

# Getting a head start on the next 10 years

In his inspiring book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond gives us important clues for understanding why, throughout history, some societies flourished and others perished. The way that humans acquired their food in different places and times plays a significant role in his story. Two factors usually play a prominent role in the outcome – local conditions and getting a head start.

The lesson appears to be that the advantage goes to those who best interpret the changes taking place in their local environments and get a head start taking advantage of those changes. The changes themselves are largely beyond our control.

Of course, interpreting the changes correctly while they are in the process of evolving is the tricky part. Humans haven't shown great promise in correctly interpreting local conditions while they are occurring, and the landscape is filled with wrecks and ruins testifying to past failures. Sometimes we are blinded by old visions. Sometimes we allow ourselves to get imprisoned in old structures. Sometimes we are immobilized by fear of change.

The mandate that the Iowa Legislature gave the Leopold Center in 1987 makes it clear that we are to be an agent for change. We were instructed to “conduct and sponsor research to identify and reduce negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts of agriculture practices, and research and assist in developing alternative practices that are consistent with a sustainable agriculture.”

To help determine how the Leopold Center could best accomplish its mandate over the next decade, we wrestled with all of the uncertainties associated with understanding unfolding local conditions and how to get a head start in capitalizing on the opportunities those conditions presented—especially for farmers. We consulted with experts, we visited with Iowa citizens in both rural and urban communities, we talked with scores of farmers. Now we are ready to act.

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New work for the Center's next 10 years will focus on three initiatives.

- We will invite others to join us in developing **new markets and food systems** that enable farmers to produce more value and retain a larger share of that value on the farm, using production methods that protect and restore our natural resources, and advance vibrant communities.
- We will similarly invite others to join us in **researching and designing new agricultural landscapes** that enable us to produce food, fiber and energy with methods that restore natural resources, provide habitat for organisms that increase agricultural productivity while renewing biodiversity, and make us more energy self-sufficient.
- We will explore new options for **public policy** that support these new directions for agriculture.

We have already begun to explore and, in some instances, launch such partnerships. As required by our founding legislation, grants still will be awarded competitively but the areas for study need to be much more focused than in the past.

Of course, the big question has yet to be answered: Are we correctly interpreting the changes taking place so we can gain a head start on new directions to ensure a prosperous future for Iowa? Only time will tell.

It is clear that the present system is not working. Massive public subsidies are needed just to help farmers pay their bills. Young farmers are largely prohibited from entering the agricultural enterprise, while farmers already on the land

have little hope for a brighter future. Meanwhile, we are eroding our natural resource base and degrading the environment – in some instances beyond reclamation.

When things no longer work, it is a sure sign that change is on the way. Our future will be the one we choose together as we respond to the changes bearing down on us. The advantage will go to those who read the changes correctly and get a head start on the new future.

We look forward to working with anyone who wants to explore and cultivate alternatives that secure healthier people and landscapes for Iowa and the nation. I am confident that people in Iowa and surrounding regions have the insight, dedication and the will to join us in this task, and to secure the necessary resources to do the job. We owe it to all of the children of all of the species with whom we share this planet.

*Jürgen Kirschenmann*



Read what Kirschenmann shared about the future of the Leopold Center during the Oct. 21, 2002 celebration dinner, on the web: [www.leopold.iastate.edu/celebration\\_page/celebration.html](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/celebration_page/celebration.html)