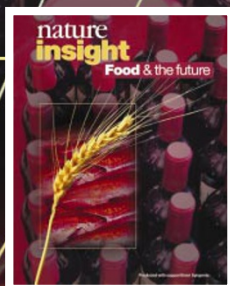


nature insight

Food & the future



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Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, genetically modified (GM) crop plants, antibiotics and hormones in animal feed, the impact of agriculture on biodiversity, fast food and globalization, famine in Africa — food is news. One strand unites these issues, and it can be summarized in one word: ‘sustainability’. The world’s population continues to grow, yet resources are finite. Our mission is to squeeze more crops from the same patch of ground, while preserving that patch in a state fit to pass on to further hungry generations. The quest for sustainability is the theme of this Insight.

We have been here before. After the Second World War, the application of science created a range of high-yield crops, averting worldwide famine. Half a century on, this Green Revolution is played out and the world needs yet greater ingenuity to feed itself. Once again, science is at the sharp end. In the West, especially in crowded Europe, public debate has focused on GM crops. These offer one of many ways to feed the world in the coming decades, and it would be wrong to concentrate on GM crops to the exclusion of other issues that affect the future of food production, such as water availability, intelligent land use, waste management and climate change.

Not that we should ignore concerns about the environmental impact of GM crops (see, for example, the June 2002 issue of *Nature Biotechnology*). However, as this collection illustrates, GM crops form only one item in a picture of agriculture shaped by a wider, historical perspective. Farming has shaped the world, and ourselves, for more than ten millennia. The decisions we make now could affect humanity for millennia to come.

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