

“Stewarding Sustainable Relationships Between Rural Midwestern Communities and the Soil in the Era of Climate Change”
Sheldon, Illinois, USA | The Unceded Homelands of the Kiikaapoi, Peoria, Kaskaskia, Bodéwadmiakiwen, Myaamia, and Očhéthi Sakówinj Peoples
Brandeis University
Daniel Block, USA, Brandeis University

Project Summary

High rates of soil erosion, largely resulting from industrial farming practices, strips us of one of our greatest defenses against the destruction brought on by climate change with its impacts on the global food supply, availability of drinking water, and biodiversity ([Pimentel and Burgess, 2013](#)). The soil crisis poses a clear threat to peace in the era of climate change, because as soil becomes less available, so too do the valuable ecosystem services which it provides, leading to possible civil strife and violence ([Rattan, 2015](#)). This project provides a model for community building and soil regeneration in farming communities throughout the rural Midwest. With Project for Peace funding, I propose to research, purchase, and plant perennial crops that provide nutrients and spur microbial life in the soil; engage in dialogues with conventional farmers from across Illinois to share knowledge and sow seeds as a community; and host planting “field days” to provide actionable resources to farmers on the matter of soil restoration.

Who Is Involved and Where?

This project will take place at Zumwalt Acres (ZA), a family farm in Sheldon, Illinois, that has been passed down to the sixth generation of Zumwalts. This family empowers their apprentices to implement impactful, community-oriented, and regenerative projects on the farm. As a member of the summer 2022 cohort and a returning apprentice for this coming summer, I am already familiar with the tight-knit Iroquois County community, as well as the ZA personnel. This project will heavily rely on the horticultural knowledge of ZA’s farm manager and fifth generation steward of the land, JR Zumwalt. Because ZA does not own large scale equipment to plant many perennial crops at a time, I will depend on John Zumwalt, a neighboring farmer, and his equipment. For purchasing the perennials and acquiring specific information on plant health should/when things go awry, I will contact Dan Cahoe, a local shrubbery owner and friend of ZA. The produce will be sold to Marty Travis of Down at the Farms, a farmer-to-market delivery service, and donated to the Sheldon food pantry which serves food insecure community members. I will involve community members like Yamei Rohlf, who organizes the Watseka farmers market and advocates for healthy food in rural areas; Lucas Allen, who works for Future Farmers of America (FFA) of Illinois; and Mayor John Allhands of the neighboring town of Watseka, a supporter of sustainable agriculture. I will also contact Katie Adams at the Savanna Institute and Kathy Bartley-McFall at the US Department of Agriculture to help organize community events and connect people, especially farmers, to relevant information about the ongoing soil crisis and what they can do to regenerate soil health.

What Will Be Done and How?

Working with other farmers at Zumwalt Acres, I will establish a new plot on the land that especially focuses on regenerating soil health through perennial crops. This new plot will be about 10,000 square feet in total. The perennials will be grown using carbon-negative methods of agriculture including drip irrigation, integrated pest management, and carbon sequestering soil amendments. This carbon-negative approach to agriculture rebuilds the health of our greatest defense to climate change without

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contributing to the climate crisis. Care of perennials will begin in the early summer season and continue through their life, feeding people and contributing to the healing of our planet.

In preparation for the first community event of this project, described below, I will work with my mentors at ZA to establish a plan that will allow me to discuss the soil crisis in a way that respects the experiences of farmers in Iroquois County and empower them to invest in soil and climate smart solutions.

The first community event will bring together around twenty-five conventional farmers, ten community organizers, five scientists, and five extension service employees. This event will be split into two parts: (1) putting plants in the ground and (2) a discussion about the threat that the soil crisis poses to peace in the era of climate change. By beginning in the soil, people from different backgrounds will be able to form strong relationships with each other. Working together will further show community members that soil regeneration in the era of climate change can only be solved through collaboration and community building.

Afterward, a conversation will hold space for people at all levels of knowledge regarding the soil crisis and recognize that not all farmers have the resources to radically transition their land from conventional corn and soybean production to growing organic perennial crops. This conversation will encourage all those present to share knowledge regarding soil conservation and highlight that not only is soil conservation the path for peace but the path of profit for farmers (Creech, 2021). Because perennial crops are only a part of the solution, farmers will be connected to extension services and other organizations that can get farmers started with cover cropping, no/low tillage systems, windbreakers, and other soil conservation efforts.

Beyond the “groundbreaking” event, I will host a youth planting day to introduce the future of Iroquois County to the importance of maintaining soil health and get them excited about pursuing a food system that nourishes local communities. This will mainly involve students from local FFA chapters. This event should reach around twenty students interested in climate smart and sustainable agricultural solutions. The youth planting day is especially important to the success of the project because many of the perennials planted will not bear fruit for a few years, meaning these plants will feed the future generations who must understand their role in preserving soil health in the era of climate change.

Expected Outcomes and Prospects for Future Impacts

By bringing people from across the community to plant perennials and plan a future for soil regeneration, this project is expected to foster a greater sense of collaboration and community in Iroquois County. This project will also establish Zumwalt Acres as a hub of knowledge sharing for people in the area who are concerned about the sustainability of our food system under climate change. However, this project will not solve climate change or the soil crisis on its own. Rather, funding for a plot at ZA especially focused on the role that perennial crops play in remediating the worst impacts of the climate crisis is like adding another small piece to the mosaic of the climate solution. After the Summer of 2023, other apprentices and year-round farm managers will continue to take care of the perennials, connect community members to climate solutions, and eventually feed hungry people the nutritious fruits and vegetables that the plants produce.