

The Industrialization of Agriculture is Killing the Land by George B. Pyle

Even when city folks notice the dwindling population of rural areas and express concern for the dying small communities scattered across the continent, they remain blind to the real causes and the best solutions. They are blind because they have bought the lie that the industrialization of food production is both inevitable and good and that the only problem is finding new uses for the surplus rural population.

The health of rural communities cannot be considered apart from the health of the land that once supported them and still, for the moment, feeds the rest of us.

That land is being laid waste just as surely as are the small towns that used to thrive on the business of farming. Yet the fields cannot speak up, and so their victimization goes mostly unnoticed.

For one thing, the fields are much lighter than they used to be. The latest federal figures available, from 1997, indicate that each year wind and water erosion alone carries away 2 billion tons of soil, or 5.6 tons per cultivated acre.

For every ton of grain and hay harvested in the United States, we lose 2.5 tons

of soil. And, as it is removed by water, the soil takes with it many tons of nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals that poison the waters downstream, require more expensive treatment facilities in cities and create large areas of oxygen-starved, fish-destroying "dead zones" in coastal waters.

Not only are our fields losing quantity, the remaining soil is of ever-decreasing quality. The soil that is left is ripped up to produce a season of genetically identical, chemical-dependent crops, then left bare for much of the year, exposed to wind and rain. Like a drug addict who loses the ability to feel normal without chemical stimulus, modern agriculture has so fried the soil that it cannot produce without larger and larger infusions of chemicals.

Water poured onto arid fields quickly evaporates, leaving behind increased amounts of salt that only reduce the ability of the soil to produce.

All that accelerates soil degradation and requires ever more fertilizer and other chemicals to make up for the natural nutritional value of soil that has been wiped away by modern, high-intensity agriculture.

Good soil is not just dirt. It is a hive of life, much of it either microscopic or even disgusting to urban eyes because urbanites don't understand the need for the growth and decay of slimy things to sustain life. Good farmers are not just people who dig in the dirt. They are the stewards of healthy soil, many of them

unrecognized or even dismissed by those who can't comprehend why anyone would want to do such hard work so far away from a Starbucks.

Because it takes fewer people to beat the earth into submission than it does to lovingly care for it, fewer farmers are producing more food, and fewer rural communities survive to support and be supported by those farmers. But it cannot last. And the final effects will be felt far from the fields, in the deepest urban canyons. Many city dwellers seem to think we would be doing farmers a favor--and ourselves no harm--by turning them into computer pieceworkers. But the fact is that fewer people on farms is both cause and symptom of degraded land, land that is rapidly losing its ability to produce healthy food, now and into the future.

George B. Pyle is a director of the Prairie Writers Circle, a project of the Land Institute Copyright 2002 Los Angeles Times

Michele Simon, JD, MPH

Center for Informed Food Choices

www.informedeating.org

michele@informedeating.org