Hemp and the environment

Family

Hemp and the environment. The plant we know as hemp has the scientific Cannabis Sativa. We tend to hear this word in connection with drug abuse, and it is true that the hemp plant can be used to make hallucinogenic drugs which are illegal and very widely regulated in most countries. As a result of this possibility, the United States government has banned the use of any variety of hemp. It is important to realise, however, that the cannabis drug, or marijuana as it is sometimes known, can only be produced from one type of hemp. There is another type which we know as industrialized hemp, and this plant is an incredibly useful resource which we could and perhaps should cultivate in large amounts for various important industrial functions. Robinson explains how the plant's fibrous structure could be used instead of wood: " it yields four times more fiber per acre than trees do." (Robinson: 1996, p. 21) When fibers are needed for paper and textile factories, for example, hemp would be a much cheaper alternative than wood. It grows much faster than wood, reaching heights of up to 16 feet in one season, and its dense leaves ensure that weeds do not grow in the ground beneath it. This means that farmers who plant hemp to harvest its fiber will not need to use large amounts of pesticides. Other plants which are used for fiber, such as cotton, on the other hand, require very high levels of pesticides to keep down the harmful insects which feed on the plants. It is obviously cheaper to avoid the use of pesticides, and it is much better for the environment, since pesticides can harm wildlife and pollute the soil and the water system for generations. Purely as an economical and environmentally sound alternative to wood and cotton, then, hemp is a very good investment. It benefits the users and prevents the widespread devastation of scarce resources which take a long time to grow, such as rainforests and oak or pine trees. When

considering traditional crops like cotton, people often forget the long term effects which cultivation of one single plant can bring. Such a monoculture drains the soil of important nutrients, and the farmers find themselves adding chemicals and biological materials to the soil. In addition to this, pesticides also have to be bought for plants like cotton. Cotton is an expensive crop: “ Cotton is grown on 3 percent of the earth’s best arable land and uses a whopping 26% of the world’s pesticides.” (Robinson: 1996, p. 22) Hemp grown for fiber, on the other hand, is naturally resistant to pests, and it can be used in rotation with other crops to create a system which is largely self-fertilizing. When the hemp is harvested, its remaining leaves and tops can be left to fertilize the soil for the next crop. The addition of natural products like animal manure is quite sufficient for hemp, in smaller quantities and without the addition of pesticides. The seeds of the hemp plant are also useful, and scholars throughout the ages have been aware of the high nutritious value of the oil that can be pressed out of them: “ Hemp seed oil is truly unique. Approximately 80 per cent is polyunsaturated fat- the highest of any vegetable oil.” (Smith: 1999, p. 1) In western countries there is too much dependence on animal fats and this leads to problems like obesity and heart disease. If people used hemp oil instead of animal products, they would improve their health and reduce the risk of these diseases. Smith notes also that hemp seeds can be ground down into a “ rich nutty tasting flour 41 per cent protein” (Smith: 1991, p. 1). This flour could be used for cooking and it would be much more healthy than ordinary wheat flour, because it contains such a large amount of protein. It is also a good alternative for people who are allergic to wheat or other common grains. One increasingly important advantage of hemp is that it can be used for fuel. The

world is beginning to run out of fossil fuels like oil, coal and gas, and once these resources are used up, they cannot be replaced because they take millions of years to form. Hemp, on the other hand, is a renewable source of fuel and this makes it an exciting prospect for the future. The gases released from it are also less harmful than petroleum gases, and so all in all, hemp is a very useful crop with many benefits to the environment when compared with modern alternatives. References Robinson, Rowan. The Great Book of Hemp: The Complete Guide to the Environmental, Commercial and Medicinal Uses of the World’s Most Extraordinary Plant. Rochester: Park Street Press, 1996. Smith, Kelly. “ Hemp Seeds: The Perfect Food”. Online article available at: http://www. naturalhealthweb. com/articles/smith1. html