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BOOK REVIEW

SOIL CONSERVATION

SOIL CONSERVATION POLICIES: AN ASSESSMENT. Soil Conservation Society of America, National Conference on Soil Conservation Policies, Washington, D.C., 1979, Pp. 154.

*Reviewed by Leon S. Minckler**

In his book *The Invisible Pyramid* Loren Eiseley characterized modern mankind as "the world eaters." *Soil Conservation Policies* goes a long way toward validating that observation and gives in some detail the reasons for it and the practices and policies we ought to follow to save the world from man's current wasteful and destructive practices in using natural resources, especially soil and water. The rhetoric is usually moderate but the meaning shouts to be heard.

The book consists of twenty essays each written by a separate author or by joint authors which were presented at a national conference in Washington, D.C. in 1979. The essays cover the history of the soil conservation movement in this country, the goals we should work toward, and how to attain these goals. Old time conservationists, who have kept abreast of the literature, will find little new material, but the essays carry a sense of urgency because it is perceived, perhaps for the first time, that the increasing scarcity of land and water, and their diminution in quality, are essential factors in our national economy and in our ability to "feed the world." One senses a feeling of growing frustration and fright that was not evident in the old pioneering days of Hugh Bennett and the Soil Conservation Service.

Things have happened in the last four or five decades that have made it much more difficult to save our soil and water resources for future human society. The United States' population has doubled

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and world population has at least doubled. Development in the United States has been swallowing farm and forest lands at a current rate of about three million acres a year. High but often uncertain foreign markets for our country's grain have tended to destabilize conservation practices already in use (plow to the fences and plow marginal lands). In the Third World countries, the intensive collection of firewood for cooking and slash and burn agriculture are denuding and eroding vast areas in a part of the world where population is increasing the fastest. *We* are losing four billion tons of top soil and fifty million tons of nitrogen, phosphates and potassium through soil erosion each year. Their replacement is estimated to cost 18 billion dollars. How are we going to "feed the world," feed ourselves, and maintain our resource base? Can it be done on any but a short-term basis?

The authors of this book explore these questions and many more with depth and perception. They all accept the fact of present rapid soil depletion and lowered water quality from siltation. The possible alternative policies and strategies are explored in great detail. The book is a wealth of just about all that has been thought, said, and done on this subject, and the authors are articulate and well-versed in the field. It should be required reading for anyone who pretends any knowledge or influence on the subject of soil conservation. Yet, a feeling of frustration is generated by all the reasoned and reasonable discussion. It's like the old saying, "Everybody wants to go to Heaven but nobody wants to die to get there." Everybody wants conservation but nobody knows how to enforce the hard policies necessary to achieve it.

Although the book was written by many authors from various conservation groups and from both federal and state governments, there are a number of common themes. Also, as would be expected, there is a good deal of duplication in the various discussions. Some of the most common agreements are: (1) an acceptance of the gravity of the soil erosion problem; (2) a generally favorable attitude toward the Soil Conservation Districts; (3) a feeling of letdown in soil conservation efforts in the last decade or so; (4) a favorable and hopeful feeling about the Soil and Water Resource Conservation Act; (5) a sense of time—the feeling that soil conservation must be a long-term concept and effort; and (6) for the most part that the job may be done best by various voluntary devices including incentives, information, and education. Probably every conceivable (up to now) policy, practice, or device to obtain acceptable soil and water conservation is discussed in the book. Regulation is still a dirty word, but a few brave

authors venture the suggestion that some kind of regulation will be necessary if the severe soil losses and loss of good farm and forest land to various developments continue. I have called this the "backs to the wall" imperative, and there is little in the book that indicates it will not happen.

There are a few specific and perhaps off-beat points by various authors I would like to mention. Senator John Culver notes that there is more top soil being lost now than during the worst of the Dust Bowl years. He says we need passion as well as knowledge to solve the problem. Norman Berg of the Soil Conservation Service says that, in the corn belt, soil loss is twice the tolerance limit. David Unger of the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) says we are sacrificing soil conservation needs for short-term profits and that we need a greater recognition of the whole people's interests and ideas. George Bagley of the National Association of Conservation Districts asks the vital (and unanswered) question, "How do we make voluntary efforts work?" Jane Yarn of the Council on Environmental Quality says that we need an ecosystem approach to soil and water conservation; marketplace economics cannot deal with these matters but can only establish a price. John Timmons of Iowa State University says we are exporting soil and water quality in the form of food and feed grains and that these losses are much more critical than our oil supply. (How do we tell that to the average motorist?)

Charles McLaughlin, who is a farmer, complains of the short-term thinking of our political leaders and the inconsistencies between their spoken principles and lack of actions which leave the soil vulnerable to wind, water, and man. He says our knee-jerk reaction to Russian crop failures make a mockery of the conservation ethic we pretend to follow and that legal title to the land confers no right to despoil it. Soil must be protected from *people*. We may be able to blow up the whole world with our bombs but still lose our own soil. (Mr. McLaughlin loves the land.) In the same vein Doyle Williamson, Nebraska Natural Resources Commission, urges us to take pride in our land. He wants freedom of management and economic choice but with necessary controls, supported by an informed public opinion.

Robert Herbst, former Assistant Secretary, United States Department of the Interior, deplores the competition (lack of cooperation) often found between state and federal agencies. He says we need shared and cooperative authority. Rupert Cutler, then Assistant Secretary of the U.S.D.A., gives a comprehensive list of twenty-one objectives for soil and water conservation which he divides into

seven sets. However, to attain these objectives, at the present rate of accomplishment, seems almost a hopeless task. Cutler calls for a renewed zeal and says we need it now. He coins a slogan applicable to agriculture, "Plant the best and save the rest." He emphasizes the essential need to monitor conservation programs and queries do they really work?

Tony Dechant, President of the National Farmers Union, has some honest and direct words for us. He reminds us that it took dust from Kansas on Washington window sills to get any political action. He believes the country is not yet ready to take effective action, and will not do so until we have more and worse disasters. He lists five devastating shortcomings of the federal government in the field of soil and water conservation.

Merna Hurd, Environmental Protection Agency, points out how the alternate constraints and stimulation of production by the U.S.D.A. tend to destabilize and wreak havoc on continuing conservation efforts. This observation relates to the point made by Tom Barlow, Natural Resources Defense Council, that there is a conflict in the U.S.D.A. between production goals and conservation goals. He maintains that three-fourths of the conservation job is not being done, that the U.S.D.A. is not laying out the dismal facts, and that sloppy farm operators tend to pull down farm prices for everyone.

Steve Bronson, a farmer, says that only 42 percent of our cropland has had conservation treatments and that federal support is declining. He says that the national interest calls for more production but that budgetary policy provides little incentive toward long-term protection of the resource base.

Lawrence Libby and Alfred Birch, economists at Michigan State University, point out the oft-forgotten truism that people do not always act in a narrow economic way and that the "land ethic" does play a part. They urge a careful look at ways to offset any unreasonable burdens of conservation practices, and also at conservation regulation.

Gerald Calhoun, President-elect, Soil Conservation Society of America, finds the world population increase frightening and something that cannot be tolerated. He says we now feed about one-fourth of the people on earth and we cannot continue at the same rate with a world population increase of eighty million per year. He issues four challenges: (1) feed the 700,000,000 people starving today; (2) maintain our good farmland and prevent erosion; (3) provide economic incentives to keep farmers on the land; and (4) provide economic incentives to save the family farm.

Soil Conservation Policies discusses the distressing soil conservation problems and gives a multitude of possible remedies. But one remains very doubtful of real success soon. So far we do not have our hearts in it. In my view there are only two basic ways we can achieve long-term soil and water conservation in the sense of preserving the earth as mankind's permanent and only home. One is a moral or ethical attitude toward the land and future generations by people who manage land and water, and the other is rational but effective regulation, probably as the result of disasters that have put our backs against the wall. Neither will work in the face of the present population growth. I would like to see specific, pragmatic, and direct steps taken to stop soil erosion and water pollution, a few at a time, and see if they work. If they do work, and we make a strong effort to show people the advantages (indeed the necessity) of soil conservation, the stigma now attached to "regulation" will be forgotten and people can continue to enjoy their home on Earth.