

One system we discussed during class was the potato farm system, specifically the Healthy Grown potatoes story. As a student studying the intersection of marketing and sustainability, it was interesting to see how the boundaries of this system almost entirely dictated the market result of the company. Originally, farmers were not concerned about the fact that chemicals used in potato production were running off into aquifers and causing environmental issues. Their boundaries were set to only see the system consisting of potato production and marketing interactions related to their potato business. However, when the boundary was extended to include the impact of chemical runoff into water necessary to sustain crane life, the farmers' perspective changed. UW as well as the WWF got involved and helped farmers realize the impact poor water quality also has on their own livelihoods, thus a compromise was reached to begin growing organic potatoes. When the boundaries were once again extended to realize the new "double-bind" in which Walmart, a potato distributor, would not pay a premium to farmers for their improved product, more issues were discovered within the system. Ultimately, this "double-bind" was avoided since Healthy Grown potatoes gained a larger market share due to superior quality at the same price as regular potatoes.

Each time the boundaries were selected, they were decided as a result of new perspectives being introduced; at first, the boundaries were established based on only the farmer perspective, then came the UW/WWF perspective, and *then* came the potato distributor perspective. Similar to the activity from class in which groups created their own version of a "potato farm system," each and every system was constructed differently because different individuals with different perspectives set different boundaries. As redundant as that sounds, I think it is that differing perspective that affects how boundaries are selected and ultimately governs the outcomes of the system.

I find it rather strange that the boundaries of the Healthy Grown potato system were originally set to be extremely narrow. Did the farmers really not see that the poor water quality would in turn affect themselves as well? Did they not understand the impact their actions would have on wildlife, or did they just not care to think about the consequences if wildlife organizations were to get involved? This also begs the question that if it were not for UW or the WWF raising such concerns, would any change have occurred at all? Or would their old methods continue to be the methods in place today? I would like to believe that the conceptual boundary change to the system – that is, the realization that potato farmers were suffering themselves with poor water quality – absolutely changed the view of the system. It was no longer just a potato business but a subsystem within a much larger ecosystem where nature and humans are negatively affected. Thus, changing the physical boundaries of the system also creates a new view, as seen by the conversion to organic potato farming and the realization that organic potatoes are a highly marketable product.

I also think the idea of the “double-bind” is connected to the method of setting boundaries. So often individuals choose to define things in binaries: male and female, 0s and 1s, my way or the highway, etc. In reality, the world is not so black and white and systems are so complex to the degree that there is likely another option or another way to view the relationships of a system. In the Healthy Grown example, I feel like systems thinking has already put me in the mindset of naturally finding ways to overcome the “double-bind” in that before the idea of market share was even mentioned, I had thought of this as a method of avoiding the issues imposed by Walmart. That, I think, is the real power in becoming a systems thinker: understanding that there is a complex web of relationships and there will always be ways to set

your boundaries even wider to discover previously unknown relationships that could lead you to a more desirable outcome.