

# Gendering strategies for civic agriculture: The case of Blue Ridge Women in agriculture and the High Country Farm Tour<sup>☆</sup>



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‘We were not in it for the money. We were attracted to something we wanted to try to get started but it wasn’t about, I mean if we made money great ... but we were just really interested in how to grow food and grow good food.’

Carol Coulter, Executive Director and Founding Member of Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture

## 1. Introduction

Over the last century, the number of farmers in the United States has fallen to less than two percent of the national population, a significant reduction from the one-third of all Americans who farmed in the early 20th century. Many of the remaining farms shifted from diverse family-scale farms growing for local and regional economies to large-scale industrial farms producing for national and global markets. Farmers, previously perceived as holders and producers of knowledge, have been tied to technologies yielding prosperity for a few at the expense of many (Lyson, 2004) and become “increasingly trivial to agriculture and food” (Lapping, 2004, 143). Rural communities have seen a declining middle class, more hired workers, lower family incomes, and increased poverty (Lobao and Meyer, 2001), making evident the linkages between food systems and “the environmental, social, spiritual, and economic well-being of the community” (Feenstra,

1997, 28).

As consumer awareness of the many social, ecological, and ethical problems inherent in the conventional food system increases, an array of more sustainable agro-food alternatives has proliferated, such as organic, fair trade, and other food labeling movements. While some of these alternatives hold promise, others stem from or are vulnerable to corporate co-optation (Watts et al., 2005) or ‘greenwashing.’ As a result, some scholars call for expanding the framework of a ‘sustainable agriculture’ to a ‘civic agriculture,’ which addresses many of the same socio-ecological emphases as sustainable agriculture but is extended to emphasize re-embedding food systems within communities. While sustainable agriculture continues to be the dominant framework, we follow Lyson (2005) in arguing that civic agriculture is in fact stronger as it distinguishes itself from the overused and often watered-down discourse of sustainability through an emphasis on community relations:

The term civic agriculture captures the problem-solving foundations of sustainable agriculture. But civic agriculture goes further by referencing the emergence and growth of community-based agriculture and food production activities that create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity. Civic agriculture brings together production and consumption activities within communities and offers real alternatives to the commodities produced, processed, and marketed by large agribusiness firms (96).

Civic agriculture seeks to re-establish a healthy relationship between farming and community by fostering local food systems characterized by “alternative production systems of direct-marketing projects that seek to bring farmers and consumers closer together ... to expand the knowledge and understanding of how foods are produced, and to increase the economic viability of farmers” (Lapping, 2004, 143). Civic farmers prioritize community, sustainability, and care for living beings; the imperative to earn a profit is filtered through and embedded within such more-than-economic goals (Lyson, 2005; Lapping, 2004; Kneafsey et al., 2008; Leck et al., 2014). Women farmers are understood to particularly embody these goals (e.g. Jarosz, 2011; Allen and Sachs,

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2007; Delind and Ferguson, 1999; Trauger et al., 2009), yet they have been historically marginalized in their productive roles and largely dismissed as producers of agricultural knowledge (Allen and Sachs, 2007; Saugeres, 2002; Trauger et al., 2008; Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007; Pini, 2004). The strength of a community food system is thus related to the support and empowerment of women farmers, which can be facilitated with horizontal networks and innovative strategies (Trauger et al., 2008).

This paper highlights the important role of civic agriculture organizations (CAOs) in organizing and facilitating creative strategies of producer-consumer reconnection and female farmer empowerment by examining the farmer-perceived impacts of participation in a regional farm tour highlighting women farmers and their families. Following an overview of the potential of civic agriculture, we expand on the important yet often marginalized contribution of women farmers, of particular relevance to civic agricultural aims, and the need for networks and strategies to support them. We then introduce Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA) as a gendered CAO that emerged from an identified lack of support for women farmers and evolved to work toward goals that parallel those of civic agriculture, including producer-consumer reconnection, agricultural education, and socio-economic support for farmers. Next, we examine the BRWIA High Country Farm Tour, an annual two-day tour of small-scale sustainable farms across multiple counties in the North Carolina High Country; the tour is this CAO's flagship event.

Employing focus groups as a participatory action research (PAR) methodology to bring women farmers together, we present the impacts and challenges associated with participation in the High Country Farm Tour as discussed by farmers from seven of the twenty participating farms, nearly all of whom were women. The data indicate that connections and relationships, education and awareness, and renewal, enjoyment, and appreciation were among the major benefits of the tour for participating farmers, reflecting more-than-economic goals and values particularly characteristic of female farmers. Challenges associated with participation are also presented, including questions of how to best structure individual farm tours and convey meaning, the issue of uneven numbers of visitors, how to navigate visitors' varying expectations, and finding ways to increase the tour's accessibility. The farmers collaboratively brainstormed solutions to such issues and developed ideas for future tours, participating in horizontal knowledge exchange and networking that is crucial for civic farmers, particularly women (Staveren, 1997; Pini, 2004; Trauger et al., 2008).

We conclude that the innovative strategy of community-based farm tours, especially those highlighting women farmers, holds great potential as a creative civic agricultural mechanism and should continue to be implemented by more communities in the U.S. Furthermore, the facilitating role of BRWIA in supporting and advancing civic agriculture illustrates the importance of CAOs in empowering women farmers and raising consumer awareness, appreciation, and support; such organizations must be better understood and actively incorporated as a crucial link between producers and consumers in future agro-food studies. Finally, following Trauger et al. (2008), this study affirms the importance of focus groups as PAR aimed to strengthen networks of women farmers, creating space for them to share stories and experiences, to exchange and develop solutions, and to form or renew relationships.

## 2. Impacts of conventional agriculture on rural communities

Industrial or 'conventional' agriculture, driven by productionist tenets of centralization, specialization, competition, and exploitation (Beus and Dunlap, 1990), is grounded in the belief that "the

primary objectives of farming should be to produce as much food/fiber as possible for the least cost" (Lyson, 2004, 93). In this system, farmers are devalued as sources of knowledge and expertise, "reduced to workers whose primary tasks are to follow production procedures outlined from above. And farms are simply places where production occurs devoid of any connections to the local community or social order" (Lyson, 2004, 93).

Indeed, over the last century and particularly since World War II, farms in the U.S. have become fewer, larger, and disconnected from local communities, shifting from diverse food production for local and regional markets to industrial farming for national and global distribution, relying on large amounts of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers (Lyson, 2005). Whereas one-third of Americans farmed in the early 1900s, by the end of the 20th century only two percent of the population continued farming, resulting in "the abandonment of farming as a household livelihood strategy" (Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007, 104) and reflecting the increasing irrelevance of farmers to food and agriculture (Lapping, 2004). As remaining farms grew larger and more specialized, with hired labor replacing a family structure, communities previously bound together through agrarian linkages experienced a loss of resilience and well-being. This correlation was first predominantly identified by Walter Goldschmidt in a 1940s United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report documenting poorer conditions in communities dominated by large industrial farms, lower family incomes, including a smaller middle class, poor public services, and low civic participation (Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007).

These trends have proved resilient: Lobao and Meyer (2001) found in a comprehensive overview that most studies overwhelmingly report "all or some detrimental impacts" of industrial farming on communities, while Lyson (2005) argued that the neglect of rural communities and farm viability is "not surprising" in a food system "anchored to the neoclassical theory of economics" (94), built upon assumptions of rationality, productivity, and efficiency (Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007). While this system maintains that the small farmer is unproductive, other frameworks prioritize the protection of small farms as a means to food security (Shiva, 2004), global agrobiodiversity, and community resilience.

## 3. Civic agriculture

As awareness of the numerous detrimental impacts of conventional agriculture rises, attention is increasingly shifting toward more sustainable practices and processes. Yet while many such efforts are aimed at instilling ecologically and socially appropriate practices into the existing food system, including the expansion of organic and fair trade products, scholars such as Lyson (2004, 2005) advocate for a turn toward what he termed 'civic agriculture,' which relies on the same "problem-solving foundations of sustainable agriculture" (2005, 96) but extends further to re-embed sustainable food systems within communities. In this framework, farming is understood as "an integral part of rural communities, not merely production of commodities" (96), characterized by direct contact between producers and consumers that "nurtures bonds of community" (96) and creates vibrant, resilient local food systems. Civic agriculture is defined as

a locally organized system of agriculture and food production characterized by networks of producers who are bound together by place. Civic agriculture embodies a commitment to developing and strengthening an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable system of agriculture and food production that relies on local resources and serves local markets and consumers. The imperative to earn a profit is filtered through a

set of cooperative and mutually supporting social relations (Lyson, 2005, 94).

More recent work has engaged notions of civic agriculture using terms such as ‘care farming’ and ‘connective agriculture.’ Leck et al. (2014) described care farms as those operating “in such spaces between private and public support where a social model of care can flourish” (314). While specifically referencing care farms as those that combine agricultural production with social services (Hassink et al., 2014), targeting individuals experiencing mental health issues, physical disabilities, addiction, unemployment, or homelessness, these authors noted that the notion of social services can be expanded to encompass broader community health and social benefits provided by civic farms. They argued that ‘connective agriculture’ is perhaps a more appropriate term in that “care farming helps farmers to connect with people and people to connect with agriculture ... Agriculture is perceived as encompassing a wider range of social, economic and cultural sets of practices than ‘farming’, and connections lie at the very heart of care farming related outcomes” (323).

Similarly, agrarians such as Wendell Berry advocate for a local food economy as an entry point for revitalizing sustainable community economies. Berry (1995) defines a community economy as one in which people “know that things connect – that farming, for example, is connected to nature, and food to farming, and health to food – and they want to preserve that connection” (17). The two defining aims of a community economy include “the preservation of ecological diversity and integrity, and the renewal, on sound cultural and ecological principles, of local economies and local communities” (18). A vibrant locally based food system, Berry argues, is an ideal starting point for the renewal of communities “because it does not have to be big or costly, it requires nobody’s permission, and it can ultimately involve everybody” (21).

### 3.1. Gendering civic agriculture

But the notion that community food systems can “ultimately involve everybody” is a complex one. While the idea of “small, integrated communities using locally evolved norms and rules to manage resources sustainably and equitably is powerful” (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, 6333), applying a homogenous imaginary of ‘community’ in the absence of attention to its intricacies and complexities is problematic, as it “fails to attend to differences within communities” (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, 633) and can illuminate the voices of the few or the elite. Women in particular can be left out, “finding themselves and their interests marginalized or overlooked in apparently ‘participatory’ processes” (Cornwall, 2003, 1325). While women are often underrepresented in processes of community development, their marginalization in the realm of food and agriculture is particularly noteworthy and understudied (Allen and Sachs, 2007; Peter et al., 2000). Though the female identity is strongly linked to food and food-related work, women “control few resources and hold little decision-making power in the food industry and food policy” (Allen and Sachs, 2007, 1). The agrarian ideology itself is often criticized for its subordination of women and perpetuation of patriarchal family farms:

Focused on the nuclear family and the male farmer, agrarian ideology embodies traditional gendered roles and can pose a roadblock to raising issues of gender equality for both men and women ... Women have long been rendered irrelevant in their roles as farmers (Allen and Sachs, 2007, 5).

Contemporary conventional agriculture’s focus on technology and mechanization is largely a masculine domain, its emphasis on domination over nature and non-human animals considered by some scholars to be linked to men’s domination over women. Merchant (1980) explored the effects of the mechanism that emerged from the Scientific Revolution and its negative impacts on women and perceptions of women’s knowledge. Other ecofeminists described the emergence of concepts that inferiorized those things deemed ‘closer to nature’ such as women, indigenous people, emotion, and the body when compared to men, ‘civilized people,’ reason, and culture (Warren, 1998; Plumwood, 2002). Specifically referring to agriculture, Saugeres (2002) observed, “Men see themselves as tamers of nature, and that in their subjection of nature they also subjugate other human (and non-human) beings ... both women and nature are defined as belonging to a low order” (375). Women in many cases are devalued as a source of agricultural knowledge and often do not identify as farmers despite their roles in food production (Trauger et al., 2008; Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007).

Yet, while in some senses women involved in agro-food systems globally have declining choice and control (Barndt, 2004), in other senses they stand at the forefront of potentially transformative alternatives. Particularly in the global North, the number of women participating in agriculture continues to grow (Jarosz, 2011; Allen and Sachs, 2007), and scholars acknowledge a gendered nature of activism and participation (e.g. Delind and Ferguson, 1999) as “the rise in the number of women in farming parallels the dramatic rise in the number of organic and sustainable farming operations and farming markets in the United States” (Trauger et al., 2009, 43).

Women farmers are particularly crucial to achieving a civic agriculture, as they are commonly motivated by more-than-economic goals such as community and care. In general, women play a prominent role in movements of social and environmental justice, in some cases emphasizing their traditionally nourishing roles “to legitimize the confrontational actions they take to protect their families’ access to food, shelter, and a healthy environment” (Bell and Braun, 2010, 797). Beyond protection and care for their families, studies show that women extend care to human and more-than-human communities through “non-traditional productivist roles” (Trauger et al., 2009) in community food systems. According to Allen and Sachs (2007), “(w)omen farmers often lead the way for environmental sustainability and innovative entrepreneurship on farms ... Women also lead broad-scale efforts to create healthy, environmentally sustainable, and socially just food cultures and systems” (13).

In order to better understand women’s roles in civic agriculture, studies have focused on identifying motivations and goals associated with women’s involvement in community-supported agriculture (CSA). Delind and Ferguson (1999), for example, found that men largely participated in CSA for personal improvement, while aspects of community building primarily motivated female participants. Similarly, Jarosz (2011) found that women farmers involved in CSA expressed an “ethics of care that defines their work as centered upon nourishing themselves and others” (308). Rather than solely economic profit, their motivations center on “social goals and desires to live their lives and do their work in a certain way as well as having the political goals of contributing to both the awareness and the possibilities for creating an alternative food network that is not primarily motivated by large-scale industrial capitalism” (321). Hintz (2015) illustrated the centrality of love, relationship to land, and connection to place among women farmers in the Midwest. And Trauger et al. (2009) found that

women farmers are redefining “successful farming in terms of providing services to their community, as well as in terms of profit and productivity,” developing what these authors described as “a new model of entrepreneurship, one that subverts the ideologies of economic rationality and redefines profitability and success in terms of care, responsibility to the public, and connection to the farm” (53).

As the number of women in agriculture grows and the linkages between their participation and the aims of civic agriculture are increasingly understood, the support of women farmers and their families is crucial. Accordingly, women farmers in some states in the U.S. are engaging in “new types of networks for educational, social, and entrepreneurial support to empower women in sustainable agriculture and food-related business” (Allen and Sachs, 2007, 12). Such networks and organizations, which we refer to as CAOs, must develop and implement creative strategies that link economic and social imperatives in order to support and advance civic agriculture (Trauger et al., 2009). Common strategies include farmers’ markets, farm stands, u-picks, community gardens, and CSA. Yet new and creative strategies that aim to reconnect producers and consumers, foster agricultural education, and support civic farmers, particularly women, warrant considerable attention.

The remainder of this paper puts forth a case study of the Western North Carolina-based nonprofit Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA) and their annual High Country Farm Tour as an innovative and under-studied<sup>1</sup> strategy to strengthen community food systems by empowering women farmers and their families. After introducing BRWIA and the High Country Farm Tour, drawing from the first author’s intimate ethnographic involvement with the CAO and the tour, we overview data from a focus group with farmers illustrating major benefits of participation as well as challenges. By relating our findings in an accessible and conversational way, we intend to illustrate the ways in which the focus group itself served to strengthen a horizontal network of primarily female farmers, to discuss ideas and raise issues, and to collectively share and develop solutions.

#### 4. BRWIA and the High Country Farm Tour

BRWIA is a nonprofit organization in Western North Carolina “dedicated to strengthening the High Country’s local food system by supporting women and their families with resources, education, and skills related to sustainable food and agriculture” ([brwia.org](http://brwia.org)). Headquartered in Boone,<sup>2</sup> they serve both producers and consumers in the High Country<sup>3</sup> by providing grants to women farmers, farmer mentor programs, workshops highlighting agricultural and sustainable living practices, farmer profile projects, consumer education programs, and their flagship event, the annual High Country Farm Tour. Working toward a vision of “an equitable local food system that protects the environment, strengthens the local economy, alleviates hunger and poverty, and improves community health” ([brwia.org](http://brwia.org)), their long-term goals, which parallel

those of civic agriculture more broadly, include:

1. Increasing the economic viability of farming and food processing, especially among women
2. Encouraging farmers to adopt sustainable farmer practices
3. Educating the public about sustainable food and agriculture
4. Improving food security

BRWIA began as a grassroots project by a small group of women farmers in 2003 with the aim of creating a supportive network for sharing information and resources.<sup>4</sup> The participating women farmers had goals that differed from their male counterparts and felt a lack of validity and support within an agricultural system that was largely male dominated. The group would meet informally at members’ farms to discuss practices they wanted to learn, organize guest speakers with expertise in the practice, and invite the community to join them. The group’s members would also exchange agricultural problems, such as access to capital, resources, and markets, and collectively develop solutions.

BRWIA obtained 501 (c) 3 non-profit status in 2004 in order to advance their mission of supporting women farmers and a strong community food system. Since then, the group’s membership has shifted from primarily farmers to Appalachian State University (ASU) faculty and staff who are passionate about sustainable agriculture, community-based food systems, and supporting women farmers. Their mission has also shifted a bit from serving women farmers and their families to supporting and encouraging women involved in agriculture at a variety of scales, such as those interested in starting backyard gardens or raising chickens. BRWIA also centers their mission on educating consumers and the broader community about agro-food issues and where their food comes from with the goal of fostering a vibrant community to support civic farmers.

The High Country Farm Tour, an annual two-day tour of small-scale working farms<sup>5</sup> employing a range of sustainable practices<sup>6</sup> in the High Country, is BRWIA’s flagship event. Participating farmers provide visitors with tours of their farms, products, and practices. While BRWIA does not limit participation to women farmers and includes farms working toward civic agricultural aims, most farms that apply are women-owned or farms in which women play an active productive role. The goals of the tour as outlined by BRWIA are to connect producers and consumers, to educate the public about sustainable agriculture and local food, and to provide farmers with socio-economic opportunities ([brwia.org](http://brwia.org)). During the August 2014 board meeting, staff and board members identified more nuanced goals including awareness, empowerment, relationships, enjoyment, beauty, preservation, appreciation, and the ability to visualize a food system.

In June 2014, 20 farms in two counties, Ashe and Watauga (Fig. 1), participated in the eighth annual BRWIA High Country Farm Tour (Fig. 2). The farmers ranged in age from early 20s to mid-70s, and while most were female-male couples, participating farmers also included single women farmers (7) or female-female couples (1). All but two farms were first-generation and, reflecting the

<sup>1</sup> While studies of farm tourism, or agritourism, are plentiful broadly, Spurlock (2009) has authored the only other known study on annual community-based farm tours. This paper offered a participant observation-oriented personal narrative of the phenomenon but did not engage other methodologies such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups.

<sup>2</sup> Boone is the county seat of Watauga County, home to Appalachian State University, with a population of 17,122 (2010 census).

<sup>3</sup> The seven northernmost counties in North Carolina are considered the High Country, including Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Mitchell, Wilkes, Watauga, and Yancey counties. Caldwell County (NC) and Johnson County (TN) are also within BRWIA’s service area.

<sup>4</sup> Information about BRWIA’s history and vision was obtained from the organization’s website, the first author’s ethnographic experiences collaborating with the organization, and a discussion facilitated by the first author at an August 2014 board meeting.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Farm’ includes traditional as well as non-traditional agricultural spaces such as community gardens, animal rehabilitation centers, incubator farm programs, and off-the-grid homesteads.

<sup>6</sup> Farmer-described practices included certified or non-certified organic, biodynamic, permaculture, mindful, ethical, natural, educational, no-kill or rehabilitative, and agro-ecological.



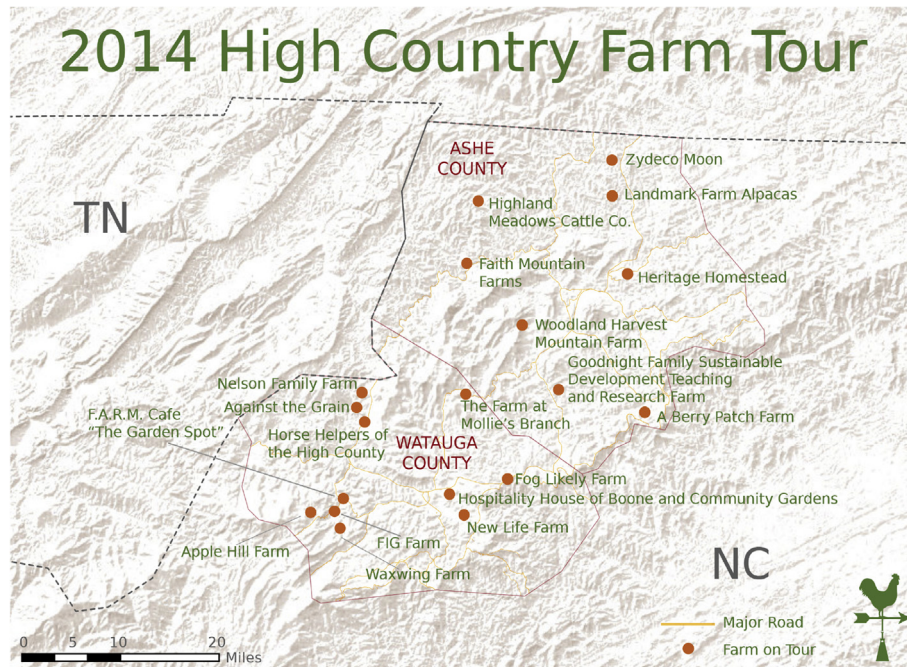


Fig. 1. Location of 2014 High Country Farm Tour participating farms. Map by Nicholas Perdue.

area's demographics,<sup>7</sup> all farmers were white. Most participating farms sold their products – including vegetables, fruits, meat and dairy products – at local farmers' markets, CSA programs, restaurants, and cooperatives. The farms were 'open' to visitors from 2–6 p.m. on Saturday, June 28, and Sunday, June 29. Visitors<sup>8</sup> transported themselves to the farms by car and were free to visit as many as they could over the two-day period, though they were advised to select three or four farms a day – descriptions and details of each farm and their offerings was provided to visitors along with their passes. Weekend passes cost \$25 per carload, sold by BRWIA prior to the tour at Ashe and Watauga counties' farmers' market, local stores, and online. They could also be purchased for \$30 from BRWIA volunteers during the tour at any of the farms, or they could purchase a one-farm pass for \$10. Money raised from ticket proceeds each year covers BRWIA's cost of facilitating the tour – any additional proceeds support BRWIA programs. According to survey data collected and analyzed by the first author, a total of 448 visitors attended the tour with an average of 77 visits per farm and a total of 1540 farm visits. A total of 107 weekend passes were sold,

and 64 single-farm visits were sold on-farm, making a total of 171 carloads who visited at least one farm.

## 5. Methods

From May through September 2014, the first author employed feminist ethnographic and participatory action research (PAR) in the High Country with the goal of better understanding the motivations, experiences, and impacts of producers, consumers, and facilitating organizations involved in community food systems. BRWIA was purposively selected for the study as a women-focused CAO, and the High Country Farm Tour as a creative strategy for facilitating producer-consumer reconnections. During fieldwork the first author collaborated with BRWIA to market the tour, sell weekend passes at local farmers' markets, interview farmers, and collect survey data<sup>9</sup> from participating producers and consumers with the goals of informing my research while also meeting organizational needs and working to advance BRWIA's mission. BRWIA board meetings were attended in order to gain insights into the CAO's history, motivations, goals, and programs. At a final board meeting in August 2014, preliminary research findings were presented, and each of the 11 staff and board members in attendance shared their perspectives on the history and role of BRWIA and the

<sup>7</sup> The 2010 US Census reported that 92% of Boone's population is white, while 3.5% of the population is black, 3.3% is Hispanic or Latino, 1.6% is Asian, and 0.2% is American Indian.

<sup>8</sup> According to our survey data, nearly three-quarters (72%) of visitors were North Carolina residents; of these in-state visitors, another three-quarters (73%) reported that they lived in the High Country. Other visitors' home states included Florida (9), Tennessee (2), South Carolina (3), Virginia (2), Illinois (1), Maryland (1), and Pennsylvania (1). More than a quarter of survey respondents (33%) indicated that they have second homes in the area. Overall, nearly all visitors were from the area or visited frequently. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents were female, reflecting a predominantly female-driven participation pool, and nearly all respondents were white (88%). The average adult visitor age was 52, with a range from 23 to 75 and a median of about 50. More than three-quarters of visitor respondents indicated that there were other adults in their group, and more than a third (34%) reported that there were children (under 18) in their group, addressing the increasingly prevalent call to provide children with agricultural and environmental education. Most visitors learned about the tour at Ashe or Watauga counties farmers' markets (41%), word of mouth (33%), a news article (30%) or signs around town (21%).

<sup>9</sup> The first author distributed a survey to tour visitors via email the week after the tour, aimed to broadly understand their motivations and impacts of the tour, in addition to information desired by BRWIA needed to improve future tours. Of the 448 visitors who attended the 2014 High Country Farm Tour, contact information was collected and recorded from 163 visitors; at least one person from each carload was asked to provide this information, and others in the group were given the option as well. Of these 163 visitors, 121 expressed willingness to complete a follow-up survey delivered by email. Of these 121 surveys distributed, 67 responses were returned, rendering a 55% response rate. Visitors were asked to respond to multiple choice, three- or four-point Likert scale, and open-space questions pertaining to their motivations for participation, on-farm experiences, and impacts of the tour, along with questions aimed to collect specific data desired by BRWIA to improve future tours. The survey was incentivized with the chance to win one of four \$50 Visa cash cards or one of four High Country Local First Rewards Cards.





7TH ANNUAL 2014 20 FARMS

Blue Ridge Women's Agriculture

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Fig. 2. 2014 BRWIA High Country Farm Tour poster.

High Country Farm Tour, which informed the information presented in the above section.

The predominant data drawn from in this paper was generated from a focus group with participating farmers. Focus groups are defined as “a nonstructured group interview, a discussion really, on a given topic in a group of five to ten persons ... The objective of working with a focus group is to generate hypotheses from the group interaction in an open, heuristic process” (Staveren, 1997, 131). Traditionally used in market-based research, focus groups can provide valuable insights for feminist researchers and serve as a PAR methodology, as they give voice to women's issues and ideas (Staveren, 1997) and can empower women through networking (Pini, 2004). While women often engage politically through networks and communities (Delind and Ferguson, 1999), for women farmers such networks can provide a “tremendous opportunity for creating and sustaining lasting cultural and economic change in agricultural communities” (Trauger et al., 2008, 438).

Following the June 2014 High Country Farm Tour, all twenty farmers were invited by email to attend a focus group to discuss their tour experiences and impacts. Participation in the focus group was incentivized by \$40 per farm and a meal, both to compensate farmers for their valuable time and to encourage a casual social atmosphere. Seven farms, represented by seven female farmers and one male farmer, agreed to participate, and a mutually convenient time that did not interfere with the farmers' busy schedules was determined. The focus group was held in August 2014 at the Watauga County Agricultural Conference Center and lasted approximately three hours. Participants were provided with a broad itinerary that included dinner, introductions, reflections on the farm tour benefits/impacts, and a discussion of farm tour challenges/obstacles. The first author facilitated the focus group with the help of BRWIA's program coordinator, Suzanne. Participants included Amy of Nelson Family Farm, Susan of the F.A.R.M. Café Garden Spot, Holly of Against the Grain Farm, Pauleen<sup>10</sup> and Wayne of A Berry Patch Farm, Caroline of F.I.G. Farm, Kathleen of Waxwing Farm, and Carol of Heritage Homestead Goat Dairy (also executive director of BRWIA).

Beyond an attempt to understand the benefits and challenges associated with participation in the BRWIA High Country Farm Tour for farmers, focus groups were employed as a form of PAR aimed to create space for horizontal knowledge exchange and to strengthen farmer-to-farmer networks, crucial for empowering farmers as producers of knowledge (Hassanein and Kloppenburg, 1995) and of particular importance for women farmers (Trauger et al., 2008). The data generated from the focus group were analyzed thematically according to broad-topic and emergent-fine codes. Data presented here overview the major benefits and challenges associated with participation in the High Country Farm Tour for farmers. We have also incorporated visitor survey data into the discussion in order to bring visitor's self-perceived impacts of the tour into a dialogue with the farmers' perceptions.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Farm tour impacts

The first topic discussed was impacts of participation in the Farm Tour. The themes most commonly touched on during this portion of the focus group were connections and relationships, and education and awareness. On the subject of connections and relationships, Amy shared her experiences forming friendships and establishing regular customers via the Farm Tour:

I've developed some really strong friendships from the Farm Tour, especially this one girl whose husband's in the service, and she's a single mom (with three kids), and she doesn't have a lot of extra money, but the girl buys more meat from me than anybody else, and you know our kids do stuff together ... A lot of customers that are really good repeat customers started out with the Farm Tour.

Pauleen similarly touched on themes of forming relationships and repeat customers:

The benefits are obviously getting to know other people who then come and recognize us at the farmers' market and call us and say, 'When are you going to have more honey in the big jugs,' or when are you going to have whatever it was that struck their fancy. That was definitely a benefit.

Kathleen also discussed the experience of having people who had visited her farm on the Farm Tour return to her booth at the farmers' market, particularly drawn to her as a young beginning farmer:

Yeah definitely from the Farm Tour to the farmers' market there were a lot of people who came up and were like, 'It was so cool to see your farm,' and they were really excited to hear about a first-year farmer, there were people that brought their kids that were not much younger than me who are interested in agriculture, and they were really excited to see someone who is just starting out with no background in it really.

Holly explained that while she and her husband prioritize community connections, they struggle to find the time and the resources to offer regular on-farm experiences or opportunities given the busy nature of farming during productive seasons. The once-a-year nature of the Farm Tour allows for that connection:

One of the great things about the Farm Tour I think for us is that people will ask you know, do you do on-farm sales, or do you have a farm stand, or do you give tours, and it's really awesome just to be able to say no because we're a working farm and we're really too busy for that, but you should come to the Farm Tour, and all these other farms are on the Farm Tour too, and we do it once a year and here's a postcard. So that's a real positive kind of way to still connect people, bring people in, but not always feel like you're trying to field folks, because you want to connect with the community and offer your farm but it's hard when you're a working farm, not just an educational farm or whatever. So that for us is a really big benefit.

The farmers emphasized consumer reconnections as another primary benefit of the Farm Tour, recounting their experiences of witnessing agricultural education taking place among visitors who are largely disconnected from food origins and processes in their everyday lives. Susan emphasized processes of sharing and learning as a primary benefit of the tour:

It raises awareness. It's amazing because people who don't have the same kind of brains that we do, who grow things, have no idea, and it's so cool to get people in your garden or in your farm, and you have those questions posed to you, and you're like oh yeah, right, you don't know that do you, ok well let me tell you this. I don't know, it's pretty cool, I love those visitors because then you get to talking and you see that little light go on. And they get it. It's kinda cool.

<sup>10</sup> A pseudonym has been used for this participant at her request.



Carol agreed, recalling her experiences of sharing how her goat dairy produces cheese and witnessing 'light bulbs going off':

It's amazing how disconnected people are from how food is made or grown or where it comes from, it just shows up in the grocery store and you just get it (group laughing). Just by the questions they ask, you know they want to know process, how do you make cheese, what is rennet, what is vegetable rennet, you know, they just ask a million questions, it's how do you do this how do you do that, why do you do it this way. So it's really fun to share information, and you can see like you know things connecting and light bulbs going off.

Carol continued that reconnecting with food origins and production processes increases appreciation and enthusiasm among consumers:

We spent a lot of time talking about ... all the different components, there's pasture management, goat management, sanitation management, and this is how you make cheese, and when you make gouda you do this and then you do this and then you do this and then you do this, and then you know two months later you have product to sell. And they're like, wow, (group laughter), that's a lot of work, and they're much more appreciative, people actually said, 'now we understand why your cheese is more expensive than grocery store cheese.'

Wayne added that the Farm Tour educates visitors about ways they might incorporate farming into their own life for socio-economic purposes:

The one thing for us the tour is a chance to try to educate people on how they can supplement their income and have a better quality of life.<sup>11</sup>

And Kathleen explained that the educational component of the Farm Tour raises awareness about uncommon produce that consumers might otherwise be hesitant to purchase at the farmers' market:

I'm always trying to find creative ways to sell things at the market, and I walked everyone past this bed of Daikon Radishes that went to flower, which I let them do, and got people to eat radish flowers, and people getting super excited to eat radish flowers is awesome for me, it's really exciting, I mean they were really pumped about the radish flowers (everyone laughing), so just stuff like that was probably one of the biggest (benefits), just showing people different stuff like that.

Participating farmers also reflected on the Farm Tour's ability to renew their passion for what they do, as they get to see their farms through fresh eyes. As Amy explained:

I think it's nice to see it through new eyes because I get just (to the point) where it's just an everyday mundane routine, nothing new you know. And then people are so excited, so it's nice to get that.

The appreciation expressed by visitors for the farmers' hard work and dedication also provided renewal for farmers. Carolina described people as being 'touched' by their experiences visiting small passionate farms:

I think people were touched by our farms, there's been people who stopped at the farmers' market who said ... we went to your farm and we went to this other farm, a bigger more established farm, and I was more impressed by your farm because of what you're trying to do, just you by yourself without a tractor.

Rather than a chore or obligation, farmers expressed sincere enjoyment of the Farm Tour. As Susan articulated:

I have to say I love doing it. Because everybody who's on the tour is having so much fun, everybody wants to know what you're doing, I mean you've got a captive audience, they already think you're awesome or they wouldn't even be there right, they already are excited.

Farmers recalled stories of memorable visitor experiences on their farm. Amy, for example, told a story of taking a 'hike' with a group of children to find her goats:

Our goats has disappeared up on the hill ... I'd been doing a farm tour and thinking I don't want to walk up there, all of them had gone, they usually come barreling down at me, and I had all these kids and they all wanted see the goats and I said, 'do y'all wanna go for a hike in the woods?' 'YES!!!' (laughing) And they just took off, they thought that was great, it started raining, they were falling down and getting in the briars, they thought it was wonderful.

Carol similarly recalled a story of children interacting with her goats:

We had some really great kid interactions with the animals; we had a little guy who was just beside himself because he got to milk a goat. We had a bag of peanuts, the goats like unsalted peanuts, so we let them all feed them, and they were pretty funny trying to feed the billy because they would sort of get close enough, drop the peanut and then be like, 'where'd it go!' (laughing). So they were having fun, so it's kind of fun you know, interactions and asking lots of questions ... the questions they ask are really fun.

While on-farm sales were considered an impact of the tour, the farmers prioritized these more-than-economic benefits and impacts of the Farm Tour over direct sales. Holly explained that in solely economic terms, the Farm Tour would not be worth the effort:

If we're going to try to equate the hours put in to preparing for the Farm Tour and even just setting up and sitting there, it wouldn't come close to compensating, I mean, (on-farm sales during the tour were) a fraction of what we made that morning at market. And it was great, I mean it was still some cash but it wasn't, for the effort of getting stuff out of the freezer and setting up produce ... it probably didn't really pay for it, but there are so many other benefits that it's not exactly like an equation.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that the one male farmer participating in the focus group's sole contribution to the group discussion was framed in economic terms. It is also important to point out that the presence of this male farmer in a room of otherwise all-female farmers may have influenced the discussion.



## 6.2. Farm tour challenges and solutions

After a short break during which farmers had a chance to meet, catch up, and have informal conversations amongst themselves, the topic shifted to challenges related to participation in the Farm Tour. This portion of the focus group evolved into more of a brainstorming and sharing session, in which farmers raised particular issues and concerns and other farmers shared their own strategies in overcoming them, or helped brainstorm solutions collectively. Some prominent challenges discussed by farmers were ways to best structure on-farm tours, convey messages, and educate consumers. For example, some farms aimed to hold structured tours beginning every hour on the hour but faced challenges in doing so. The farmers discussed amongst themselves their experiences and brainstormed solutions:

Amy: Last year I did tours on the hour and people showed up on the hour, a few minutes before, it was like clockwork, everything was super organized, it was great except for a few handful of unruly kids ... everything was great. This year people just came in and I started a tour and they'd come over, and it was complete chaos, and so I don't know if that can be remedied or if it was just a function of the people that were there at the time.

Kathleen: Did you say that you were having them on the hour? I thought I was going to do tours on the hour and that didn't happen.

Carol: We tried to do that and it never worked, so we have a little place where they can gather, and we have one of the volunteers do a little spiel about the farm and homestead, and then she actually brought radios which was like a godsend because our farm's kind of spread out, so he'd be like Carol a big group is here so I knew to hurry up ... so that helped by having something else to distract them for awhile ... some people just tagged along.

Amy: We ended up having people get on the end and then be like ok y'all need the beginning and y'all need the end.

Holly: We had the same problem, and one of the things I was sort of brainstorming was like, oh wouldn't it be cool (if) one of my helpers could draw a little farm map, and that way if people come and they don't want to wait for the next tour they can just take a little self-guided tour and some people would almost prefer that because they just want to come through and breeze through quickly.

The farmers also raised questions of how to best convey effective messages and provide agricultural education in small amounts of time. Amy, for example, raised the issue of how to explain why her chickens cost more than those at grocery stores.

Amy: I have a challenge ... (about) having a way to educate visitors ... my friend goes, how can you compete with EarthFare<sup>12</sup> selling their chickens for 99 cents a pound and you're selling yours for \$4 a pound.

Holly: They're \$5 at our farm.

Amy: Yes I'm cheaper than Holly! (everyone laughing) That's something that takes almost a seminar, you can't just say in three sentences why your chickens are \$4 or \$5 a pound. (general agreement)

Susan: They are so happy, that's why you're paying so much because those are happy chickens.

Amy: I think that's getting used a little too much, the happy chicken.

Susan: But it's true.

Amy: But I mean I think people have heard that so much that now that's not really ...

Susan: But they can see it.

Amy: I emailed EarthFare ... and asked where their chickens were processed and some technical questions, and nobody ever answered me. And they were boasting about their certified humane standards, so I went on the website and looked at certified humane space requirements and my friend's like they've got a video on there so I looked and I'm like hmm they don't have any video of the inside of the chicken house ... Yeah it's like 0.7 square feet per chicken, I could raise 4000! (laughing).

On the same subject, farmers identified the issue of navigating visitors' varied expectations. Some wanted in-depth information, for example, while others aimed for a quick overview. As Carol explained:

And that is the other hard thing is because there's such a range of people, there are people who want to get in really great depth about things and then you're (also) trying to deal with the group and the people are asking questions about things, you know the rest of the group doesn't want to know about the chemistry of cheese making, they just want to sort of know in general how does it happen, and you're trying to deal with these people who keep asking you these questions and it's like here's my card, call me, I can't talk to you right now. (agreement, chatter)

Solutions to such issues were proposed, such as providing take-home material so that visitors could learn more after the tour and holding workshops on particular topics:

Suzanne: Maybe we can work with you all if the people are interested, next year ... we could have extra info packets, like there's some great graphics that describe certifications and explain it, so when you do get those questions you might not have time to go in depth but you can be like, here.

Also, something Against the Grain did this year that I thought was interesting was they were the ones that held workshops everyday at I think it was 5 (o' clock) one day, did y'all end up doing this ...

Holly: Saturday people came and Sunday people didn't.

Amy: What kind of workshops?

Holly: Well we had our biodynamic mentor there and he offered a little tour through the biodynamic lens and talked about that, I think six people came for that, but some people just happened to come at that time and we were like oh we're offering this too or you can just walk around the farm with me, and so some people did that, and then Sunday we had like a seeds saving kind of tour like a specific tour focused on like walking around and looking at seed crops, but nobody came to that one.

Susan: Oh that's a great idea.

Participating farmers also pointed to the issue of uneven

<sup>12</sup> Earthfare is an organic food supermarket with stores in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee.

amounts of visitors to their farms. While some farms were overwhelmed with large groups, other farms experienced a low turnout. Weather was also discussed as a recurring and unpredictable factor in determining turnout. Carol, who experienced an overwhelming turnout on Saturday and a more manageable number on Sunday, recalled:

Saturday we were like oh my god ... we had run out of cheese so we stayed up that night making more cheese because we had no idea, like, is Sunday going to be a repeat or what, of course it wasn't, we were thankful, but so (there's) no sense of what to expect because we'd run out and we did so good Saturday it's like OK it's worth it to stay up and go ahead and do it but ... it's a crapshoot.

Possible solutions were discussed, such as restructuring the tour in future years to have farms on the tour for one of the two days. Ashe County farms would be highlighted on Saturday, for example, while Watauga County farms would be open for visitors on Sunday. But farmers raised the issue of bad weather ruining a farm's chance of having many visitors, intensifying risk if farms were open only one day. Some farmers preferred the idea of hosting visitors for one day rather than two, giving them back some of their weekend to attend to their many other tasks.

The time of year was also debated. Some farmers were unhappy with a June tour, as it's early in the season and they didn't have as much produce to show as they might have in a tour later in the summer. Yet other farmers felt that they would be tired later in the summer after the rigorous growing season, and that consumer connections made later in the season would have less likelihood of translating into regular market customers. Factors in determining the dates of the Farm Tour were linked to targeting dates with high numbers of visitors to the area, farmer preference, avoiding holidays and other community events, and BRWIA capacity.

Finally, ideas for future tours were proposed and brainstormed among the participating farmers, such as making note of farms that are children-friendly and easily accessible for people with limited mobility. The idea of renting busses to guide tours, perhaps with Spanish translation services available, was also proposed, expanding the accessibility of the tour to include non-native English speakers as well as people without personal transportation. In sum, the conversation was primarily focused on how to extend the Farm Tour mission to reach a greater number of people in an effective way.

## 7. Discussion

The focus group revealed that the major impacts of the Farm Tour for participating farmers included connections and relationships, education and awareness, renewal and enjoyment. They expressed sincere enjoyment of their experiences on the Farm Tour, recalling stories and sharing anecdotes. They discussed forming friendships and establishing regular customers, the unique ability to connect to the community, and witnessing agricultural education. They recounted seeing 'light bulbs go off' as visitors to their farms encountered agricultural realities and made connections (perceptions that resonate with visitors' self-reported impacts in our survey data, see [Johnson et al., 2016](#)). And the farmers explained that the Farm Tour allowed them to view their farm and work through new eyes, renewing their passion and dedication to what they do, resonating with [Herman's \(2015\)](#) notion of 'enchantment' that

allows for otherwise mundane experiences, practices, spaces and objects to be revalued, which encourages both the

remembrance of why the farmer took up farming in the first place ... The sense of fullness and enhanced responsiveness to other material forms that these enchanted connections promote is arguably psychologically beneficial, reinforcing positive feelings of possibility which in turn encourage a belief that here is something worth continuing (109).

Connective goals were indeed the primary motivations for participating farmers; while on-farm sales were considered a bonus, direct economic goals were not their primary concern. Rather, the farmers explained that if the purpose of participating in the Farm Tour were strictly economic, the effort would not be worth their time. The more-than-economic benefits outlined here – connections and relationships, awareness and education, appreciation and enjoyment – justified their participation. Such elements are important tenets of civic agriculture, characterized by direct producer-consumer connections that build community and creates thriving local food systems. For these primarily female farmers, economic imperatives were "filtered through a set of cooperative and mutually supporting social relations" ([Lyson, 2005, 94](#)) (in fact, the only focus group participant who articulated primarily economic goals was the sole male farmer in the room). They understood the processes of education, awareness, and appreciation cultivated among consumers during the Farm Tour to translate into an increased willingness and desire to support them socio-economically. Furthermore, the gendered nature of participation in both the Farm Tour and the focus group clearly supports links between women farmers and strong civic agricultural goals.

Challenges related to participation in the Farm Tour identified by the farmers during the focus group included finding effective ways to convey messages and educate consumers, meeting expectations of diverse groups of visitors, balancing between too many and too few farm visitors, and locating the ideal time during the growing season to hold the tour. Farmers raised and discussed issues amongst themselves, sharing insights and brainstorming ideas. Some of the potential solutions proposed during the focus group included holding workshops on particular topics to target visitors especially interested in specialized topics, providing visitors with take-home information to enhance the educational process, restructuring the tour so that each farm would be 'open' for one day rather than two to ensure higher visitor turnout and reduce farmers' time and effort, and potentially shifting the Farm Tour to slightly later in the growing season when produce is more mature. Finally, farmers suggested expanding the tour's accessibility to more people, such as including bus tours and language translation services.

Perhaps most importantly, such opportunities for horizontal knowledge exchange are key to empowering community-based farmers, particularly women, and civic agriculture. Rather than top-down knowledge imposed upon farmers, farming that embodies civic agriculture "should be seen as a process of social learning" ([Pretty, 2002, 156](#)). Horizontal networks can help demarginalize and support women farmers in particular, as more traditional agricultural programs often exclude women's emphasis on alternative production methods ([Trauger et al., 2008](#)) and because women farmers "tend to trust other women farmers, as they have often not been taken seriously by their male peers or by male-dominated forms of hierarchical information exchange" ([Trauger et al., 2008, 438](#)). Many farmers, however, do not have the time or the resources to devote to facilitating spaces for such relationships to emerge. While CAOs such as BRWIA can help significantly by facilitating events such as farm tours, workshops, mentor programs, and potluck meetings, research studies themselves can further this as a PAR aim. A research/activist tradition

originating in philosophical traditions, PAR has been adopted by feminist social scientists “as a way to work toward social change among traditionally marginalized groups, particularly communities of women” (Trauger et al., 2008, 435).

In this case, the focus group as PAR was able to further the impacts of the Farm Tour by bringing farmers together to discuss their experiences, exchange ideas, dissect and debate discourses (such as that of the ‘happy chicken’), and collaboratively develop solutions. Farmers also took advantage of the opportunity to catch up with friends and to introduce themselves to new farmers, renewing and strengthening the network of producers so crucial to civic agriculture (Lyson, 2004). While sharing a meal and during the break, farmers talked, laughed, exchanged stories, and filled each other in on the latest news at their farms. Conversations about things such as poultry processing led to collaborative plans to share equipment, while tales of new farmers’ struggles were met with lessons learned from more experienced producers. And at the end of the evening, farmers exchanged contact information, which was also provided on the focus group itinerary.

Additionally, feminist ethnographic fieldwork provided insights into the history, evolution, and mission of BRWIA as a gendered CAO, calls to better understand gender relations in the food system. As Allen and Sachs (2007) argued, “We need to know much more about who women food activists are, their motivations, and their visions for the food system” (16). Reflecting the marginalization of women in agriculture, BRWIA began as a small group of women farmers aiming to create a supportive network for sharing information and resources, spurred by the recognition of gendered approaches and a lack of recognition and support from male farmers. Today, the CAO aims to empower women in agriculture and their families through strategies such as the High Country Farm Tour, which fosters producer-consumer reconnections, consumer awareness and education, and socio-economic support for farmers. Their role in supporting and advancing these civic agriculture goals is a crucial one.

## 8. Conclusion

As the numerous detrimental impacts of conventional agro-food systems are increasingly understood, it becomes imperative that agricultural alternatives incorporate a deeper sense of community (Lyson, 2004), which has been linked to broader ‘social resilience’ (Herman, 2015). Over the last century, as farms industrialized and grew larger and fewer, rural communities previously bound together through agricultural ties suffered from a shrinking middle class, deteriorating public services, lower family incomes, and low civic participation (Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007). Civic agriculture aims to reverse these impacts through community-based food systems, which depend on producer-consumer reconnections and the support of local farmers who prioritize ecological and social well being in addition to economic success. Though women have historically been marginalized and minimized in their productive roles, studies link strong civic agricultural goals to female farmers (Trauger et al., 2009; Jarosz, 2011; Hintz, 2015). Thus, the support of women farmers should be prioritized in fostering sustainable community-based food systems, largely dependent on CAOs, innovative strategies, inclusive farmer networks, and horizontal knowledge exchange.

This paper highlighted BRWIA as a gendered CAO that strengthens community-based food systems through programs fostering producer-consumer reconnections, consumer education, and socio-economic support for women farmers and their families, focusing particularly on their annual High Country Farm Tour as an innovative and under-studied civic agricultural strategy. Focus groups with participating farmers revealed more-than-economic

outcomes including education and awareness, connections and relationships, and renewal, appreciation, and enjoyment, each crucial to goals of civic agriculture and important in maintaining farmers’ inspiration or ‘enchantment’ (Herman, 2015). The focus group methodology, following Trauger et al. (2008), was employed as PAR that brought women farmers together to network, to share experiences and best practices, and to develop innovative solutions and ideas for the future, improving Farm Tour outcomes and further strengthening the producer networks so crucial to a civic agriculture.

We conclude that innovative strategies such as the High Country Farm Tour are key in advancing civic agricultural goals, holding real “potential to nurture local economic development, maintain diversity and quality in products, and provide forums where producers and consumers can come together to solidify bonds of local identity and solidarity” (Lyson, 2004, 7). Our study indicated that embodied tours of civic farms can enable “agricultural spaces to become connected social hubs within which genuinely supportive communities can develop and flourish” (Leck et al., 2014, 322), and when such strategies highlight women farmers, this potential is particularly potent. It is recommended that the model of community-based farm tours be adopted by more communities as an innovative civic agricultural strategy, and that CAOs, particularly those targeting women farmers, should be more actively understood and incorporated as the pivotal “underlying structure that supports civic agriculture” (Lyson, 2004, 63) in studies of food and agriculture. Both CAOs and their innovative strategies are of vital importance in rebuilding linkages between producers and consumers, by which “communities throughout the United States will establish a foundation for a more socially and environmentally integrated food system” (Lyson, 2004, 7).

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