

## Farming with the Wild

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“A beautiful and harmonious new vision for sustainable agriculture. By incorporating the voices of the most important ranchers, farmers, and environmentalists in this country, Dan Imhoff is able to bring together the power and creativity of this emerging movement.”

Alice Waters

### Introduction

Farming in Leopold's Footsteps

By Fred Kirschenmann

As a farmer, my relationship with wild things has been fraught with ambiguity. I grew up believing that wildness was the enemy of agriculture. I didn't like blackbirds eating our sunflowers, coyotes attacking our calves, or weeds robbing our crops of nutrients and moisture. So I had an almost instinctive inclination to tear all the wildness out of our farm. I was ready to use all the tools or scientific management tactics available to eradicate wild things from the farm.

A part of me even felt morally justified in harboring that attitude because it is deeply entrenched in our culture. The early Puritans who settled on New England's shores considered it part of their manifest destiny to “tame the wilderness” and “build the Kingdom of God” in this “new land.” Cotton Mather (1663-1728) considered the wilderness to be the “devil's playground.” It was, therefore, part of his God-given responsibility to urge his fellow Puritans to replace the wilderness with nice, neat rows of corn. For good or ill, that Puritan ethic shaped much of the culture in North America once Native Americans were driven from the land. I am a product of that culture.

Like the generations of farmers and ranchers before me, I have lived, in part, by this wilderness eradication ethic and caused devastating harm to natural ecosystems. Meanwhile, conservationists have adopted a countervailing ethic in order to protect the wilderness. In response to centuries of abuse, conservationists decided to preserve wilderness in its natural state by designating certain regions as Wilderness Areas that are to be protected from human activity. Only with great difficulty have wilderness advocates managed to keep a small proportion of our country (approximately 5 percent) free from industrial intrusions (though not free of livestock). But by quarantining humans from certain parts of the landscape to preserve it, we have also inadvertently consented to humans using the rest of the landscape without any regard for its wildness.

We now know that this dual approach to land use is dysfunctional on both counts. Wildness cannot be “maintained” in the form of isolated pieces of the landscape, and farms cannot be productively managed without wildness. Just as wild organisms need the connectivity of natural ecosystems to thrive, so agriculture needs the wildness of soil organisms to maintain soil quality and pollinators to grow crops—both necessary elements for productive farming. So in the interests of both productive farming and robust wilderness, we need to revisit our dualistic mentality.

Since producing as much as possible in one part of the landscape while preserving everything in its natural state in another part of the landscape is not working, and the real goals of conservation—preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community—have been betrayed, we are now forced to come to terms with our fundamental role as *Homo sapiens* within the biotic community. The essential fallacy in our dualistic thinking is that in both cases—wilderness and agriculture—we had assumed that humans were separate from Nature. Isolating wilderness areas from human activity assumes that wilderness thrives best without human intervention. Indeed, large areas uninhabited by people such as the Brooks Range of Alaska provide powerful testament. That assumption, however, while probably true in the modern, industrial context, serves only to deepen the schism between humans and wild Nature. Isolating wilderness from agricultural landscapes presumes that humans, acting separately from Nature, can control production systems purely with human ingenuity and technology. Neither assumption encourages the sort of healthy reintegration into the biotic community that humans must achieve—for our own sake and the sake of all life on Earth. Behind that dualistic fallacy lies another, namely that Nature is a given, that it has evolved into a state of equilibrium (that it will remain essentially the same) and that we can either manipulate it at will (agriculture) or preserve it in a natural stasis (wilderness). Again, there are no empirical data to justify such assumptions. And this both encourages the alienation of humans from Nature and represents a serious underestimation of Nature.

Fifty years ago Aldo Leopold attempted to overcome this flawed dualistic thinking by introducing a new paradigm—an “ecological consciousness.” The role of *Homo sapiens*, he suggested, had to be changed from one of “conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.” This way of thinking, he suggested, transforms our relationship within Nature. It “reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.”<sup>1</sup> When our understanding stems from this perspective, the boundaries between domesticated agriculture and wilderness begin to soften.

Our society’s failure to appreciate the need for an ecological consciousness is evident not only on industrial farms, but on organic farms as well. We have, unfortunately, come to think of organic farms as isolated enclaves that have little or no connection with the ecology of the landscape in which those farms exist. Organic farms, treated as isolated enclaves, cannot maintain the rich biodiversity necessary for a healthy farm, any more than an isolated wilderness can preserve the biodiversity of a healthy ecosystem. If we hope to create an agriculture that ensures the land’s capacity for self-renewal, or a wilderness that perpetuates the native biodiversity of a region, then humans who possess an ecological consciousness need to be part of the landscape.

It is, in part, our dualistic thinking that has led us to believe that the “environment” exists of its own accord. It is just “out there.” In truth, however, the environment is constantly being constructed by the organisms (including humans) who live in it. As Harvard evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin reminds us, all organisms “are in a constant process of altering their environment. Every species, not only *Homo sapiens*, is in the process of destroying its own environment by using resources that are in short supply and transforming them into a form that cannot be used again by the individuals of the species.” In other words, if it were not for the activity of organisms in nature modifying their environment—and in doing so, destroying part of it—there would be no environment.

It is the process of one species destroying part of the environment that creates opportunities for other species. Cows eat grass, thereby destroying part of the environment. The by-product of that activity is manure, which provides food for dung beetles and other organisms, who in turn destroy the manure, and in so doing create nutrients for the soil to produce more grass. As Lewontin goes on to say, “...every act of consumption is also an

act of production.”<sup>2</sup> The appropriate role of humans, then, is to engage in a dance with other species in the biotic community in a manner that enables the community to renew itself—both its wild and domestic parts.

Applying such a view to 21st century agriculture will require a radical shift in our relationship with Nature. First and foremost, we must reclaim our solidarity with the ecosystems in which we farm through “place-based reinhabitation.” As David Abrams has written: “It is only at the scale of our direct, sensory interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world.”<sup>3</sup> Our mission as farmers and ranchers then, must evolve from providing adequate, affordable, nutritious food and practicing good conservation to taking direct responsibility for the “health of the land.” Our conception of science must change from one that invents technological innovations to solve human problems to sciences that engage in locally based conversations with Nature. Our notions of organic farms must change from enclaves of purity to habitats within ecosystems. The certification of individual farms must give way to standards and monitoring systems for certifying entire watersheds. At that point, agriculture’s relationship to wildness will move from production enclaves to wild farm alliances, and as the author of this book argues, restoring interconnected healthy ecosystems.

On our own organic farm in North Dakota we have begun to appreciate the role of wildness in productive farming. We now use livestock breeds that have retained some of their “wildness” and as a result our beef cows possess the instinct to protect their calves from coyotes until the youngsters are old enough to fend for themselves. We have discovered that maintaining a suitable habitat for pollinators and beneficial insects increases the productivity of our cropping system. By mimicking the “succession” inherent in wild systems with crop rotations, we have eliminated the need for costly herbicides to control weeds. We hope that someday perennial polycultures will replace annual crops, eliminating the need for annual disturbance of agricultural lands. We are convinced that many additional benefits lie hidden in the vast resources of the prairie ecology in which we farm. Despite decades of research and education devoted to controlling Nature, we have a lot of catching up to do. We first need to comprehend how the prairie ecology functions so that we can better understand how to farm by accessing Nature’s free ecosystem services while improving the land’s capacity to renew itself. Once we achieve that understanding, our farm will become more profitable and more sustainable.

Given the depletion of fossil fuel resources, the inabilities of our farming regions to sustain any further agriculture-related degradation, our expanding human population and its impacts on biodiversity, many of the above changes will take place. But this will require that we abandon our dualistic thinking, adopt an ecological consciousness, and erase the hard boundaries between tame and wild in our minds.

#### Notes

- 1 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. (Oxford University Press, 1949).
- 2 Richard Lewontin, *The Triple Helix*. (Harvard University Press, 2000).
- 3 David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. (Vintage Books, 1996).

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