



preserving vegetal diversity

project proposal by regis lemlerthe
man and humanity master thesis
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provisional title

save our seeds

research question

How to address the loss of vegetal diversity, actually happening in every society due to a seemingly unavoidable and necessary economical development ?

keywords

agriculture, consumption, environment, genetic diversity, politics, social diversity.

relevance of the question

Biodiversity is a genuinely fundamental consideration, impacting not only environmental sustainability but basic needs - and rights - such as nutrition and habitat quality; it also affects social diversity, traditional knowledge, people's autonomy and self-subsistence. Many populations are still highly dependant on agriculture indeed, while corporate-issued legislation constantly dwindles the gap between this primordial activity, developed through centuries of empirical evolution, and other recent, science-based technologies.

This situation is currently leading to a ethical but mostly technological redefinition of life, as living organisms are being made patentable discoveries. Indigenous culture are suffering the same troubles since community-based skills are being owned by individual "discoverers", depriving the firsts of any right on their own culture.

The conservation of vegetal diversity also regards our ability to overcome future threats such as parasites, actually brought closer to us by the extensive and almost monopolistic culture of a few, highly productive varieties of plants - corn, wheat, rice, soya. Increasing diversity, on the contrary, would make plants aggressions less likely to turn into pandemic fleas. This is of such an importance that seed banks are being created all over the globe to prevent these risks. This genetic diversity they aim to protect is also the vector of primordial information for future discoveries in both agronomical and medical fields; it is considered that most disappearing species today might find application in medicine.

Biodiversity influences, even shapes, consumer cultures. The ingredients that are available in our shops are determining of our way of eating, thus our perception of the world's diversity. Though this issue might seem more trivial than the ones before, it also represent an incredible opportunity for design to raise awareness toward the common need for diversity. When it is obvious that the main issues regarding the problematic are of a political nature, designing could succesfully lead to the introduction of the topic on scene of the social concerns, thus giving a chance to make it grow into a problem claiming for political involvement.

current debates about the subject

Patents : a political and economical issue

On the one hand, the political nature of the issue makes that the debate mainly confront legal and ethical perceptions of the world; while in principle no one would deny the right of every human to eat, drink and breathe without running any danger, or one's right to freely use one's own culture, such basic rights are conditioned to governmental, international and corporate regulations. The basic right to health care gets stucked against patents systems destined to protect innovation, thus encourageing research and development of future medicines. This of having enough to eat conflictly meets with the pretention of agronomic industries to finance their engineered seeds. Finally, the very right to use what should be considered as a commonly-build knowledge or technique by the very population who developed it is being stepped over by companies who patented that knowledge during colonization, making it theirs, thus asking for license fees to be paid by whoever would use it. Even their creators.

A strong controversy is being held about the supposed efficiency of Intellectual Property Rights in stimulating invention. As the situation transformed since this system was created from a freelance inventor that needs to get the benefit out of his creation to a corporate inventor who receives a salary for his work and making it property of the mother company, it is considered by many economists that patents nowadays protect - and therefore stimulate - the distribution process rather than invention. It is also being pointed out that some companies patent invention with the only goal to make it non-available. Finally, there is no need to be an expert to notice that creativity has always existed, even in the absence of a patent system.

Consumption and individual creativity

The consuming issue, finally, exposes itself to the debate. In times of constantly harmonizing consumption pattern, the demand for original products makes itself more obvious. Forgotten food comes back in local shops first, under the encouragements of quality defenders and producers, and since recently appears in bigger supermarkets. Still, the evolution remains confidential, and although few people thinks about criticizing that return to original tastes, the homogeneization of consumption seems to be the main option.



Generating specific tools for my researches was a way to make them both personal and understandable for other people.

methods and methodologies

The period I assigned to getting a global understanding is over, I believe successfully enough; I now feel familiar with the topic. I highlighted during my researches different potential approaches I could consider as a designer; design for debate, pedagogic tools, experience design, practical action and communication. I illustrated each of them by a demonstration project; I am now considering the genuine interest and feasibility of these projects as starting points for a new direction. This process of focusing happens inevitably yet gradually.

Contacting experts

To do so, I find of the highest importance to be able to communicate with experts that can help validating or disproving options. Therefore I set up a weblog, on which my latest researches, discoveries and essays can be found and discussed.

This also target school mentors, as I believe being able to show my personal state of the art will enable further talking during the actual meeting.

Thesis writing

I would like the thesis to be a report of my evolution, thus starting from a broad presentation of the topic dedicated to provide global understanding, and gradually focusing on a small amount of potential projects, explaining what is the selection process I will go through, to finally tell about the final project and its implementation.

I want as much as possible to use visual mediums in order to carry the message; I am therefore trying to make my own photographs and diagrams.



Clockwise. Which plants do one have to use to cook a black soup ? How can we protect and respect traditional knowledge ? Handmade soap, could the craftsman also grow the ingredients ? How can one learn suitable gardening techniques ?

relationship research / design

I am currently looking for turning my researches into real design projects. Therefore I am trying to evaluate the potential interest of the concepts mentioned before as starting points.

Experience design, cook book

I am interested in the way new habits can be implemented without any efforts, simply by generating original experiences. I could investigate more starting from the idea of creating a recipe book that focuses on aesthetic rather than taste, but also on different parameters (riddim, sound... what tools can allow this selection ?)

Potential collaborators : Marije Vogelzang, cooks, botanists.

Communication and politics, prior story

I believe in the idea that disclosing traditional techniques will make them harder to patent illegitimately. There is a whole system to set up in order to achieve this goal. It is also important to have the information available to final consumers, so that a link can exist. We considered together with Aldo to focus on one country, so I decided to investigate Madagascar's diversity. The choice comes from the fact that 80% of species are endemic of the territory.

Potential collaborators : fair trade, Malagasy botanist, wikipatent.

Individual creativity, growing materials

Given the rise of interest for personalization, it could be of interest for individuals to process not only their own objects but the materials that they need. Researching about vegetal material is something I have a background in, but I am afraid that no one actually wants to take time to grow its own artefacts. I am currently considering this question to evaluate how worth is the project.

Potential collaborators : nature stores, craftsmen, materialtheques.

Pedagogic tool, crop rotation

Working on Frans "user I love you" assignment, I am considering the need for gardeners to learn/teach about crop rotation. This is only focusing on one technique, but I could extend it to the more global issue of learning techniques about plants.

Potential collaborators : gardeners, farmers, botanic stores.

network of experts

I asked experts if they would agree to stay in touch with me all along the year, first giving me their personal opinion about my venture and sharing their experiences, and later reacting on my discoveries, answering practical questions...

Experts who already replied :

De l'autre côté du pont, restaurant proposing local products
Dom Marsh, British Permaculture Association office coordinator
Debra Solomon, webmaster of culiblog
Fred, contact from the organization FredoBio (promoting organic agriculture & seed conservation in association with kokopelli)
Genneper Hoeve (organic farm in Eindhoven)
Greg, urban farmer in Tucson
Groen Gennep Volkstuin (community garden in Eindhoven)
Hervé Le Meur, coordinator of the organization OGM danger
Ikechi Mgbeoji, writer of the recent book Global Biopiracy
Jennie Love, founder and webmaster of straightfromthefarm website
Jonathan Zilberg, cultural anthropologist working in Indonesia.
Nancy scola, reporter-writer
Philip Sterck, Responsible of BioPlanet organic stores
Suprabha Seshan, director of the Narayana Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary (she will be able to answer later in the year)

Experts who did not answer :

I think the list would be too long, I can say that I need to contact more people that could help me in my researches about cooking : cooks (A friend of mine owns an organic / original tastes / vegetarian restaurant in Lyon, but also famous chefs ?)
About those who didn't reply and I'd like to ask again : Vandana Shiva, the kokopelli organization.

research planning

main goals

29/10, mid term.

Presentation of the main issues, how they are linked, my global understanding

second half of first trimester.

Evaluation of projects validity and feasibility.

Selection of one main project to continue during the year.

Start thesis writing.

first half of second trimester.

Developing selected design project, design, probing, opportunities for implementation.

Building a specific network around the project.

If thought sound, develop small projects in parallel, that will help building the network as well.

second half of second trimester.

Looking to implement further the project, evaluation.

Finalizing system design.

first half of third trimester

Finalizing product design, prototyping.

Implementation of the project.

second half of third trimester

Considering project communication, presentation.

further developments

Continue the project, get feedback.

Develop further parallel projects if interesting.

detail of the second half of first trimester

november.

workshops in Groen Gennep Volkstuinvereniging (community garden)*

probes with children in the Genneper park. related to gardening*

24/11.

meeting with Mr Philip Sterck, responsible of BioPlanet (organic stores)

17/12, final term.

results from User I love you project*, presentation of a selected project, and arguments for this choice.

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legal texts

OMC's Accords sur les aspects des Droits de Propriété Intellectuelle qui touchent au Commerce (ADPIC)

WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)

GATT's Uruguay Round

Union pour la Protection des Obtentions Végétales (UPOV) convention

Universal Declaration of the rights of indigenous people (UNO)

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) chart

Plant Variety Protection Act (PVPA)

websites

all websites are linked to in the weblog saveourseeds.wordpress.com



Thank you for reading

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