

What is today's meaning of environmental stewardship ?

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Charles McLaughlin, an Iowa farmer, spoke at the Billings,

Montana Annual Society Meeting on: Aldo Leopold's Land

Ethic Revisited. Charles practiced Leopold's concept of land ethics by using his land, as a farm, while maintaining an ecological balance of all natural systems involved. He was concerned with soil erosion, water quality, wildlife habitat, threatened species, in essence, the overall quality of life.

How relevant is "Leopold's Land Ethic Revisited" a decade ago in present America? How many users of land and water producing food and fiber, for consumers here and abroad, practice stewardship? In today's world driven increasingly by economic decisions, and reliance on the market system (not government) to protect and conserve renewable natural resources, will a land ethic suffice? It took a disaster, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s to awaken the American public to the magnitude of the soil erosion problem. That awareness, building on the earlier work of Hugh Hammond Bennett, helped create the soil conservation movement. Federal soil and water conservation programs caused an awesome array of conservation practices to be installed on the privately-owned lands in every region of the nation. Land managers had, as Leopold hoped, begun to see land not as a commodity belonging to us, but land as a community to which we belong and to use it with love and respect. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.

Until the enactment of the Food Security Act of 1985, with a Conservation Title, soil and water conservation on privately-owned agricultural land was voluntary. Technical and financial assistance was available from USDA, and increasingly from non-federal governments. The '70's "fence-row-to-fence-row" planting accelerated erosion. The several conservation provisions of the 1985 Farm Bill allowed successful bidders to voluntarily enroll their highly erodible cropland in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). However, three provisions: Sodbuster, Swampbuster, and Conservation Compliance drastically changed the meaning of voluntary stewardship of agricultural resources. To qualify for federal "farm program" benefits a set of rules and regulations came into play. The least demanding was Sodbuster asking that any highly erodible grass or tree land be converted to cropland following a conservation plan. The Conservation Compliance provision was more stringent requiring a plan to be in place by 1990 and fully implemented by 1995. The Swampbuster feature was a total prohibition on converting wetlands to cropland. All provisions related to the linkage of policies for commodities and conservation for the first time in USDA history. Thus, a land ethic or stewardship attitude was re-enforced through the possible denial of certain federal funds and potential sanctions, if violations were detected or plans were not adequately implemented by those managing land and water for agricultural production.

The claim by those who manage land and water resources for

agricultural production, as the Nation's first environmentalists, is credible, if we accept available NRI data and reports. There are critics of compliance, because of limited penalties. However, cropland soil loss is reduced, especially on lands in the CRP. Conversion of private agricultural wetlands has been reversed to the point that a no-wetland-loss objective, of a prior Administration, has nearly been achieved. The threat of increased regulation to combat non-point sources of water pollution has not diminished, but is not the first option. The 1990 Farm Bill strengthened the 1985 conservation Title, adding the Wetland Reserve Program. Non-point sources of water pollution caused much debate, with limited actions, because of lack of adequate funding.

P.L. 104-127, the new farm bill, has an excellent conservation title with several incentive-based provisions. The process of rule-making and subsequent implementation is now underway. It is too early to predict the impact of some new programs. The promise of CRP and WRP programs until 2002 is encouraging. The "Freedom to Farm" portion of the law will give landusers more flexibility on what to plant, and where to plant crops. The contract does allow a self-certification of compliance. However, the drawdown of stocks for corn and wheat, and the present attractive market-prices may tempt some to again crop marginal soils with little or no conservation measures. As McLaughlin reminded us a decade ago, Leopold stated in his Land Ethic, "A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lop-sided. It tends to ignore,

and eventually to eliminate many elements in the land that lack commercial value---It assumes, falsely I think, that the economic part of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts".

Now with the potential for significant reductions in federal agricultural and conservation funding ,along with several proposals pending in the 104th Congress to lessen regulation, will a land ethic be the primary motivation to protect the soil and water resources used for agricultural production ?

What do we understand about stewardship, about a land ethic ?

The President's Council on Sustainable Development, after two years of research and public hearings, released their report February 26, 1996. This high-level Presidential advisory panel of 25 leaders from business, government, environmental, civil rights, and Native American organizations said, "To achieve sustainability, institutions and individuals must adopt this new way of thinking". It was their conviction that economic, environmental, and social equity issues are inextricably linked and must be considered together. Both individuals and institutions must take on greater responsibility, and embrace an ethic of environmental stewardship.

Chapter 5 of *Sustainable America, a New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and a Healthy Environment for the Future*, is Natural Resources Stewardship. It begins with:
Stewardship is an essential concept that helps to define

appropriate human interaction with the natural world.

An ethic of stewardship builds on collaborative approaches:

and incentives in such areas as agricultural resources

management, sustainable forestry, fisheries, restoration, and

biodiversity conservation. This is followed with, "America is

blessed with an abundance of natural resources which provide

both the foundation for its powerful and vibrant economy and

serve as the source of aesthetic inspiration and spiritual

sustenance for many. Continued prosperity depends on the

country's ability to protect this natural heritage and learn

to use it in ways that do not diminish it".

This is followed by a challenging observation, *Stewardship is*

at the core of this obligation. Without personal and

collective commitment, without an ethic based on the

acceptance of responsibility, efforts to sustain natural

resources protection and environmental quality cannot succeed

and as the population increases, so too will demands for food,

and fiber, fertile soil, clean and abundant water, and wildlife.

The shift from managing a single resource or a single species

to managing an ecosystem for a variety of resources, including

the maintenance of its biodiversity, was endorsed as making

sense.

Their review of incentives for stewardship also examined the

need to eliminate any disincentives for natural resources

stewardship. We have been down that road before, beginning

with the 1985 FSA. Subsidies, expenditures, and taxation were

identified as three distinct areas where reforming present actions to become more of an incentive to stewardship, relies heavily on market-driven economics, including least-cost methods. Appropriate regulations were part of the answer.

The policy recommendations for agricultural resources management are set forth in actions 1 through 7.

Are you still seeking, as I am, for a definition of a land ethic-of stewardship-that will be meaningful to a private owner and/or user of land and water for agriculture? Is it in the eye of the beholder as Charles McLaughlin viewed his farm in Iowa?

A review of land use history since our nation started is dominated with controversies and conflicts of interests.

In the beginning the West seeking new settlers and development, wanted low land prices. The East feared the loss of its population and the increasing political power of the West. Our land history is replete with needed action always late. What we have had have been trends in the prevailing attitude toward the land. Hugh Hammond Bennett awakened the the nation to the ravages of water, wind, and neglect that were depleting our land resources. He not only saw the need, but had the ability to bring together the programs that would ensure a good stewardship of the land, if practiced. Do each of us view a grain of sand as eternity, a blade of grass infinity

Charles McLaughlin, in Billings said, "This Society represents a formidable array of expertise and technology. I think we ought to be more publically vocal, perhaps put aside the protocol of the ivory tower, and to go out to impact the intellectual and political community. We must imbue technology with the poetry of the "Sand County Almanac . When some remote ancestor invented the shovel he became a giver, he could plant a tree. And when the axe was invented he became a taker he could chop it down. Whoever owns the land has thus assumed, whether he knows it or not, the devine functions of creating and destroying plants. Other ancestors, less remote have invented other tools, but each of these, upon close scrutiny proves to be either an elaboration of, or an accessory to, the original pair of basci instruments. We classify ourselves into vocations, each of us wields some particlar tool".

A need for a dialouge on stewardship is timely between the users of the resources and conservationists. Will SWCS members and collaborators lead, become advocates for sustaining eco-systems as the market-place increasingly influences decisions of land owners and managers, whether rural or urban ? As the world moves rapidly into the next century, with an additional 87 million new people added each year, will any ethic prevail? Food security-worldwide-will challenge a stewardship of land and water. Ethics may be the glue that holds a civilized society together, but they are not laws, they are a set of moral principles and values that govern an individual's or group's conduct. A profession is characterized by conforming

to its technical and ethical standards.

The Society's Mission Statement, adopted 4/19/96 by the SWCS Board of Directors, states, "The Soil and Water Conservation Society fosters the science and art of soil, water, and related natural resource management to achieve sustainability. We promote and practice an ethic recognizing the interdependence of people and the environment". Our vision statement, adopted by the SWCS Board of Directors on 2/8/96, states, "The Soil and Water Conservation Society is recognized and respected as an effective advocate for the conservation of soil, water, and related natural resource issues".

The above words need to be translated, increasingly, into the individual actions of SWCS members and their Chapters to find the answers to my question: What is today's meaning of environmental stewardship ?