

BEHAVIOR:

Will 'slow living' movement pick up speed in U.S.?

Lacey Johnson, E&E; reporter
ClimateWire: Monday, June 11, 2012

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. -- An odd mix of environmental leaders, academics and farmers met here this month to exchange ideas about a little-known philosophy called "slow living." Its followers believe that investing in local communities and food systems helps people lead slower, more fulfilling lives -- and it may also be an important tool in combating climate change.

"If we're going to build a sustainable world, it's got to be a world where a lot of things move more slowly," said Oberlin College professor David Orr to a crowd of more than 300 people June 1. The environmental studies and politics instructor went on to call climate destabilization "the most important issue we face as humans."

One connection between slow living and climate change centers on the idea that local goods and foods travel much shorter distances to reach consumers than chain store products and fast food.



The main drag in Brattleboro, all decked out for the Slow Living Summit.
Photo by Lacey Johnson.

EMAIL PRINT

The average American meal contains imported ingredients from at least five countries, according to a 2007 report by the Natural Resources Defense Council. Each year, thousands of tons of produce, such as tomatoes, blueberries and asparagus, is flown into the United States from as far away as Europe and Argentina; other foods travel halfway across the world in cargo ships from Asia and Australia.

Such imports not only increase atmospheric carbon dioxide but also can hurt local farmers in the United States.

Aside from transportation-related emissions, the simple act of farming and clearing new land accounts for up to a third of global greenhouse gases released each year, according to a recent study by the Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change. Farming locally and sustainably could be a significant opportunity to cut carbon emissions, and that's one of the big themes behind slow living.

Far-flung connections

While it seems deeply local, the slow living movement has some national and international antecedents. Some of its themes will even resonate in the United Nations' Rio+20 talks coming up in Brazil later this month. There, environmental groups, academics and some diplomats will try to make the case that economic growth has risen to a level that can no longer be sustained on the planet.

A new paper by Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich argues that "in biophysical terms, humanity has never been moving faster nor further from sustainability than it is now." In 1968, Ehrlich wrote the best-selling book "The Population Bomb," which warned of the mass starvation of humans in the 1970s and 1980s due to overpopulation.

The term "slow living" stems from Rome, where activist Carlo Petrini started a "slow food" movement in 1986. That year, a McDonald's restaurant was slated to open near the Spanish Steps, and Petrini was so outraged that he led a campaign against the fast food giant, advocating for "slow food" instead. He eventually wrote a series of books earning him an international following, and today his nonprofit organization, Slow Food, counts 100,000 members in 1,300 chapters worldwide.

"Slow living sounds like a bunch of well-off 60-somethings enjoying fine wine and artisanal cheese ... but it's not that at all," said Ralph Meima, the director of Marlboro Graduate College's sustainability management program and a partner on the second annual Slow Living Summit.

"People are really looking around for ways to make a difference in their own lives and finding that a lot of progress can be made by thinking small and working collaboratively," Meima added. "The purpose [of the summit] was to bring people together in this region to make new connections and relationships possible."

The three-day event in Brattleboro drew nearly 400 people, including speakers like Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin (D), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), and a handful of prominent authors and sustainability experts. Dozens of small-scale farmers also traveled to the summit from as far away as Pennsylvania and Maine -- many of them looking for inspiration on how to improve their farming practices and form better business connections within their communities.

Sustainable farming ideas shared at the conference included building hydroponic greenhouses that double as fish farms to maximize water use and using "manure digesters" to produce biogas, which can then be used to generate electricity. Combining different farming resources is what Vern Grubinger from the University of Vermont calls a "creative economy approach."

The 'Strolling of the Heifers'

"The more you get into this, the more ideas can come out for ways to live differently," said Dottie Smith, a retiree who grows food at her home in New Hampshire. She has attended both Slow Living Summits and says all the ideas "swirl around" in her head after she leaves.

Slow living can also insulate local communities against the damaging effects of climate change, said Kate Stephenson, the executive director of Vermont's Yestermorrow Design/Build School, who spoke at one of the 60-plus workshops offered at the summit. With more extreme weather predicted in the future, small towns are likely to see increased power outages, washed-out roads and water shortages, Stephenson said.

"What are the skills that we need locally -- even on the neighborhood or village level -- to survive under those conditions? I think a lot of the folks that are here at the Slow Living Summit ... are people who are trying to learn those skills."

The idea that sparked the Slow Living Summit came to Brattleboro resident Orly Munzing about 12 years ago. She was on a walk with her husband when she spotted their elderly neighbor Dwight Miller hard at work in his apple orchard.

"I said, 'Dwight, I feel guilty. What can we do to help you?'" recalled Munzing.

She expected Miller to pass her a rake, so she could lend a hand with the farm work; but what he said next surprised her.

"If you and your friends don't start supporting your local farms, you're not going to see them anymore," he told her. Then he suggested she do something about it.

Miller's words struck a chord with Munzing, and she began thinking of ways to drum up enthusiasm for local foods in her hometown. Less than a year later, the "Strolling of the Heifers" weekend -- named after the famous Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, Spain -- was born.

'Slow living' meets 'slow money'

Now in its 11th year, the weekend combines a livestock parade, dairy festival and educational activities for residents to learn about sustainable farming and local foods. The event draws tens of thousands of visitors to Brattleboro each June, and its organizers award \$140,000 in annual grants to support local farmers and businesses.

Three years ago, Woody Tasch, author of the slow-living-inspired book "Slow Money," contacted Munzing and asked whether she was interested in adding a slow money workshop to the 2010 Strolling of the Heifers weekend.

"I owe everything to him, because that's when the light bulb moment came to me," Munzing said. After hosting the slow money workshop, she decided to organize a full Slow Living Summit for the following year.

"It's very rare that an organization that doesn't have a lot of muscle is able to launch a conference like this," said Meima. "I'm still kind of befuddled, but we're going with it."

Unlike dozens of other sustainability conferences in the United States, the Slow Living Summit isn't hosted at a large hotel or university campus. Instead, independent businesses on Brattleboro's Main Street are used as venues for each workshop and event -- appropriate for a conference about investing in local communities.

Slow living institutions such as farmers markets, co-ops and community banks are "a regional phenomenon" in Vermont, says Meima; and with more green jobs per capita than any other state, it's also the perfect place for people to come together and share ideas about sustainability, he added.

"What we're doing together in Vermont right now, I would argue, isn't being done anywhere else in America," Shumlin said at the summit's closing ceremony. "If we keep focusing on the prize, I say that this conference won't be an aberration; it will be the rule, and we will have a healthier, happier quality of life."



Orly Munzing, founder of the Slow Living Summit, poses with a neighbor. Photo courtesy of Orly Munzing.