

Alternative Futures for Agriculture

We are losing a plant or animal species to extinction every 60 minutes. We may lose, in the next fourteen years, twenty percent of all remaining species of plants and animals, according to the President's Council on Environmental Quality. The activities of one species, **MAN**, are totally responsible for the ecosystem changes causing this devastation.

Further, our water, air and soil are being degraded and depleted. Soil erosion caused by mineral extraction, deforestation, and modern agribusiness practices will, within the next three decades, create the loss of one-third of the planet's topsoil.

I used to hear statements like these and I totally disbelieved their truth, I visualized a long-haired "hippie", completely out of touch with reality, predicting either doom and gloom several thousand years into the future or the demise of a small snail somewhere in the Chicago River.

My understanding has changed! In fact, my position is now 180 degrees from where it was earlier. Four years of experimenting with my irrigation system, attempting to build a non-limiting environment for growing corn, helped me understand the error of my thinking. The changes in the ecosystems in my own soil astounded me!

During that time, I applied extremely high amounts of anhydrous ammonia (400#N/year), muriate of potash (960#/year), and triazine herbicides (at 1 1/2 times the normal rate) in an attempt to raise 300 bushel-per-acre corn with no cultivation.

I speeded up a process which I believe is taking place on every "conventionally operated" farm in the world today. I destroyed virtually all of the biological life in the soil. One could not even find an earthworm in my fields. I caused the soil aerobic zone to diminish to 1 1/2 inches. The soil became more difficult to work. Yes, I speeded up a process that normally takes 25-100 years into 3-4 years!

"Man against nature...That's what life's all about!" declares General Thomas Sands, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I must admit that I had developed a militaristic attitude of being at war with nature as well. I realize in retrospect that I was a product of the thinking of Bacon and Newton and others who set forth a view of nature as raw material existing for the sole purpose of being exploited. I was further influenced by political and economic theorists like John Lock and Adam Smith who suggested that nature only had value when it was turned into something useful. It had become easy for me to justify the use of the earth in any way at all, as long as individual freedom, knowledge, and prosperity were the results.

I now agree completely with Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson when he states that Christian faith in the Western World has become captive to the assumptions of modern culture which sever God from the Creation and subject the Creation to humanity's arrogant and unrestrained power. Rev. Michaelson goes on to state that the materialism which has developed has constricted the arena for truth to be known and for certainty to be established. He says "Now reality can only be proved rather than accepted by faith." In other words, the true nature of the world can only be known through the scientific method. This severs God's relationship to the Creation in the understanding of the modern mind. In short, nature is commonly understood today as an object unto itself, apart from its relationship to God.

In the first Chapter of Genesis, verses 26-28, the account is related of God's creation of man in His own image. God blessed man and gave him dominion over the earth. The biblical term dominion does not mean domination of nature by man. The biblical concept of dominion is connected to two other key ideas: 1) Covenant and 2) Stewardship.

The concept of covenant deals with God's covenant with man. This covenant began in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:28-29) and was renewed with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The covenant specifically states that God will remain faithful to us and will provide everything we need to live. For our part of the covenant, we are expected to be faithful to God and to live in a loving relationship with Him and with our fellow creatures. In this, God expects us to take care of the land.

The biblical idea of stewardship has become identified with the concept of wise management. I now understand it to mean much more than just wise management. To me it is the process of learning from nature and learning to work in harmony with all of the natural ecosystems, including the ecosystems found in the soil. I understand my specific responsibility for stewardship in terms of renewable farming.

When I evaluate a specific practice in our farming operation, that practice must be profitable and it must be practical if it is to be implemented. I also know that practice must contribute to the integrity, the beauty, and the harmony of the bionic community. If it does not, it is wrong for me to implement.

Wendell Berry has written, "The family farm is failing because it belongs to an order of values and a kind of life that is failing." According to Berry, the failure of the rural way of life is at root a failure to grasp the complexity of life on earth and the simple truth that our existence depends on how well we take care of the soil.

Dr. Calvin DeWitt, Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, says "Christian stewardship is a carekeeping of the earth that works to preserve and restore the integrity of the created order, doing the will of the Creator, and seeking for the Creator's kingdom of integrity and peace--a kingdom devoid of human arrogance, ignorance, and greed. Christian stewardship is so living on earth that Heaven will not be a shock to us.

As I consider alternatives for the future of agriculture, it is my prayer that I will be given renewed ears and renewed eyes for the presence of God in all of life, and that my farming practices will all be more and more in harmony with the Creator.

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