

Ben Bromley

HOME GROWN Book shows how area people are making money while protecting Mother Earth

By Ben Bromley

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It may appear they're merely building chairs or making cheese or feeding hogs. But look a little more closely: They're changing our culture.

Entrepreneurs, artists and volunteers are working to strengthen communities and protect Mother Earth by creating sustainable rural economies. They're demonstrating that there's money in creating products without hurting the planet. Their efforts are heralded in a recently published book, "Renewing the Countryside—Wisconsin."

South central Wisconsin is well-represented in the book. The Ice Age Trail, which winds through Columbia, Juneau, Marquette and Sauk counties, is featured. So is the Fall Art Tour, an annual highlight in Baraboo and Spring Green. Three Sauk County businesses — Cedar Grove Cheese in Plain, Baraboo Valley Windsor Chairs in Rock Springs and Willow Creek Farm in Loganville — get attention, as does the Wormfarm Institute in Reedsburg.

They are disparate entities with a common goal: Connecting consumers with the land through the products they buy. "Food is the way in, to understand how the world works," said Donna Neuwirth, who with Jay Salinas created Wormfarm in 2000. They give visiting artists room and board at their 40-acre farm in exchange for garden labor. Suddenly urban artists gain appreciation for the patience and skill it takes to grow food, as opposed to the instant gratification on display at the grocery store. Same goes for Chicago kids who visit the farm on weekends with parents who are part of Wormfarm's food co-op.

"That kind of education has a ripple effect that people seem to recognize," Neuwirth said. "There are enormous values to being involved in how everything connects."

There's also money in going "green." David Ogren runs Baraboo Valley Windsor Chairs, selling handmade 18th century-style chairs for hundreds of dollars each. He works full-time out of a barn-turned-workshop, turning scavenged wood into chairs with hand tools and skill. Most of his orders arrive online.

“When a storm goes through, I drive around looking for big trees that might have come down,” Ogren said with a smile. “I hate to see so many trees get chopped up and burned.”

Spring Green jewelry maker Maya Madden said top-notch craftsmanship and expert marketing allow professional artists to thrive in the country. The Fall Art Tour, which she helps organize, has been a boon. “People can live in rural areas and still make a living,” Madden said.

Spurring action

Lisa Kivrist, one of the book’s authors, said each entity featured in the book represent dozens more. “The stories in the book are meant to be examples of all the great things going on in the state,” she said. “There’s a lot of great things happening in your region.”

“I just think it’s wonderful that there’s such a wide variety of people doing interesting things in the country,” Neuwirth said. “It’s amazing how many of us didn’t know about each other.”

Renewing the Countryside is a Minnesota-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting rural revitalization. Similar books have been published about other states.

The organization’s goal is to trigger inspiration and appreciation by illustrating how people make a difference in their daily lives. “Wisconsin has been known for visionary people, and this book really showcases that,” Kivrist said. “If these stories can motivate people to action in their community, that would be the greatest end result.”

‘Green’ isn’t just for hippies anymore

Organic farms and community co-ops might have been considered a bit left-of-center 20 years ago, but sustainability has gone mainstream. Going green isn’t just for hippies anymore. Neuwirth said Wormfarm’s food co-op is supported by doctors, architects and teachers. These aren’t slackers who sit around stroking their beards while listening to the Grateful Dead. “We have the occasional ponytail,” Neuwirth conceded.

“Shop local” efforts continue to gain steam as rising gas prices make transportation of goods increasingly costly. Shopping locally requires some extra effort from the consumer, but it’s an investment that pays off long-term. “It’s very timely right now for people to pay attention and buy locally to create sustainable rural economies,” Neuwirth said.

Madden said customers at her Spring Green gallery are increasingly aware of the importance of supporting the local economy. “You know where your money is going,” Madden said. “I think there’s a lot of people that don’t want to see any more money going to China. It’s getting harder to find things that are made in this country, let alone handmade.”

One of the reasons Ogren left a career in chemistry to start making chairs was that he wanted

his work to result in a non-disposable finished product. Today he turns abandoned basswood and hickory into chairs built to last generations. “I like the fact that they are one of the most sustainable things I could do,” Ogren said. “Hopefully my carbon footprint is fairly small.”

Getting involved

How can you join in changing our culture for the better? Neuwirth suggests a simple first step: “Everyone should plant a garden.” A gardener acquires patience and an appreciation for the effort that goes into creating food. Gardeners value the land because they depend upon it.

“Once you immerse yourself in those processes,” Neuwirth said, “you see how you spend your money and what you eat makes a difference.”

Buy the book

“Renewing the Countryside—Wisconsin” is available at the Village Booksmith in downtown Baraboo and at No Rules Gallery in Spring Green. It’s also available from the publisher, University of Wisconsin Press, by calling (800) 621-2736 or online at <http://www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress>