**Michael R. Baldwin**

**Beyond the Classroom**

**PLNT 4790: Karibu Kenya; Culture and Agriculture in Kenya**

I am not so sure what exactly my expectations were taking this trip, but my experiences in Kenya could be easily described as life changing. Kenya was an eye opener. I believe that now more than ever I have a greater appreciation for the things so common in our society that like many others, I seem to have taken for granted. Clean water, power, and waste disposal are services that we expect to have in the U.S., I now perceive them to be luxuries rather than a standard of living. I feel quite fortunate that I have been afforded so many opportunities in my life, and going to Kenya was one of my greatest experiences to date.

The most beneficial aspect of this course was the exposure to social issues associated with agricultural production systems in Kenya. By touring large scale operations we observed some of the usual negative environmental and social implications that one would associate with conventional agricultural systems; and through meeting with NGOs we were also made aware that there is a strong movement to promote sustainable agricultural development in Kenya. Seeing the positive and negative aspects associated with agriculture in a developing nation first hand has given me an understanding of issues that I would not have were they solely presented to me in a lecture or taken from a book.

During an afternoon spent touring a tea processing facility and one of the local tea plantations in Kericho, we were introduced to some of the negative implications of “Fair Trade” certification. To maintain compliance with the requirements of Fair Trade certification, the tea plantation began purchasing equipment to mechanize the tea harvest. The motivation to mechanize was driven by the minimum wage requirements of Fair Trade certification. Instead of maintaining all of their employees and paying them the required wage, the decision was made to purchase harvesting equipment capable of replacing employees thereby reducing operating costs. This same operation also claimed that their production system was sustainable. The basis for this claim lie in an agro-forestry component incorporated in their system to satisfy energy demands by raising eucalyptus trees for fuel. By my observation, I would suggest that the production techniques employed by this tea plantation are actually antithetical to the concept of sustainability. Vast acreage was either planted with tea or eucalyptus creating expansive areas of monoculture. In addition the sections of eucalyptus were not selectively harvested, they were clear cut producing areas susceptible to erosion until the area was replanted, and when replanted the same tree species was used. There seemed to be no attempt onsite to nurture a system that promoted healthy ecological interactions, and when complicated by the employee wage issues it makes me wonder what exactly is Fair Trade certification really worth? In this instance it seems as if Fair Trade has actually perpetuated a system contrary to the original intent of the social movement.

Throughout our stay in Kenya we met with multiple non-government organizations focused on promoting sustainable agricultural and socioeconomic development. Some groups were primarily focused on crop production techniques that utilized available renewable resources, and others incorporated in their practices the teaching of specialized skills to community members to boost their ability to become self sufficient. These groups are truly outstanding having a common mission of empowering the people of Kenya by offering communities education. In a country where food security is a big issue, it is nice to see that there are many community oriented organizations striving to alleviate poverty and hunger issues. In time, I became aware that many of the organizations we met with were established by graduates of one of the facilities we visited, Manor House Agricultural Centre. At Manor House we were given the opportunity to do some hands on work building compost piles and preparing beds for planting. As well, during our time at Manor House we were able to see that the facility is a model of sustainability. Along with teaching students about sustainable theory and technologies, the facility actually employed many of the practices, like collecting rain for water and harvesting bio-gas from animal waste for fuel.

Established in 1984, Manor House Agricultural Centre has strived to promote sustainable development in Kenya through farmer trainings, community outreach activities, and agricultural research. Manor House has developed three-month, and two-year post secondary education certificate programs in Bio-Intensive Agriculture which could be considered comparable to American organic standards. I perceive Manor House to be an incredible asset to the people of Kenya. As an educational institution this facility goes beyond the norm of training students in the classroom, and has created a sociologically invaluable program. Through the Manor House curriculum students receive an education that is divided between the classroom and practical hands on application of learned theory. In addition, it is a requirement of the Manor House program that students are active in the community, they must work for a period with NGOs and assist in community training seminars. I believe that due to the structure of the Manor House program there is a great propensity for its graduates to continue community oriented services that spread knowledge of sustainable practices.

My experience in Kenya has rejuvenated my interest in agriculture based community services. The knowledge I have gained through my coursework at the University of Wyoming has been greatly complemented by this trip to Kenya. Visiting facilities like Manor House Agricultural Centre shows that there is hope for a sustainable future; this thought can be supported by the number of graduates that have gone on to establish their own organizations assisting communities with sustainable development. I feel that this course was incredibly beneficial, expanding my knowledge and awareness of social issues in sustainability on an international level.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the donors facilitating the Beyond the Classroom program. I will never forget the incredible experience of traveling to Kenya, and were it not for the financial assistance I received, I would not have been able to participate in this life changing course. Aiding individuals in their academic endeavors is truly a noble action, and I greatly appreciate the assistance I received.

Thank you,

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