



## **We are a part of the earth and the earth is a part of us. 1989**

A chapter clarifying the European Federation of City Farms' application for European Union funding for a programme of harmonising and promoting good environmental practises.

### **Introduction**

City Farms are environmental projects where children, young people, pupils, teachers and other adults can daily learn about the urban and rural environments and their interrelationship with plants and animals, the importance of the seasons and the relationship between ail of these.

Agriculture, the domestication of plants and animals, became fully established about 10,000 years ago and with it came an almost universal contact with plants and animals universal, that is, until recently. Two hundred years ago the industrial revolution started in Britain and spread throughout Europe. By the next century it had spread to America and today it has spread out of Europe and North America to Japan and elsewhere. In this short time, a trivial Lime in genetic history, we human beings have separated ourselves in an almost extraordinary way from the care of plants and animals.

People were not attracted to the mill towns of England in the 1700s or to the factories of Europe in the 1800s because they liked city life. Our parents and forefathers were displaced from the countryside into cities because of shifting agricultural patterns and through economic necessity. In the last 200 years Western Europe has changed from a population that was 10% urban to one that is now 90% urban In this relatively short time there has been a radical transformation in our physical relationship with animals and the living environment. Our children have been excluded from contact with and caring for any living things other than our pets.

In the history of mankind there has never been such a large percentage of the population that has spent so little time in physical contact with animals and plants.

With this progressive urbanisation of human kind in the industrialised world, our gardens and our pets have suddenly been thrust into the position of being the most important remaining bond with the natural world, a physiological bond that evolved over countless generations. We cling to pets because nurturing them makes us feel better and contributes to our good health.

In clinging to pets in the way we do, however, we have lost sight of the reason for our behaviour and are destroying their status as animals and making them instead into degraded images of humans, City Farms remind children that animals are not humans in furry disguises, but are unique creatures with unique needs.

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "Compassion is the basis of all morality". Albert Schweitzer said that "A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life". In our relationship with the living world around us these should be the principles that govern our actions.

Our increasing interest in conservation, saving endangered species, saving the forests of Scandinavia and Germany from acid rain or the tropical forests from being cut down for cattle ranching, the growing public determination to control pollutants in the environment, also lead to a desire to come into a closer relationship with animals. This a part of human nature, but our response to this universal feeling will vary according to our cultural traditions. The western tradition in which man had dominion over all of nature has been more readily able than other cultures to evolve into a culture where we are now saying that we have a "responsibility" for all nature. This is, of course, a paternalistic attitude but pragmatically speaking it has allowed western though to evolve to a state today where we are looking with fresh eyes at our relationship with the rest of the animal world. In doing so we are coming to a better appreciation of human nature, and why our seemingly irrational behaviour of keeping pets is not irrational at all. After all, to understand our relationship with the world around us we must first understand ourselves.



What we are creating today, although we might not yet realise that we are doing so, is a profoundly new relationship with the natural world, one in which the social and psychological values of animals, outweigh their material worth. This is the pragmatic driving force of the humane movement. If we teach our children today to respect the world around them, we will help to ensure that a world remains for their children to enjoy. A major vehicle for this process is the local City Farm.

### **City Farm Programmes**

At the City Farm, agriculture and horticulture are practised a relatively small scale, giving opportunities for children, young people and adults to become familiar with the food and natural resource cycle.

All participants are invited to join in City farm activities, which may include: working in the vegetable garden, compost making, lifting potatoes, reaping cereals, hay making, collecting seeds, planting and caring for trees, watering plants, shearing sheep, grooming rabbits, trimming goats feet, milking cows, driving horses in harness, mucking out animal housing. Through these activities participants become more aware and discover the usefulness of their work. By evaluating these activities people are amazed at their own abilities and their relationship with their environment.

By participating in City Farm activities people develop more respect for and understanding of the environment and gain an insight into agricultural techniques. They begin to understand the vulnerability of a farmer's or gardener's trade as well as the impact of their activities on the environment. They learn how much plants are dependent on sun and water and the relationship with the life cycle that powers the world.

The participants begin to understand that if the elementary rules of nature, acquired from sustained experience, are observed, even more, generations will enjoy the resources of nature but if people act in a selfinterested way and take thought for the future, nature may be stifled for many generations to come.

### **The four seasons**

People understand that the weather can play tricks on their planning, especially during the holidays or on weekend excursions. The weather's impact may spoil their enjoyment or cause traffic problems, in its more severe forms gales or snow may cause large scale disruption and damage.

At the City Farm participants are faced with the consequences not only of today's weather, but also of yesterday's and tomorrow's weather. They learn that weather conditions during the four seasons can determine the success or failure of food production and the survival of habitats. They learn that the activities at the City Farm are dictated by the seasons' succession.

Outside of a City Farm urban people seldom get the opportunity to learn about seasonal activities, since imported summer vegetables and other seasonal foods are sold throughout the year and food processing for the lean winters is no longer required.

For many centuries the seasons determined all human activity. This is no longer true and, as a result, people have become less familiar with natural cycles. City Farms provide practical experience and answers every day.

### **Domestic animals**

When people first developed into an agricultural community they succeeded in domesticating certain wild animals in order to take advantage of them for their own benefit: the dog as sheep dog or as watchdog, the nannygoat for milk, the sheep for wool to make clothes, the pigeon as a messenger, pigs and cattle for meat, the horse for its strength and speed, poultry for meat or eggs, the bee for honey. At City Farms goats and cows are milked, sheep are sheared and the wool is spun, in the hen house eggs are collected; the horse or the donkey draws the tiltcart and, at Christmas, homegrown poultry is eaten.



## Preparing and eating the produce

At some city Farms the grain is sown, grown and harvested, then threshed, milled, sifted and the flour is used to bake bread or mixed with eggs and made into delicious pasta. Products from the garden are used to make soup or simply a potaubeu ; fruit is made into jam or apples from the orchard are made into delicious cider or apple juice. Old laying hens are killed in order to make an excellent Ghent chicken casserole, or maybe a french volauvent. The children can see that animals are bred for meat and have to be killed. For some it is the first time they have ever peeled potatoes, for at home they may be used to readyprepared food, cooked in the microwave oven.

## Alienation from agriculture

The distributive food chains have succeeded in selling the chicken in kit form: do you want a leg, a wing or some breast? What child in a supermarket can know whether a chicken has two or four feet?

Not that long ago there was a farm in each street of any village, and every town dweller had an uncle or aunt who was a farmer or market gardener. They visited the farm at least once a year and received some of the many fruits from the land. Children could romp in the hay barn or join the farmer in the field. Nowadays even rural children are unlikely to have these experiences. There are now very few farmers who keep a variety of domestic animals, or who churn butter or sell cheese.

The cost of living, specialisation, competition, agricultural aid and advice have encouraged many farmers to run their farms as monoculture businesses. Here the public cannot freely enter without harming the business or perhaps placing themselves in a dangerous environment. City Farms provide an opportunity for open access, a meeting place for young and old, where a parent may taste a selfmade wine, where teachers can show their pupils that respect for the environment is a necessity, and where children can come into physical contact with the rabbits in the orchard, the calves in the farmyard and the sheep in the field.

Agriculture as an industry has tried to put over its case to the consumer, but it has failed to distinguish between large scale agribusiness monoculture and the more sustainable, or at least adaptable, practises of the majority of farmers. This has led to a commonly held public view that:

- agriculture pollutes
- agriculture wastes tax payers money
- agriculture produces too much
- agriculture destroys the environment

This has led to a fundamental questioning of the direction taken so far by much of european agriculture. Out of necessity much more serious attention is being given to sustainable forms of food production and land management. City Farms have a major contribution to make to this process, and in fact were in the forefront of raising these issues.

## Raising the issues

City Farms are a world-wide phenomenon. In Europe they have taken a variety of forms, with different emphases in different countries:

- "Fermes d'Animation" say that people ought to get reacquainted with domestic animals, as all follows automatically afterwards;
- "Jugendfarmen" want young people to experience the living environment as naturally as possible;
- "City Farms" arose from the people's wish to do something about their local environment through their own initiative;
- "Gezinsboerderijen" try to solve the problem of the alienation of young people and adults by involving them in the world of nature and agricultural activities;



- "4 H" in Scandinavia was formed by farmers worried that people were growing up without an understanding of the natural cycles and agriculture's role within them.

The common strand which unites them is the need to reestablish the lost link between urban people and the natural cycles necessary for sustainable development.

### **Environmental resource**

People feel at home on a City Farm it is a meeting place and a hothouse of ideas for local residents, nature lovers, schools, gardeners, pigeon fanciers, beekeepers, small stock keepers, people passionately fond of energy saving, naturalists, makers of homemade cheese, artists and performers, poultry keepers, foresters, hurdle makers, youth workers, amateur oyster mushroom growers, ecologists, blacksmiths, educationalists, recyclers and many more.

The City Farm facilitates them to get together, exchange ideas and experiences, organise courses and learn new skills. On the City Farm one may find people experiencing mushroom culture, wine making, sauerkraut courses, learning a craft, building solar panels, propagating plants and trees, protecting rare breeds of domestic animals, conservation of habitats, sustainable farming, biological gardening, recycling paper into durable materials and much more. The City Farm reaches many people from all walks of life and, in turn, facilitates them to develop more respect for nature and the natural environment.

### **Conservation**

City Farms are valued by all nature loving associations. Derelict land has been brought back to life, hedges have been planted, orchards laid out, ponds created, plantations restored, habitats protected, woodlands managed, interpretation provided. City Farms have also succeeded in creating botanical gardens, restoring water systems and canals and pollarding willows in order to restore former biotopes. Many nature loving associations appreciate these activities and have close relationships with City Farms.

During the "Third Flemish Scientific Conference on Open Space Planning", Paul Strykers (CVN) asserted that City Farms are the ideal infrastructure for nature and environmental education.

### **Reuse, repair and recycling**

At all City Farms, children are confronted daily with reuse, repair and recycling. Animal manure and vegetable scraps are composted to serve as vegetable humus to feed the land. Kitchen waste is fed to animals. Reclaimed timber is used for making nestingboxes and chicken arks. Honey jars are cleaned and reused to stock the new harvest. Milk is sold in reusable bottles. In the home and at City Farms one usually finds several kinds of waste that cannot be immediately reused or recycled on the Farm, the participants therefore learn to sort out waste, to minimise waste and to reduce pollution.

### **A symbiotic relationship**

At a City Farm each participant learns that there is a close relationship between people, animals and plants, the wider environment and their responsibility for them. At the City Farm an ecological equilibrium is maintained. Getting acquainted with natural cycles and rules and working with them is enriching for everybody, and awakens people to the fact that there are also natural systems where an inappropriate human activity may disturb the symbiosis for a long time.

The aim of the European Federation of City Farms is to facilitate children, young people and adults to cooperate in a wide range of environmental educational activities.

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Marc de Staercke, 1989