2007

Review of Farming and the Fate of Wild Nature: Essays in Conservation-Based Agriculture.

Judith Soule
NatureServe, Arlington

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch

Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/905

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The editors of this collection set out to “provide the scientific, philosophical, economic, and cultural underpinnings for an emerging movement, conservation-based agriculture.” With many well-recognized contributors (e.g., Berry, Leopold, Kingsolver, Bass, Pollan), the volume should appeal to readers of both conservation biology and sustainable farming. The book uses an accessible journalistic or essayist rather than a scientific referenced style, though several selections provide clear syntheses of scientific findings (e.g., “Context Matters” by Reed Noss and “The Role of Top Carnivores” by John Terborgh et al.). Wide variation in styles and topics tends to distract from the cohesion within sections. I recommend reading the book as a whole, without too much puzzlement over the arrangement, allowing connections to seep in as you go. Most of the essays have been published elsewhere, but their arrangement in this volume provides new perspectives, establishing the codependence of healthy agro- and wild ecosystems. This is a topic of critical importance in the Great Plains, and though not all chapters deal with the Plains, the principles cross ecoregional boundaries.

The strong essays by familiar, respected authors in section 1, beginning with Wendell Berry’s eloquent call for a united front against industrial agriculture, and including two excellent new contributions by Fred Kirschenmann and David Gould and by Laura Jackson, explore the boundaries between tame and wild. Section 2 invites the reader to consider ecosystem services needed and influenced by agriculture, as well as ways of harmonizing farming with nature. A new essay by Baumgartner completes this section with examples of on-farm practices and organic certification standards that incorporate biodiversity conservation. Section 3 provides a primer on biodiversity challenges, with emphases on interdependence of living systems, geographic scale, and context. None of these essays are new, but the synthetic pieces by Leopold, Noss, and Terborgh et al., provide important background principles for increasing the compatibility of wildness and agriculture. Other contributions here rally the reader’s sense of urgency and personal responsibility.

The final section (4) returns to realities of changing farming and food systems to incorporate the wild and concludes that this goal is both possible and in process. Brian Halweil summarizes substantial research, concluding that organic farming can feed us all. Contributions by Jennifer Bogo et al. and Dan Kent show ways of voting with our pocketbooks through fine dining and purchase of eco-labeled products. This section would have benefited from editorial commentary linking back to the larger, sobering context of earlier essays. For example, Dan Barber’s hopeful treatment of agricultural economics needs to be linked back to Jackson’s essay—it will take more than individual commitment or encouraging midsize farms to diversify to change the powerful food and agriculture industry: we need to “speak to the management,” as Jackson concluded. As it stands, it is easy to put down this book and start looking for a local-foods restaurant, rather than to rouse ourselves, as scientists, to engage in the serious cross-disciplinary search for solutions that the editors are seeking to inspire. Judith Soule, NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia.