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We Can Feed the World. Here's How.

By Norman Borlaug

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Thirty-two years ago, I was chosen to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, representing the thousands of researchers who created the higher crop yields of the Green Revolution. The extra food created saved perhaps a billion people from starving in the 1960s.

Today, we are faced with another, equally enormous task. We must learn to produce nearly three times as much food for the more populous and more prosperous world of 2050, and from the farmland we are already using, in order to save the planet's wildlands. That's why I am one of the signers of a new declaration in support of protecting nature with high-yield farming and forestry. (Co-signatories include former Sen. George McGovern and Per Pinstrup-Andersen, the winner of the 2001 World Food Prize.)

The high yields of the Green Revolution also had a dramatic conservation effect: saving millions of acres of wildlands all over the Third World from being cleared for more low-yield crops. If the world were still getting the low crop and livestock yields of 1950, at least half of today's 16 million square miles of global forest would already have been plowed down, and the rest would be scheduled for destruction in the next three decades. Mexico, where I have done much of my high-yield research, is nevertheless losing nearly 3 million acres of forest per year to the expansion of peasant farms.

There are people telling us not to raise the yields. Some of them say that modern food is not as healthy as yesterday's, though science can find no lack of nutrients and, all over the world, the people eating modern crops are growing taller and living longer. There are some who still fear that more food encourages population growth, though food security has helped bring Third World fertility rates 80% of the way to stability.

Some of the naysayers claim that modern, intensive farming is risking the world's biodiversity. However, they apparently think it's more important to save man-made biodiversity, such as antique farmers' varieties, than to save the rich web of unique species characteristic of a wild forest. We can save the farmers' old varieties through gene banks and small-scale gene farms, without locking up half of the planet's arable land as a low-yield gene museum.

I've spent the past 20 years trying to bring the Green Revolution to Africa -- where the farmers use traditional seeds and the organic farming systems that some call "sustainable." But low-yield farming is only sustainable for people with high death rates, and thanks to better medical care, more babies are surviving.

The International Food Policy Research Institute recently projected that Africa is a "building catastrophe." African farms are currently locked in a downward spiral, in which the traditional bush fallow periods are shortened from 15 or 20 years to as little as two or three -- which means crop yields are declining, soil nutrients are depleted, and still more land must be planted every year to feed the people.

Africa desperately needs the simple, effective high-yield farming systems that have made the First World's food supply safe and secure, and kept its wild species from extinction: chemical fertilizers, improved seeds bred for local conditions, and integrated pest management (with pesticides). Without those basics, Africa is likely to see tens of millions more undernourished children by 2020 -- even after it clears a whole Texas worth of wildlife habitat for additional cropland. Yet the funding for the Future Harvest agricultural research network that serves the whole Third World is only about \$300 million per year.

If America were losing wildlands equal to the size of Texas, we'd believe it was an urgent problem. We'd demand an increase in agricultural research and a crash program to get new technology to farms. If millions of U.S. children were starving for the simple lack of good seeds and fertilizers, the government would fall.

The declaration that I, and others, have signed does not endorse any particular technology or farming system. It simply notes that if the world is to avoid a Hobson's choice between starving children and extinct wildlife species, the first-order priority is higher yields on the land we already farm.

Mr. Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize, teaches high-yield farming systems under the sponsorship of the Sasakawa-