GreenLands BlueWaters

Voices From Our Network

The Civic Scientists

The next generation of continuous living cover (CLC) researchers reflect on the current moment in history and reimagine the future.

The effects of a global pandemic and racial uprising on one white, cis-gendered, perennial grains woman researcher with mediocre mental health

Sienna Nesser
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Introduction

I was raised to be a radical, but not in the field of agriculture. That came later. As a suburban high schooler, I was fascinated by nitrogen fertilizers. The idea of perennial grains captivated me when I was in college. After a few years of working on farms, I've found myself studying a perennial oilseed, radical research in the field of agriculture.

Methods

In March, I got used to staying at home all day. Virtual everything, except for grocery shopping, which inspired significant anxiety. As I sat through classes and meetings, I was grateful not to have to worry about field work right away. I let the snow melt, and after the silflower emerged from the ground, resumed my field work.

Then May 25th came. The Twin Cities erupted with anger, fear, flames, protests, and shock after George Floyd was murdered by police. I started using twitter to follow the news, see which buildings were burning and what all the noise was - fireworks or rubber bullets? I listened to a constant hum of helicopters as I tried to analyze last year's results. I didn't go to the protests; I didn't help clean up in the mornings. I was afraid of teargas and covid-19. I was afraid of seeing all of that destruction with my own eyes.

Results

I have long been aware of my privilege as a white woman and long wanted a more equitable world. As I read about white supremacy culture and police abolition, there were a few things that shifted my mind. I previously thought I didn't have the knowledge, lived experience, or skills to fight racism in a meaningful way. I realized I was wrong.

The second shift came after I heard that there are 35 Black farmers in Minnesota. In some ways, the number was not surprising, but it shocked me. In looking at the USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture data, I see that Black farmers own 2,474 acres of land in Minnesota. White farmers own 13,559,543. Equity is going to be a long fight.

Discussion

On the Friday after George Floyd's murder, I had field work to do. So I met a fellow researcher in the field to cut down plants so that we could observe how they regrow. As we worked, we talked about the uprising, the riots, whether we could hear it from our respective homes. How it felt to see so many pictures of burned buildings, then the number of people cleaning up in the mornings. We wished each other a safe weekend.

Conclusion

Scientific research requires a conclusion, but there are none right now. Everything is uncertain. Inconclusive results. The university makes protocols, initiatives, task forces and plans, but the only thing we can plan on doing is changing. When will be the next time that we can meet safely in person? Who will be the next person killed by unceasing police brutality?

I have understood the past six months, in some ways the past 400 years in this way: The world was cracked. We all lived year after year, stepping over or avoiding many deep fissures, sometimes building bridges over them, or walls and fences to avoid them. A global pandemic deepened those cracks, and the murder of George Floyd was what finally broke our world apart. Some people are trying to tape the world back together, but I don't think that will be enough. I think we need to build something new, and that it will take enormous community effort and a long time. I hope you're with me.

Sienna Nesser **University of Minnesota**

Long fascinated by the nitrogen cycle, Sienna Nesser followed that interest by studying sustainable agriculture while at the University of Minnesota, Morris (B.A. Environmental Studies and Studio Arts). It was there that her advisor, Dr. Sheri Breen, introduced her to The Land Institute and their work on perennial grains. After working on several different farms throughout the state and country, Sienna moved back to Minnesota and began her Master's degree at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Through her thesis work she is studying Silflower, a native wildflower, with the hope that it will someday be a perennial oil seed crop.