Article Summary:

- The evolution of agricultural systems begins with the soil. Four types of agriculture can be hypothesized.
- The methods of nature: primeval forest, prairie; The agriculture of nations that have past away: Ancient Rome etc.; The agriculture of the Orient: China, India, Japan; The methods of Occidental agriculture: Europe, the Americas
- In “Nature’s Agriculture” plant and animal systems are always mixed. Soil is covered and conserved. Nutrients are consistently returned and recycled.
- In agriculture of nations that have past away, social changes in the way humans interact with farming have led to collapse. Traditional methods based on a local connection to food have given way to urbanization, slavery, and less attention paid to maintaining soil fertility.
- In agriculture of the Orient, systems have been maintained for 2000+ years. Agriculture relies on returning minerals and nutrients to the system. Farms are small scale, very diverse and very productive.
- In Occidental agriculture the scale is much larger and less people actively work the land. Monoculture is extensively practiced and soil is viewed more as a non depletable resource. Yields are high but the long-term sustainability of this form of agriculture is unknown and, in Sir Howard’s opinion, unlikely.

Discussion Questions:

1. In Sir Howard’s view, how has the loss of animals affected agricultural systems?
2. What does Sir Howard mean when he talks about “the hunger of the stomach” and the hunger of the machine? How do biofuels fit into this debate?
3. How plausible is the reintroduction of “humanure practices” in modern agriculture? What are some possible constraints?
4. How might agricultural pests be viewed as “professors”? Does this view hold any value for modern agricultural practices?

Overall Discussion Question:

1. The roots of organic agriculture are strongly tied to soil tilth and health as an overall measure of system health and this has been extended to the relative need for pest management. How appropriate is this relative to different production systems (i.e. field crops, vegetables, fruit production)?