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Review of *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* by Geoff Cunfer

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On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment. By Geoff Cunfer. Foreword by Dan L. Flores. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. xii + 292 pp. Figures, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper.

Geoff Cunfer has written an important book about the interaction between humans and nature in the Great Plains between 1870 and the end of the twentieth century. It will be useful to those involved in environmental and ecological

science, agriculture and agricultural history, as well as economic history and economic development. One of the largest agricultural landscapes in the U.S., the Great Plains was at one time thought of as “the Great American Desert,” and the Northern Great Plains was the last region to be settled on the agricultural frontier. Interpretation of Great Plains history is split between two camps. The older is the optimistic view of Turner and Webb of adaptive settlement that gradually brought advancement for the region’s inhabitants as new crops, techniques, equipment, and access to water harnessed the land for improved agriculture. The other is the bleaker view of Worster, Cronon, White, and others who stress the inappropriateness of farm settlement and the corresponding degradation of the region’s environment.

Cunfer finds a middle and more realistic outcome—one of successive episodes of temporary equilibrium between people and the environment. But, as he notes, natural systems are not inherently sustainable or in equilibrium, and while there was periodic accommodation by farmers to the constraints of limited and fluctuating rainfall, high winds, and variable soil quality and topography, endogenous environmental shifts forced new adjustments. There never was a condition of “sustainable agriculture,” a conclusion that has broad implications for development economists and ecologists who often posit sustainability as a goal. Cunfer’s analysis is based on an unusual blend of county-level census data for 450 counties, gathered as part of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) Great Plains data set as well as local case studies of farming in the Northern (Billings, Slope, Golden Valley Counties, North Dakota, and Wibaux County, Montana), Central (Rooks County, Kansas), and Southern Plains (Crosby, Lamb, and Floyd Counties, Texas, and Harding and Quay Counties, New Mexico). Among his conclusions, Cunfer finds general stability in the shares of pasture and crop land in the Plains, countering the notion that more and more of the region has been placed in cultivation, undermining natural ecosystems. There has also been considerable diversity in cropping across time, countering the notion of extensive monocropping.

The book describes how people intersected with natural processes to improve their farming prospects, but, at the same time, how the environment constrained what was possible. The arguments are clearly stated, with effective use of maps and figures to illustrate empirical findings. There is also a useful appendix. **Gary D. Libecap**, *Department of Economics and College of Law, University of Arizona*.