

Films highlight genetic threats, sustainable futures

Excerpt from a Review of *The GMO Trilogy*:

By Brian Tokar\*

Amidst the growing public debate about the effects of GMOs, the Iowa-based Yes! Books has introduced an important new multimedia collection, attractively packaged as *The GMO Trilogy*. The trilogy features two timely and well-produced videos, a comprehensive audio CD, and lots of clickable extras.

The centerpiece of *The GMO Trilogy* is an hour long documentary called *Unnatural Selection*. Masterfully produced in English by Bertram Verhaag and Gabrielle Kroeber, two German filmmakers with a long history of documenting GE and farming issues, *Unnatural Selection* takes us on a panoramic world tour of some of the places that have been most directly impacted by aggressive corporate promotion of genetically engineered agriculture. For those already familiar with the basics of this issue, the journey illuminates the vast international dimensions of the debate. For those new to genetic engineering, it offers a profound and colorful introduction. It is a work of compelling urgency and stunning beauty that should not be missed by anyone who cares about food and the people who grow it.

The film begins on the sprawling prairies of Saskatchewan, Canada where countless farms were saved in the mid-1990s by converting to growing organic canola. But an invasion of genetically engineered canola, developed by Monsanto to withstand applications of their Roundup-brand weed killers, ultimately reversed this progress. Pollen from GE canola spreads for miles and seeds blow freely from farm to farm; the survival of countless organic, and even conventional non-GE farms was threatened.

The best-known voice of Saskatchewan's canola growers is Percy Schmeiser, who plays a prominent role in the unfolding of *Unnatural Selection*. As a commercial canola grower and a lifelong seed saver and seed developer, Percy's future was irrevocably altered when a portion of his own crop, uniquely bred for local conditions, was contaminated with seeds or pollen from Monsanto's genetically engineered variety, which had blown onto his land from neighboring farms and passing trucks. For the 'crime' of having a contaminated crop, he was sued by Monsanto under patent law, and his case went all the way to the Canadian Supreme Court (see [www.percyschmeiser.com](http://www.percyschmeiser.com)). "We have no choice left," says Schmeiser, pondering the widespread contamination of Canada's canola fields, "but people in many parts of the world still have a choice."

From there, the scene shifts to Hyderabad, in central India, where local cotton growers have organized to resist the introduction of genetically engineered cotton—in this case engineered with a pesticide that aims to kill the cotton bollworm, many growers' most persistent and damaging pest. Following a hyper-aggressive marketing campaign, featuring give-aways and flashy, Bollywood-style TV ads, numerous farmers in India came to believe that the new "Bt cotton" was the answer to their problems, and they mortgaged their farms and their futures to embrace the new technology. But the bollworm resistance failed and crop yields fell dramatically, forcing many to sell their land. Thousands of farmers committed suicide so their families could escape the burden of

mounting debts. Now, whole communities are organizing to vent their rage toward local representatives of multinational seed companies.

Indian physicist, author and activist Vandana Shiva, one the world's most articulate and respected opponents of genetic engineering, is seen speaking with groups of farmers and sharing her profound insights about the consequences of this technology. She also presents a compelling alternative, drawn from the phenomenal diversity of traditional Indian agriculture. Dr. Shiva offers us a tour of one of the most inspiring places in the world for people who care about food: the Navdanya seed farm in the Himalayan foothills. There we view some of the hundreds of varieties of traditional rices, beans, and peas that have been preserved through Navdanya's efforts. We are reminded that healthy diets depend on healthy, loving relations to the land, both for our farmers and ourselves. For Dr. Shiva, traditional farmers are the "heart and soul of India," embodying a rootedness to the land that can inspire us here in North America as well.

*Unnatural Selection* offers disturbing exposés on experiments involving genetically engineered animals, from monstrously deformed pigs given a human growth hormone gene by the US Department of Agriculture, to fast-growing GE salmon raised in a laboratory in eastern Canada. The company that "invented" these salmon, known as Aqua Bounty, has already applied to the US EPA for permission to grow and sell them commercially. We hear from company officials about how engineered fish—in what has become a familiar advertising slogan for GMOs—are needed to "feed the world," and the contrasting view of university scientists at Purdue who have studied the disastrous effects these 'super-salmon' would have if they ever escaped into native wild fish populations.

"[This] is a technology that can not exist with nature; it is a technology that invades, pollutes, contaminates, and ultimately destroys the natural species," explains attorney Andrew Kimbrell of the Center for Food Safety, one of the most persistent GMO opponents in the US. We also meet chefs in San Francisco, who have rejected the use of engineered ingredients, and visit the Norwegian laboratory of Dr. Terje Traavik, one of the few independent scientists investigating the health hazards of GE foods.

The second disk in *The GMO Trilogy, Hidden Dangers in Kids' Meals*, is a fast-paced introduction to the health consequences of GE foods, featuring interviews with some of the world's most prominent independent scientists who have arisen as vocal critics of this technology. . . .

The third disc in *The GMO Trilogy* is for anyone seeking a more step-by-step discussion of the health hazards of genetically engineered foods and the controversies surrounding their approval. It is an hour-long audio presentation by Jeffrey Smith, recorded during the international speaking tour that followed the publication of *Seeds of Deception*. . . .

GMOs represent an historically unique threat, reports Jeffrey Smith: "We're feeding the products of an infant science to millions of people and releasing them into the environment where they can never be recalled." So whether you're already well read on the topic of GMOs, or just starting to learn about this latest threat to our food, get *The GMO Trilogy*. Your friends, neighbors, and your children will thank you for it.

*\*Brian Tokar directs the Biotechnology Project at the Institute for Social Ecology and is the editor of two books on the science and politics of biotechnology: "Redesigning Life?" and "Gene Traders."*