

The Environmental Ethics of Coffee Growing: a conversation between three beans

by Maitridevi

F: Hello – Welcome to the International Coffee Bean conference. My name's Freda I'm a Fair Trade coffee bean, and I come here every year from Nicaragua, to find out what's happening in the coffee world. Things have been pretty bad recently, the coffee market has been volatile for decades, but now overproduction is driving prices to an all time low. Did you know that there an estimated 10 million people involved in coffee production? That's a lot of people with very little money.

P: Hey Freda old girl – how are ya?

F: Oh hi Pedro, I'm ok – How's life on your Brazilian Plantation

P: Not too bad – but we're getting sold for peanuts.

Z: At least you get sold for peanuts, – We barely even get that.

F: Zege – Hi I didn't see you there – hey you don't look too good - what's up.

Z: Oh everything's up - I feel we're being cheated. Our family has just sold this year's coffee crop & I'm sure they haven't been paid enough for it. The people they sell to are the same ones that tell them what the world price is, and I think they're being lied to – but I've no way of knowing. They're already badly in debt because last years crop failed – there's no way they'll be able to pay it back and meanwhile everyone in the family is going without breakfast.

P: Yes, but your growers are going about it all wrong if you ask me. They should listen to the radio every day to check what the world price is, and make sure that's what they get when they sell

Z: But they can't afford a radio – besides it's broadcast in a different language that they don't speak – and they're such small fry, they're in no position to bargain.

P: OK - but I'm sure there's something they could do better. They need to move with the times efficiency, technology, competitive edge, that's what they need, then they'll get more money. Take me for example, I grow on a really

large plantation—nothing but coffee as far as a eye can see, and we make plenty of money because of that, despite the low prices. I expect your folks don't have that much land, but I'm sure they could do it on a smaller scale too.

Z: Well how?

P: OK - first of all, you shouldn't grow in the shade, I know that's how we evolved, but beans really like sun – we all grow so much better that way.

Z: You mean cut all the other trees down? – Oh no that would be terrible, what about all the wildlife? – and I rather like the shade.

F: Yes, where I grow is a bit like tropical forest. I've seen nearly 150 species of birds where I live; and I heard that you sun-seekers see barely any from one week to the next.

P: Hey – so I don't see so many birds, but there's more beans at the end of the day, and that means more money – which is what your folks don't have. Now can I continue?

F: OK

P: The other thing you need to do is only grow coffee – specialise - it's much more efficient, you just do one thing really well. Complete coffee domination. It means we beans get all the fuss and attention – I love it.

F: Well hang on – we grow along with other crops and that protects us from pest attacks.

And you beans that grow in full sun are already much more susceptible to disease. Go on admit it, you're all sickly.

P: NO we're not, we just get sprayed with lots of chemicals instead – that keeps us healthy.

F: Humph – I thought you smelt funny

Z: But we grow other food crops - that the family can eat.

P: Yes but they don't have enough to eat do they? And you don't make enough money to buy them the food either. You're not doing either well enough, that's why you need to specialise.

Z: Well maybe we could give it a try?

F: It sounds like a recipe for environmental disaster if you ask me. No forests, no birds, no other crops, no natural pest control, just acres of heavily sprayed coffee and soil erosion.

P: *[ignoring F]* Then the best bit is yet to come – this is top secret mind - you grow special coffee.
It hasn't been developed yet, but I've heard that in a few years us beans will be transformed.

F: What do you mean transformed?

P: Genetically modified – that's what I mean.

F: Oh no, I don't think I'm going to like this.

Z: No - go on - I don't know what you mean.

P: Well... How long does it take your owners to harvest you beans?

F: Well lets see... the coffee cherries which contain us ripen at different times

Z: Yes over about 3-4 months

F: So they need to be individually hand-picked

Z: Which is quite a lot of work really.

P: Yes, and if you want to mechanise your harvest you end up picking all the cherries at the same time, ripe or not, and that produces really bad coffee....
And bad prices..... So what if you didn't have to do that?

F: Really?

P: Yes – scientists are creating a genetically modified coffee, which doesn't produce ripened coffee cherries.

F & Z: Huh??!

P: Doesn't sound too good huh? But actually it's very clever, because instead you spray the entire crop with a natural plant chemical called ethylene, which is what plants usually produce to cause fruit to ripen. Then the entire crop ripens at the same time, and you get to pick it all in one go. You can even use machines to do it; it's so easy.

Z: Oh that sounds great - it would make life so much easier.

F: I'm not so sure - you hear such bad things about GM crops

P: Well you shouldn't listen to what everyone says. I think there's lots of good ideas around that make it possible to do things like: - increase crop yields, or reduce chemical use through increased disease resistance, or to grow crops in difficult areas.

F: But even if the ideas are good, people just don't know who to trust any more - all companies are driven by profits, and some are unscrupulous.

Z: I'm interested in this GM coffee - will it really happen?

P: Well they're working on it as we speak - in Hawaii.

Z: You see I'm thinking that it would be good even if we carried on growing as we are, with other plants, in the shade of trees, because it would make harvesting so much easier, and then the family could spend more time growing other things to make money.

F: Oh NO! You can't do that. Ethylene kills all flowers; you'd have to be growing only with other coffee plants, any other crop would be affected.

Z: Oh I didn't realise that, I thought...

F: And you'd have to pay for this special coffee, which I expect will be made so that it doesn't produce fertile seeds for new coffee plants. That means that when you need new plants, you'd have to buy them; and if you grow only coffee you'd need to buy herbicides and pesticides, and they'd cost money too. Not to mention the ethylene, without that you'd be stuck with an entire crop of unripened beans. And you don't have any money - not a bean

Z: Oh

F: Really this GM coffee is only going to be available to bigger producers, and not to those who are already living in poverty. In fact it'll probably drive the poor farmers out of business. There's already a glut of coffee which is why the prices are so low. With gm coffee, big plantations will be able to produce more coffee cheaper - and it's not as though the world needs it - so the prices will simply drop even more.

Z: We can't survive if they drop any more.

F: *[to P]* See I told you GM was no good.

P: No that's not fair, I still think that GM has got potential, but I guess perhaps this coffee thing isn't a good example of that.

F: You can say that again.

Z: Well what can I do – it looks like there's no hope.

F: Well in many ways my owners are like yours, but they're members of a Fair trade co-op. Fair trade guarantees them a minimum price for their coffee, which covers the costs of production and a basic living wage. It means that they get paid a decent amount and so can continue to grow their crops in the traditional way, without resorting to monocultures and pesticides. It also gives them money to invest in their farm. Because of fair trade the coop have managed to build a local school, and a medical centre in the community.

P: But how is Zege going to do that when you know perfectly well that your co-op can't even sell all their coffee as fair-trade.

Z: Can't they — Why not?

P: Economics my dear – there's not enough demand for it. Fair trade coffee is more expensive, and so most people don't buy it. And you simply won't get people to pay more for fair-trade coffee when they can buy cheaper stuff more easily?

Z: But if people knew what a difference it could make ... all those millions of small farmers. And surely they can't want the forests to be cut down and there be nothing but gm coffee sprayed with chemicals?

F: Yes surely they could be persuaded?

P: Well..... I don't know.

Z P & F: *[all turn to the audience]* What do you think?