

Taking farming back to basics

By: **FREDA R. SAVANA** (Sun, Apr/01/2007)

Raanan Katzir spent two weeks at Delaware Valley College hoping to inspire and inform students about an increasingly popular method of farming that emphasizes conservation and fewer pesticides.

The agricultural expert travels the world educating governments, farmers and journalists about the practice known as sustainable agriculture after spending 40 years with Israel's ministry of agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture, sometimes known as agro-ecology, promotes better land management and the use of biological controls including insects considered beneficial because they kill off plant-destroying bugs but don't harm the environment.

"Sustainable farming seeks to minimize anything that has to be put in the ground to aid crops," said Brian Snyder, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, based in Centre County.

The sustainable agriculture movement has grown over the past decade because of the increasing need to curb pollution, improve the quality of food and return farming to a more natural state.

Although the practice is relatively new, it emphasizes traditional farming methods.

Farmers used to work the land, growing crops that supported their families and their communities with little assistance from chemicals and other pesticides. But agriculture has changed dramatically in the past 50 or 60 years, moving away from family-owned farms to vast, highly mechanized farm complexes that maximize production.

New technology has benefited the industry in many ways, but agricultural experts including Katzir say not all the changes have been positive.

"As farmers applied more and more pesticides, pests became more resistant," he explained during an interview at the small, private college. "In many ways farmers were destroying agriculture. It was not a good solution."

In dozens of countries, especially those that are poor and developing, Katzir said sustainable agriculture focuses on managing minimal resources, especially water.

Working in Israel, Katzir said the country has made much progress in transforming the desert into fertile ground. It has successfully produced flowers, vegetables and fruits during the winter for an appreciative European market, he said.

"We've have excellent agriculture in the sand dunes too, growing avacadoes and mangos."

During his visit to Delaware Valley, his third to the college, Katzir lectured on Israel's approach to

sustainable farming, food security around the world and water resources.

Katzir developed his relationship with the school after meeting its former president, Joshua Feldstein, in Israel.

Barabara Muse, chairwoman of the college's Agronomy and Environmental Science Department, said Katzir brings a great deal of expertise to the students.

"Besides his vast knowledge of sustainable agriculture, he offers a global perspective," she said.

Katzir said it is crucial for agricultural students to understand the need for applying a sustainable approach to farming.

"The solution will be for younger generations to be more knowledgeable."

The matter is a simple one for Snyder. The growth in the farming movement is driven by the need for quality food at a reasonable price, produced closer to where people live, he said.

"The strategy is based on every country being able to feed itself."

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