The Happy Farm

Plum Village: Integrating mindfulness into farming and promoting healing through nature connection | France

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Mindful farming is cultivating more than just crops. The Happy Farm project at Plum Village, inspired by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, merges mindfulness with sustainable and ethical food production, creating a harmonious blend of productivity, environmental care, and personal happiness.

BACKGROUND

Plum Village, established in 1982 by Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay), is the largest Buddhist monastery in Europe, with 200 monks and nuns. The Happy Farm project is a realization of Thay's dream to integrate mindfulness into daily life and healing through nature. Located in South-West France, the agroecology farm spans 3 plots of organic cultivation, promoting regenerative and organic practices. Volunteers practice mindfulness while working, experiencing the deep connection between nature and human effort.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The Happy Farm at Upper Hamlet was founded in 2013, in the pursuit of producing seasonal, organic vegetables within Plum Village for the long-term sustainability and food security of the community. There is approximately 1 acre of land in cultivation, with more than 70 beds and a large polytunnel greenhouse. Each year, fruit and nut trees are planted within an emerging food forest.

The Happy Farm at Upper Hamlet produces around 10,000kg of organic produce annually, and offers the opportunity for 300 children and 500 young adults to mindfully get their hands dirty on the land, through gatherings such as the Summer Family Retreat and the Wake Up Earth Retreat.

The Happy Farm at Lower Hamlet was founded in 2016, where it is tended to by the nuns and laypersons of the Plum Village Lower Hamlet. A wide variety of seasonal vegetables are grown here, which is all offered to the Lower Hamlet Sangha. In its first year, The Happy Farm at Lower Hamlet produced 1,000kg of organic produce.

CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The Happy Farm project emphasizes mindfulness in every aspect of farming. Cultivating the land, harvesting, and observing nature's rhythms are seen as practices of understanding, love, and mindfulness. The farm serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all life and encourages gratitude and reverence for the Earth. The practice of mindfulness in farming is seen as a path to personal healing and transformation. Mindful farming includes working in silence for periods of the day, using the breath to anchor into the present moment, and using a bell to unite together in the sensation of listening. Each workday begins with a short sitting meditation, followed by a round of check-ins to promote connection and presence among the volunteers.

In the mornings, farm work is done in silence to create a work environment in which volunteers can be in deep contact with the natural world and stay connected to their breath and their senses. The sound of the bell is used as an opportunity throughout the day to re-connect volunteers with the present moment by interrupting the habitual flow of internal thinking and chatter. The sound invites volunteers to bring mind and body together with the nature all around. Volunteers also unite with one another through song and through sharing circles. These practices are consciously cultivated by creating intentional moments throughout the working schedule—through tea breaks and moments for walking meditation.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

By farming with mindfulness and observing the rhythms of nature at The Happy Farm, participants cultivate an intimate connection with the planet as a living, breathing being. This connection provokes reverence and gratitude, which in turn catalyses healing and transformation within the self and for the Earth.

The Happy Farm is not just a place for farming but also a community where individuals live and practice together. It fosters brotherhood and sisterhood among its members, who share living spaces and practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Six Harmonies. The morning circles, shared work, and living together all create a deep connection between members at the farm. The Lower and Upper Hamlet Happy Farm have established an intricate and mutually beneficial relationship, through the practice of work exchanges which ensure the sharing of knowledge and joy.

The interconnection of mindfulness with farming is underpinned by the teachings of Thich Naht Hanh, who taught that when we sow seeds, cultivate land or water plans, we can be happy right in the present moment. The quality of the harvest depends on our peace and our happiness.

Therefore, the quality of our being, our peace and our freedom are crucial to the practice of happy farming. The Happy Farm believes that adopting human-scaled agricultural technology is crucial for sustainability. However, it also recognizes that achieving sustainability is a spiritual challenge. By practicing mindfulness and slowing down, individuals can identify their true needs and reduce wasteful consumption. The farm serves as a training ground for holistic sustainability practice and ffers educational opportunities to explore living in close community and reconnecting with nature.

The Happy Farm's method of growing organic food is based on classical organic farming methods and permaculture elements. The farm practices agroecology, where food production is not more important than caring for and enhancing the land's ecology. The farm nourishes the soil and grows food organically through natural soil amendments, crop rotation, green manure, no-dig methods, mulching, and companion planting.

Finally, they are now in their 11th year on the Upper Hamlet Farm and 8th year in Lower Hamlet. Together, these farms have over 100 agroecological graduates from the one year programmes. Those who join the programmes are trained in mindfulness-based approaches in the tradition of Plum Village. Plum Village has trained over 200 volunteers in the same tradition as part of the Summer Volunteer programmes, has hosted retreats for 11 years and has welcomed over a thousand guests to practice mindfulness mixed with agroecology and nature connection since 2013.

LEARNINGS

The Happy Farm project faced challenges such as team continuity and time management. Despite establishing paid facilitators and managers, the fluctuating composition of the team presented distinct difficulties. Additionally, balancing the 20-hour weekly commitment to farm operations with the center's schedule and mindfulness practice required efficient management, given the extensive tasks associated with food production.

Key lessons learned include the importance of integrating mindfulness into farming to promote personal and environmental well-being and the value of community building through shared practices and living spaces, fostering deep connections and a sense of belonging. Looking ahead, there are significant opportunities to scale up by expanding educational programs and retreats, thus promoting mindfulness and sustainable farming practices on a broader scale.