that the US government acknowledged the possible adverse side effects of climate change was 1965. The U.S. President's Science Advisory Committee released a report to Lyndon B. Johnson warning him that the release of CO2 into our atmosphere could cause harm to life on earth. The term “global warming” was not used until 1975, only 46 years ago, when it was popularized by geoscientist Wallace Broecker. Broecker is quoted as saying, “The climate system is an angry beast, and we are poking at it with sticks.” According to

“Wallace Broecker, Prophet of Climate Change" by Kevin Krajick, “[h]e was one of the first scientists to predict an imminent rise in the earth’s temperature due to human output of carbon dioxide.”

The 1980s brought on the first real fear of global warming. The summer of 1988 was the hottest in history up to that year. From 1988 to 1989, 40% of the United States experienced the worst drought since the dust bowl of the 1930s. The article “Timeline: Climate Change” by Michael Marshall stated, “global warming attracts worldwide headlines after scientists at Congressional hearings in Washington DC blame major US drought on its influence.” The drought cost the United States $60 billion in damages. According to “Climate Change History,” on History.com, “Scientists sounding the alarm about climate change began to see the media and the public paying closer attention.” NASA scientist James Hansen delivered testimony and presented models to congress in June of 1988, saying he was “99 percent sure” that global warming was upon us.”

Now that climate change is in the mainstream media, younger generations have had the words “global warming” echoing in their heads for their whole lives. The 18-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg has been making headlines since she began her journey in activism at just 15 when she protested in front of the Swedish parliament, demanding they take action to lower carbon emissions. “We will never stop fighting for this planet, for ourselves, our futures, and for the future of our children and grandchildren,” Thunberg said in 2019.

The fear of a changing and warming planet is starting to feel closer than ever before. Members of the Hudson Valley community are beginning to see these signs of a changing world. NASA claims that in the northeast, we will start seeing “...agriculture, fisheries, and ecosystems

become increasingly compromised."

"What is this planet going to look like for my children? Do I even want to have children in the current state of the environment?" Erin Moylan, 27, asks rhetorically. Moylan grew up in Kansas and moved to the Hudson Valley two years ago to work at a small-scale farm at a yoga retreat center. Her interest in farming was prompted by her interest in food. "Growing up in the Midwest, I was raised on a very standard American diet. We had a box of pasta a night and hardly any fresh produce. So then I started thinking about our food system, a huge part of wellness is nutrition and nutrient-based food." she says.

Moylan is starting up a vegetable farm in Poughkeepsie, New York, with one other partner, and hopes to be in full production by 2022. Moylan began farming for the same reason many young farmers do, to improve the land she is living on.

"A lot of younger people have taken this accountability for the next generation when they're the ones that technically are the next generation," Moylan says.

A member of that "next generation" is Davida Task, 19, a recent high school graduate from Montclair, NJ. Task has put her college life on hold to pursue farming. She began her farming career in Gardiner, NY, at Four Winds Farm. She is now working as a farmer in West Virginia for an organization called Grow Ohio Valley, which is dedicated to growing and teaching people about fresh and healthy produce in rural West Virginia. "Everyone here is passionate; this work is not only a service to feed people but also to save the land," says Task. Task does not plan to continue farming for the rest of her life. However, her farming experience will be useful as she continues her education at Rutgers University majoring in either food policy or environmental science.

Sustainable agriculture is not limited to food; Rebecca Iasillo, 30, has taken her farming experience and uses it for medicinal purposes. Iasillo began her farming career watching her mother garden and grow food and flowers. She now runs an herb garden by herself in Rensselaerville, NY. She uses these herbs to make various teas and tinctures with different medicinal properties, which she sells online. Iasillo has long brown hair, with front bangs that frame her face. She lights up as she talks about her experiences cultivating medicinal products.

"I really fell in love with it," says Iasillo. She began her interest in farming after her father passed away from cancer, and her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2017. "It's very personal to me," she says as her face grows more serious. "I was looking at my parents' chronic health issues, and it's scary to think that can genetically be in me as well."

For Iasillo, it is a mixture of environmental consciousness and personal health. "I'm interested in how my decisions affect myself, the people directly around me, but also the community at large, and that community is also underneath us in the soil. It's this beautiful microbiome," Iasillo says.

There is a personal and gratifying aspect to small and local farming. "The best part was seeing everything. I got to see the planting, saving seeds, harvesting, getting it ready for the market, and talking to people in the community," says Polina Chizhov, 22.

Chizhov was a farmer at Blooming Hill Farm, located in Chester, NY, with a farm-to-table restaurant just 10 minutes down the road in Blooming Grove, NY. She worked in both the field and the restaurant.

Chizhov got her start in farming in 2014; she began working in the farm fields when she

was only a freshman in high school. “I was looking for something that involved my love for environmental conservation and nutrition,” she says.

Chizhov continued her passion for conservation as an environmental studies major at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, New York. “Not to glorify small farms, but small farms do make up a large portion of global food as far as quantity, so I think they have a major role to play in supplying food,” says Chizhov.

Chizhov is well versed in the effects larger agriculture corporations have on the environment. “Generally, big agriculture focuses on a few crops at a massive scale, and local community farms tend to diversify and make use of land and resources more diligently, and in the big picture, I'd say for sure that impacts climate change,” says Chizhov.

What Chizhov is referring to is polyculture and monoculture farming. Factory farms tend to produce their crops using the method of monoculture farming. Monoculture farming is the practice of only planting one crop on a field at a time. While this can increase quantity and efficiency, it can also negatively impact the environment around it. Monoculture farming decreases biodiversity, requires higher water usage, and depletes the soil of nutrients.

Sustainable farms have been known to produce their crops using the method of polyculture farming. Polyculture farming is the practice of planting many crops in the same area to mimic natural ecosystems. Polyculture farming allows for more biodiversity and increases soil health. Having healthy soil and crops reduces the need for pesticides and other chemicals. Sustainable farms also rotate crops which promotes the health of the soil.

Polyculture farming has a long list of benefits. According to the article, “Polyculture Production System for Sustainable Farming” by agronomy expert Tanja Folnovic it can meet food demands. “A polyculture system requires less land to produce more food,” said Folnovic.

Polyculture farming also allows for less water use, better soil erosion control, and pest-resistant crops," she continued.

According to Emma Bryce's 2017 article, "Can organic farming feed the world sustainably?" it is possible to heal our planet through sustainable farming. "If we dramatically expanded organic farming across the globe, we could reduce pesticide and fertilizer use, cut greenhouse gas emissions, and feed the world," said Bryce.

Polyculture farming is much healthier for the soil as opposed to monoculture farming. "Monoculture farming is horrible for the soil," says Kayla Wixtrom, 24. Wixtrom is a former apprentice at Dig Acres Farm with Larry Tse. "It's your job to take care of the soil for the next generation," she says.

After working for Dig Acres, Wixtrom started her own farm called Radiance Farm in Chester, NY. She primarily grew flowers and basil and sold them to restaurants and at local farmers' markets. Wixtrom had to put her farming life on hold when her grandfather was diagnosed with dementia and Alzheimers, and she took on the full-time role of being his caregiver. "I would love to farm again," says Wixtrom.

Radiance Farm, Dig Acres, and Choy Division are all members of the Chester Agricultural Center. This is an organization that helps support new farms and farmers by providing affordable leases of farmland. Ani Ventocilla King, 23, is the communications outreach manager of the organization. "Everyone that signs the lease abides to farm organically and uses regenerative practices; it's all-natural growing," says King.

Having a sense of community drives many of these farmers. Over the past year, the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted everyone. The farming community is no exception. However, they have found ways to prevail through the hardships of the virus. Chester

Agricultural Center opened a produce store during the pandemic. “We started the store for COVID relief as an outlet for our farms in case they lost money,” says King. “We also started it as a way for our community to access healthy food safely.” The store allows for low contact and easy pick up of produce items.

In Dutchess County, NY, MaryKate Chilemi, 34, and her partner Chris run a farm called Thousand Leaf Gardens. Their farm has also allowed for safety during the pandemic. Instead of a store with people coming in and out, they have an honors system farmstand. People can come and take what they need, leave the cash, allowing for contactless pickup and a sense of safety from the virus.

Chilemi and her partner run the vegetable and flower farm by themselves. “We haven’t hired an actual employee yet,” says Chilemi laughing. She and her partner work hard to continue their farm because it is their passion, and they want to have a positive impact on their environment. “Supporting smaller, local farms is important. It will inevitably impact our carbon footprint,” she says.

The closeness people feel to their food when getting it from a local market or their own farm is hard to match. “It's really good to see fruits and vegetables with dirt on them,” says Brenna Cracolici, 26, an employee at Blooming Hill Farm, a farm-to-table restaurant in Blooming Grove, NY.

Cracolici worked at Pine Hill Farm, in Chester, NY from 2014 to 2018. She has lived in Chester for the past eight years. She began working at Pine Hill farm with the hopes of learning more about farming and creating a difference in the environment at a local level. Cracolici then accepted a job in the kitchen at Blooming Hill farm, where she is now able to see the finished product of farming’s hard work.

“You are definitely more grateful when you get food from a farm,” she says with a grin. “It’s a different experience waiting for it and watching it grow for months and then finally getting it; it’s pretty beautiful.”

In Kingston, NY, also in the Hudson Valley, Wes Hannah, 37, and his wife own Solid Ground, a five-acre vegetable farm. They began farming in the Hudson Valley in 2011 and have been doing it ever since. “Being a part of a local food system and having a positive impact on our community was really appealing,” says Hannah. Hannah and his wife hope to continue having an impact on both their community and environment. “I think farming is pretty rare in that it has a holistic element, both on a social and environmental level. So, we can be proud that what we’re doing has a positive impact,” he says.

Back in Chester, Larry Tse walks through the farmland, saying hello to the various other farmers he passes. He keeps motioning to different vegetables he passed and the miles of farmland ahead of him. He seems comfortable, and he picks up little pieces of trash as we walk along the field. It is clear any thoughts of climate change are out of his mind as he focuses on the crops in front of him. However, he refers back to it for a moment, “It takes incremental change. We’re all just trying to do a little bit better,” says Tse.

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