10/23/97

FARMING

[Use in August]
June?

Part-time farmers <u>are</u> just playing. We have one of the most pleasurable occupations known to man.

Noel Perrin[1]

For a town boy, a farm might provide escape. For a boy who grew up in Yellowstone Park and spent more of life than was profitable soaking in trout streams and duck marshes, a farm is work. And work ought to pay.

Sixty acres in this climate do not make a viable unit of production, not remotely. Modern farming requires an investment that could never be repaid, even if I were to buy used machinery and spend my days working on it. And that is what a farmer does, in this valley. The sports cars and motorcycles innoculated me against mechanical enthusiasm. They were fun, but only fun, and then only with the wind whistling.

Geology made this place for wildlife anyhow. It is a picture-puzzle of interlocking habitats, three of which happen to be adaptable to farming. We call them fields because they are high and dry enough for farm machinery. Two are growing crops now and I would farm the third, across the creek, if I could figure out how to build a cost-effective bridge for the tractors.

When I got here first, I saw just enough land to hold the stream together. In broader vision, there are two fields big

enough to farm and a third that would produce grain or hay if we could get equipment across the stream. A bridge sturdy enough for today's farm machinery, however, might cost more than a small field would repay. Similarly, the few cattle we could graze would not pay for the fencing needed to keep them off stream banks.

The crops we do raise are good

- for our bank account,
- for the wildlife, and
- for the people who eat what we produce.

So long as all three needs are served, we will try to keep the land in production.

[A farm is, by definition, an ecology altered to feed humans, and you have to remember where you fit in the food chain. You don't take possession, exactly, but you decide who eats whom out here.]

[You don't stop at his house when you want to see him. [Mike?] You check at the tool-shed, [] which despite its name is the biggest building in sight -- a modern farm's cathedral. [Add details on big machinery under repair.]

[The man in the tool shed is Bob Kline, [describe] who has been farming this valley for [] years [Rod? Parents?] He sees things for which I have no eyes.]

The soil is deep, silty loam, he tells me, with a little clay that makes it stick to your feet after a shower. Can't do much better, he says. It has to be good or it would not be worth farming at all, what with the brush and marsh that a farmer has to work around.

Farming is always risky, but not as risky here as it is on the high plains east of the mountains. [See Chronicle article of 5/5/96.] The weather is on our side, during most growing seasons, with enough sun and enough rain. The geology catches snow for irrigation and gives us a high water table. There will come a time, too late, when the world will wish that places like this had been set aside for agriculture.

Most efficient crop is the alfalfa (lucerne), [Bob] says, which gets its roots down to the water. He mixes it with orchard grass, which delays the first cutting well into July. We don't want to lure ducks and pheasants into the stuff -- which happens to be excellent nesting cover -- and then harvest broods with the hay. After a late spring, I may have to mark nests so that Bob can work around them. Hucklebery points the hens and I put in the flags. On a place of this size, one good brood could double the pheasant population.

On the south twenty, eight acres can be farmed. It is in barley, now, but will be rotated with alfalfa when nitrogen in the soil gets low. The grain is a gambler's crop, with wildly variable prices. But then all farmers are gamblers, hoping for a good year. Last year we had one -- over four [] dollars a bushel and sixty bushels an acre, without irrigation.

Most farmers harvest and then prepare the field for next spring's planting while the weather is still dependable. Plowing, however, buries the spilled grain. One year we left an acre standing, but deer nipped off every ear as soon as it was ripe. Now Bob mows all the barley but cuts it high, leaving stubble and

spillage. Birds are built for feeding on the ground, and they get enough to survive the short hungry days. One of these springs, however, the weather may keep Bob out of the field. If so, we won't get a crop in.

> There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery and the other that heat comes from the furnace.
>
> Aldo Leopold
>
> (Quoted by Terry Wieland in Remington Country, fall (?) 95.)

> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
>
> Yeats (p. 599) [confirm]

[See Thoreau on Contact! used on p.9 Hsbandry?]

[ecocnomics: farming does not pay well.]

During our evolution, the purpose of life was tomorrow. Food came in spasms and you had to spear your woolly mammoth when you got your chance, because it might not pass through again.

Most farm crops are nature tamed. They took away wilderness and gave us country and city -- Siamese twins joined at the stomach. The change gave us culture, too, agriculture and high culture, but has probably not had much impact on our genetic structure.

A farm is not land on welfare. It has to produce something humans will pay for, or the land will be turned over to some other purpose -- probably a housing development, in my valley.

, by definition, an environment altered to feed humans. It has a manager who decides on the mix of crops. The manager may opt for a monoculture of, say, grain or he may leave some room for wildlife. In either case, the land is part of the general economy.

Death on a farm involves lives that are close to you. [Lead to individual vs. population.] It is harder to watch the death of one deer you know than to realize that deer up on the mountain are dying of cold and hunger.

Matter of perspective.

[Firewood -- farm: calories burned & eaten]

[Managing Nature]

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
>
> Genesis 1:26

> We have a particular difficulty figuring out how to incorporate farming into nature, and for good reason. Agriculture has been a part of the natural landscape for as long as there has been civilization and writing and philosophy -- and cities to flee from.... farming is full of nostalgic associations. The lure of the pastoral long predates the age of wilderness worship....
>
> Stephen Budiansky, Nature's Keepers[2]

Budiansky is entirely right, so far as he goes, but back beyond civilization -- before Genesis -- there were people who lived wild. They are gone now, or nearly so. I could no longer hunt with the Bushmen if I returned to Angola. There is no point in pretending. Their world was not Nature. It needed no name, when it was everything. We named it because it was different from our world and in the naming it died.

The leftovers we call nature are abundant, all the same, but beware the worship. Muskrat [] did not build your world, or mine. Muskrat won't save it. Muskrats may even tear down its silty banks. We might have to trap muskrats to save what's left.

Earlier in this century, Americans reached a broad consensus on the conservation of wildlife. The consensus has been shrinking toward profound disagreement -- not on facts but values. Research has shown us how to have wildlife in large numbers. Science cannot, however, tell us what we want to do with what we've got.

There are, broadly speaking, three options. The first commentator below suggests bringing wildife under full human control. The second wants a hands-off policy. The third votes for management with a light touch.

1. Full Control

> Cleveland Amory, a spokesman for the Fund for Animals, argues that, in an ideal world, animals would be protected not only from humans but from each other: "prey will be separated from predator and there will be no overpopulation or starvation because all will be controlled by sterilization or implant."[3]

Under this model, humans will take over the decisions heretofore made (or not made) by nature. We will control:

- Reproduction. We will prevent overpopulation in elk, for example, by sterilizing cow elk.
- Movement. Such elk calves as are allowed to be born will be separated from, for example, grizzly bears, which prey on young elk in nature.
- Food. What the grizzly will eat is not clear.

Such controls might be possible for a few species. Zoological gardens are very expensive, but they know how to control the reproduction, movement, and food, of such few animals as interest humans.

Game farms achieve control in larger areas and sell what they produce, paying the costs of production. There are, however, only a few species that are marketable for meat or antlers.

This leaves us with the non-marketable, non-charismatic, mini-fauna. Sterilization of ground squirrels, rats, grasshoppers, and cockroaches would be labor-intensive. Natural selection would continue in these populations.

It is not quite accurate, then, to say that our attempts at full control would lead to the death of nature. We would remove from nature only the species we love.

2. Hands Off

[]

Let it be, let it be,
Let it be, let it be.
There will be an answer.
Let it be.

The Beatles

Call this the natural-regulation model. The objective is to keep nature natural -- which means that this is not a variation

on the first model but the opposite of it. Man divorces Nature in the belief that she can do better on her own. She gets custody of wildlife. Man retains visitation rights. (It may be significant that Man and Nature are among the few nouns with gender in the English language.)

Call this the wilderness model, if you prefer. All of the western hemisphere worked without human interference until some 11,000 years ago. There are still a few wilderness areas in which Nature takes care of her own business, to a point. Even in Alaska, however, the biggest species -- grizzlies, moose, mountain sheep, and so on -- need some human oversight, some finger on the scale.

I wish it were not so. A hands-off policy appeals to me because it saves work -- and also because given things are best. Anna and I will be plucking flowers soon for Memorial Day. They will be wild ones all, iris and phlox and violets.

3. An Ethic for Governance

> There are still those who shy at this prospect of a man-made game crop as artificial and therefore repugnant. This attitude shows good taste but poor insight. Every head of wild life still alive in this country is already artificialized, in that its existence is condtioned by economic forces. Game management merely proposes that their impact shall not remain wholly fortuitous. The hope of the future lies not in curbing the influence of human occupancy -- it is already too late for that -- but in creating a better understanding of the extent of that influence and a new ethic for its governance.
>
> Aldo Leopold, 1933

Wildlife is a crop in the sense that it is produced and can be harvested. But you cannot farm wildlife, in the sense of

treating it like a tame crop. You cannot control its reproduction, movement, or food. Ducks that breed on this place do so not because they have been put them here but because they flew in and found good nesting cover. Trout are here because they have moved in from somewhere downstream. Deer are here because they have found good browse. The land is semi-tame, but the creatures growing on it are fully wild -- pieces of wilderness animate.

What we raise, in fact, is not wildlife but habitat for wildlife. The ducks, trout, deer, pheasants, cranes, kestrels, and snipe raise themselves. They are all wild, from mallard's egg in the nest to the mallard wing Huckleberry finds after some owl's meal. The process is wild. The results are wild -- wilder than a moose in the wilderness, if wildness is measured by wariness.

The tame crops (barley and hay) are intensively managed. The wild crops get only management as needed -- mud-control in the creek, for example. I would like to report that the light touch saves money, but it does not. I could pour hatchery trout in the pond, let them fatten a little, and catch them at far less expense than those in the creek.

I sweat to provide trout habitat because fishing is play. All hunting and fishing are play, which is to say that they are our original work -- the kind that no longer pays. You don't dig into the soil, when you fish. You dig into your origins. [mind]

[I considered leaving some cattle on the place to control noxious weeds. But our pastures would be so small in area, and so convoluted, that fencing off the stream banks would be

prohibitively expensive. Instead, I took out one internal fence that crossed the spring creek and maintained the barbed wire along our perimeter.]

[On our little place, cattle would amount to no more than hobby-farming. We do, however, have enough land for a border collie and a few sheep to keep it out of mischief. I might have been tempted, but for my four years on Irish moors and mountains. There were lots of sheep up there, and precious few of the native grouse. The vegetation had been profoundly altered by grazing. Nobody planned it that way: One thing just led to another and wildlife came in last.]

(1) Second Person Rural. Boston: Godine, 1980. p.31.

(2) NY: Free Press, 1995. pp. 119-120.

(3) The Economist, August 21, 1993. p. 25.