Soils, Land and Food:
Managing the Land During the Twenty-First Century


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Professor Wild is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Soil Science at the University of Reading. This volume appears to be a summary of knowledge acquired during his career, and applied to one of the critical questions for the new millennium, namely: how to manage a finite and fragile land and soil base, such as to feed a still rapidly growing global population. The book is clearly stated, but is essentially a summary. It dwells primarily on the characteristics which relate to the physical nature and techniques of maintenance of soils for agriculture. As such, it pays much less attention to the range of economic, cultural and political factors which determine whether production will take place and be sustained to meet growing demand.

The eleven chapters are loosely divided into three themes; chapters one and two provide a general overview of the need to manage land for food production and the array of natural resources needed to meet that end; chapters three through seven examine the different techniques whereby agricultural land may be managed, including soil nutrient management, control of soil erosion processes, and the uses of fertilizers and water to raise crop yields. Thereafter, three chapters present examples of agricultural production, including seven case studies, the global situation and the particular cases of Africa, India and China. The book concludes with a summary of ‘prospects and uncertainties’.

While the book contains a great deal of relevant information, especially as regards the basic relationships between land and soil management, it has several weaknesses, especially if evaluated from a North American perspective.

Like many British texts, it presents a limited world view. The global land-food supply and demand equation must include an evaluation of both the so-called developed and less-developed areas in terms of their ability to fulfill local and global requirements. At the present time, and for the foreseeable future, food production and land management in the developed world outside the United Kingdom will be of critical import, yet the book hardly mentions key production areas in North America, Australasia or even Western Europe. Nor does it pay more than passing reference to key issues of agricultural development in the developed world, including large scale industrialization of crop and livestock production, and the development of transgenic crops (GMOs). Likewise, there is no reference to alternative or organic farming, despite its distinct land and soil management regimes.

The less-developed world is somewhat better served, but the treatment is uneven. The six third world examples of management of land use change (which follow a historical account of England’s shift from peasant to more modern agriculture) are thumbnail sketches of past, rather than contemporary
schemes, and at least three reflect attempts to establish industrial rather than food crop production. The broader examination of attempts to increase agricultural production in Africa, India and China examine the recent past and try to assess future prospects. In the cases of both Africa (i.e. the continent minus Egypt and South Africa) and India, the prognoses seem overly optimistic, especially set against continued rapid population growth. Every region of Africa has seen declining yields and food availability, and most international research agencies predict that this pattern will persist (e.g. Pinstrup-Andersen et al. 1999). Although there is a large amount of unused land, very little contains fertile soil or adequate water supply. In India, although there have been substantial increases in food output, it has been difficult to raise per capita consumption levels, and there are declining amounts of land and water for further growth. China has done better in terms of reducing population growth rates and its rural labour force, nevertheless, it faces problems of urban encroachment on much of its most fertile land, and pressure to increase production of animal foods, with the attendant pressure on food versus feed grains.

It is hard to place this text. It is very readable accumulation and there are some useful summary tables, which make it attractive to the lay reader or as an introduction to the topic. On balance, however, it does not do justice to the complex topic to which it seeks to contribute.

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