

Trumpeter (1993)  
ISSN: 0832-6193  
Land-Use Planning and the Land Ethic

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## **I. Introduction**

More than three centuries have passed since the first Western Europeans settled permanently in the United States. During this period of westward expansion roughly half of the area of the contiguous forty-eight states has been converted to farmland while less arable land has been used for tree-cutting, grazing, watershed, recreation, and other uses. Less than 3Western Europe or the Orient, most of our experience of nature on a regular basis is not of wilderness but of productive humanized landscapes, referred to alternatively as the “country-side”, rural, or “pastoral” lands. Although the economic value of pastoral lands as farmland and grazing land is primary, the rapid conversion of these lands to suburban and rural-urban uses since World War II has increased our awareness of their secondary values, particularly their ecologic and aesthetic value.

During the 1960’s and 70’s a number of institutions and mechanisms designed for preserving agricultural lands for their economic, ecologic, and aesthetic values have been developed in the United States and Western Europe. Perhaps because of the relative scarcity of agricultural land in countries like Great Britain and France, more stringent land-use planning has been applied than in the United States, but there are other reasons based upon tradition and history. For example, most of the provincial European cities and towns began as clusters of dwellings built in the shadow of a defensible castle or monastery, growing concentrically through the centuries to their present sizes. This pattern, combined with limited means of transportation until the Second World War, facilitated typically sharp boundaries between city and countryside. In contrast, from the plantation cultures of the early South to implementation of the Homestead Act in the American West, our own patterns of agricultural development have typically been diffuse, sprawling, and individualistic rather than compact and communalistic, with the exception of Colonial New England towns, which are more “European” in character. In addition to the traditional compactness of European cities as inadvertently good land-use planning, an important traditional source of communal agricultural practices and good stewardship of the land was the Benedictine monastic order, especially the practices of its later branch, the Cistercians, noted for reclaiming prime agricultural lands from “malarial swamps”.

## **II. Agricultural land preservation in the United States and Western Europe**

Post World War II suburban development in the United States in the 1950's and 1960's necessitated new approaches to land-use planning designed to manage and contain urban sprawl. Unfortunately, lacking a strong popular mandate and federal leadership, land-use planning in the United States has met with limited success. Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature* (1969) ran aground on the shoals of individual property rights and the quest for rapid profits through land sales comparable in scale to the land speculations indulged in by George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Whereas the Founding Fathers enriched themselves largely through the agricultural development of wilderness, speculators in recent decades have been much engaged in trading our agricultural heritage for rural-urban sprawl.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) might have addressed the problem of the weakness of our land-use planning institutions in the face of extreme development pressures on both prime and non-prime soils. However, two-hundred year old popular attitudes of opposition toward the right of government to regulate the use of private lands steered incumbency-minded legislators away from attempting to solve one of the most serious environmental problems of our time: the agricultural and ecological future of the food-producing lands of America. Much of the Central Lowlands and Great Plains already constitute an "ecological desert" of monocultures of corn and wheat. Ecologically, more diversified regions of mixed cropland, grazing land and woodlots are richer and worthier of wildlife conservation practices than the great breadbasket of North America. Such regions as New England, the northern Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest fall into this category by virtue of topography and other geographic variables.

While postwar suburban and rural-urban sprawl were overrunning American farmlands, European countries were dealing with the same problem with varying degrees of success. In France, for example, where I have travelled widely for decades, strict laws have been implemented to maintain historically-based concentric patterns of urban growth within limits Americans refer to as urban growth boundaries (UGBs). In the State of Oregon, where European style land-use planning has been implemented, prime and non-prime agricultural lands outside of UGBs are protected from sprawl by exclusive farm use zones (EFUs) enforced by local governments under Oregon's Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). Oregon's 1973 land-use legislation is thus in conformance with commonly accepted land-use practices in France and other European countries.

However, France, presently the only member of the European Economic Community which is self-sufficient in food, has gone far beyond the zoning of economically valuable agricultural land in preserving its pastoral environment. Inspired

by the United States National Park Service, the French established a national park system of their own in 1960, creating parks in the Alps, Pyrenees, and Massif Central. Then, in 1967, to complement ecological and cultural preservation in their national parks, they legislated “les parcs naturels régionaux”, the regional natural parks developed on privately-owned agricultural lands possessing unusually important ecological and cultural values.

The French Regional Natural Park System consists of special agrarian regions in which the inhabitants of private agricultural lands and their provincial towns have applied to the national Federation of Natural Parks and made a case for special preservation within a determined boundary. The institution is quite similar to our own National Scenic and Recreational Areas, such as the Columbia Gorge. The main difference is that the values protected by the regional natural parks are those found in mixed agrarian lands of diverse crops, grazing lands, forests and woodlots, along with remnants of unique ecosystems such as estuaries, marshes, or rare indigenous flora and fauna. Also, the regional natural parks are intended to preserve historic towns and monuments (new and repaired buildings must be constructed in the local architectural style, using local materials) and to provide economic assistance to backward and remote rural communities through the development of tourism, recreation, and rejuvenated local craft traditions.

To the average American, the French Regional Natural Park system probably sounds utopian and perhaps even socialistic. How could so many individuals come to an agreement allowing a federal institution to impose limitations on land-use practices, choice of building materials, and the right to degrade aesthetic and ecological values in the course of making one’s living from the land? In other words, how could such a stewardship ethic actually have been endorsed by farmers and urban citizens who are property owners?

Historically, the vast majority of American property owners have acted against legislation which limits their right to use land as they wish, even if in agriculturally and ecologically destructive ways. The failure of Congress to approve a national land-use policy and planning act during the early 1970’s is indicative of the pervasiveness of these anti-environmental, anti-regulation attitudes. Nevertheless, some interesting precedents in favour of a self-imposed land ethic have been set in the United States as well as in Europe. In addition to Oregon’s LCDC, the state of California has developed a strong land-use act modeled on the NEPA environmental impact statement (EIS) process. Since 1973, California has required environmental impact reports (EIRs) on all significant private as well as public projects. These reports are implemented under the guidelines of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The EIRs are used in conjunction with state recommended comprehensive plans similar to those required of local governments under LCDC. Washington’s State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) also requires EIRs on private development projects, but, as in the case of some California local governments, the process is ineffective as a

growth management tool because of weak pro forma implementation.

Despite the shortcomings of growth management through state EIR processes, the environmental impact report is valuable for facilitating the rezoning of agricultural lands where old General Plan zones are in conflict with the longterm viability of agricultural production and humanized ecosystems. Also, comprehensive plans require an environmental inventory of soil fertility, water supply, flora and fauna, and other variables as well as of social, economic, and demographic trends. The availability of such information is useful to developers, to farmers who wish to preserve their livelihood, and to environmentalists working to preserve local environmental quality.

### **III. A California Success Story**

During the mid-1970's, as Environmental Geologist and planner for Santa Barbara County, California, I participated in writing the EIR for a project known as the Santa Ynez Valley Rezone. By 1974, rural-urban sprawl was becoming a serious threat to the continuation of diversified agriculture in the Santa Ynez Valley, located 35 miles northwest of Santa Barbara, the "Hope Diamond of real estate." The comprehensive planning process aided valley farmers in becoming aware of the long- term threat to agriculture. As a result, they applied to the county government to downzone (increase the minimum lot size) the existing General Plan zones of 1, 5, 10, and 20 acres to 20, 40 and 100 acre minimum parcel sizes in order to prevent further rural-urban sprawl around the towns of Solvang and Santa Ynez, essentially creating permanent UGBs and EFUs. As with all significant public and private projects under CEQA, an EIR was required in order to provide an objective evaluation of the agricultural, environmental, social, and economic consequences of approving or disapproving the downzoning. Subsequent public hearings on the EIR and on the project decisions to be made by the County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors indicated a strong support of the rezone by the majority of farmers and other citizens who would be affected. The project of rezoning the land to lower densities was approved. The farmers of the Santa Ynez Valley had succeeded in placing a boundary around their lands similar to those applied for in France and implemented under the Regional Natural Parks system.

The success story of the Santa Ynez Valley Rezone and other rezones which followed in Santa Barbara County stand in sharp contrast to the nearly uncontrolled rural- urban development which is presently occurring throughout the United States. Even in Oregon under LCDC, pressures brought to bear on local government officials and the control of planning commissions and Boards of Commissioners by speculative development interests continually undermine the long-term comprehensive planning goals of LCDC. The smaller farmer is squeezed between the economic pressures of federally-supported agribusiness and economic competition on a global scale on one hand, and the pressure for

rural-urban development on the other. Is it any wonder that concern for stewardship of agricultural lands for sustainable and ecologically benign practices has generally been ignored by American farmers? Europeans have fared somewhat better, but the Post-World War II shift to intensive agriculture has been destructive of both traditional agrarian society and the pastoral ecology. Despite the planning innovations developed since the late 1960's, the competitiveness of the global marketplace and new European Community economic structures will severely test their recently discovered land ethic and its institutions.

#### **IV. The Need for a Stewardship Ethic in the United States and Canada**

We seem not to fully appreciate the value of things until we begin to lose them. Perhaps the earliest sense of losing the pastoral landscape in the modern Western European tradition came with Rousseau and the Romantic poets as commercial cities and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution reminded these late eighteenth and early nineteenth century artists and intellectuals of the vulnerability of the countryside so long taken for granted. This realization came later to the United States through Emerson and Thoreau, but, during the second half of the nineteenth century, interest was focused on the problem of diminishing forests and wilderness and the need for their preservation. The writings of George Perkins Marsh and John Muir helped to inspire the conservation and preservation movements which have led us towards more sustainable forest practices, old growth preservation, and the setting aside of wilderness areas.

Aldo Leopold contributed to the preservation movement by working to set aside the Gila Wilderness of Arizona and New Mexico as early as 1924, forty years prior to the 1964 Wilderness Act, but his paramount concern was with good agricultural and ecological stewardship on the farmlands of America. His *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), considered by many scholars to be the seminal work of environmental ethics, documents the wasteful and destructive practices of American agriculture. Constructively, in "The Land Ethic" and other essays, Leopold prescribed various practices for what we now call sustainable agriculture, including contour plowing, organic farming, watershed management, and wildlife conservation, always keeping in mind a comprehensive, ecosystemic perspective as a planning framework for individual agricultural practice. He also warned us that we must strive collectively to create institutions which counterbalance the singlemindedness of the profit motive in a capitalist society.

Although we can document numerous examples of good stewardship practiced by American farmers, the good steward and the small farmer are losing the choice to practice the land ethic to the combined pressures of a growing international agribusiness industry and ranchette or hobby farm developments encroaching upon both prime and marginal lands. Lacking national leadership and support for more ecologically sustainable agriculture or protective boundaries

such as those of the French Regional Natural park system, it is particularly the regions of diverse uses of farm, forest, and grazing lands such as New England and the Northwest which have the most to lose. One reason for this is that their diverse topography determines a patchwork of prime and non- prime soils. The nonprime, so-called “marginal” soils, typically used for fruit and nut orchards, vineyards, woodlots, and grazing, are usually written off as unprofitable lands in the context of the competitive global marketplace. It supposedly follows that their best alternative use is for second home or hobby farm development.

It is precisely the attitude that secondary or marginal agricultural lands are a kind of dispensable “wasteland” useful only for low density rural-urban development that impelled the farmers of the Santa Ynez Valley to require EFU type zones and UGBs to protect the economic viability of their agricultural livelihood. In the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains, lands rated at the bottom of the Soil Conservation Service soil capability classification often turned out to be the most valuable land for growing avocados. Rezoning of much of these “marginal” lands has prevented their loss to ranchette and lower density development. Does this experience not imply that it is generally wasteful and premature to condemn the Northwest’s or New England’s “marginal” lands to development while heavily relying on the drought and pest-prone monocultures of the Great Plains and Midwest in the future? In the long run it is essential to preserve secondary lands as well as prime soils if humanized ecosystems are to remain healthy.

Finally, is strong land-use planning even viable in America if conservative interpretations of the “taking issue” are applied to primary and secondary agricultural land? When, if ever, will state and regional innovations, acting under national leadership and guidelines, regularly offer solutions such as development transfers and centralized cluster development as ways of solving the “taking issue” to the satisfaction of farmers, other property owners, and all of us who travel through and enjoy the rural landscape? Should subsidies made to large-scale agribusiness be partially diverted into support for low-impact, more sustainable small farms in mixed and “marginal” lands where some ecological preservation can be supported? Great Britain, which has also suffered severe ecological degradation due to post-war agricultural innovations and the greatly increased application of artificial fertilizers and pesticides, has embarked, since the Agricultural Act of 1986, upon a program of setting some environmentally sensitive farming areas aside from production. In other sensitive areas, farmers are encouraged, through subsidies for any loss of profit, to return to traditional methods of farming. Isn’t it time that the citizens and federal governmental institutions of the United States followed the examples of Great Britain, France, and a few innovative states in reclaiming and preserving the agricultural, aesthetic, and ecological values of American pastoral lands?

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**Citation Format**

LaFreniere, Gilbert (1993) Land-Use Planning and the Land Ethic *Trumpeter*: 10, 2.  
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