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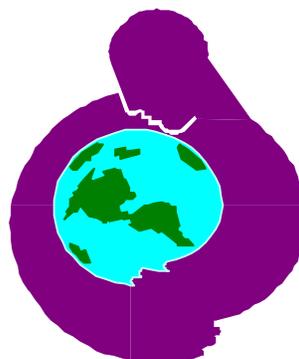
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# Technical Report

## Stewardship, Spirituality, and Natural Resources Conservation: A Short History



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# Stewardship, Spirituality, and Natural Resources Conservation: A Short History

by  
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**Social Sciences Institute**

*When the land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land -  
when both end up better by reason of their partnership - then we have  
conservation.*

*Aldo Leopold*

*Whatever may be the wishes or inclinations of the people of this country, this  
task of protecting the land against increased impairment and destruction must  
be fought from now on.*

*Hugh Hammond Bennett*

## **Introduction**

The link between stewardship, spirituality, and agriculture not only spans millennia, but also connects diverse people and many religious philosophies. Judeo-Christians find biblical references to stewardship beginning in Genesis. An early proverb states, "A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children." The story of Noah bringing paired sets of animals through the flood is well known. The New Testament provides other stewardship parables as well. The importance of stewardship has long been understood by American Indian and Native American cultures. Some of these cultures treat the natural resources as part of their religion. Natural resources are a living, unifying force that should be respected and honored. Land, water, animals, and vegetation provide

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sustenance and are also seen by these cultures to be part of a higher spirit. Similarly, the law of Islam acknowledges the rights of all creatures and "disapproves the wasteful flow of much water...and to make the best use of all resources -- living and lifeless."

In American history, agrarian values have deep roots. Thomas Jefferson emphasized that farmers who own land would embrace policies that support the stability of a democratic government. Modern America's linkage between spirituality and stewardship may have had its beginning in Europe. In France, more than 1500 years ago, the city of Vienne had crop failures and widespread hunger due to bad weather, fires and earthquakes. Saint Mamertus, the bishop of Vienne, called for prayer and penance on the three days preceding Ascension Day. Word of the practice spread to other countries and as the years went by the annual practice of setting aside special Rogation Days was widely established. Earlier in this century, parts of the U.S. South set aside the fifth Sunday after Easter as Soil and Soul Sunday.

## **Defining Stewardship**

There are many different definitions of stewardship. One definition is "the individual's responsibility to manage his life and property with proper regard to the rights of others" (Resler, 1983: 6). Rexford A. Resler in his article entitled "On Stewardship" in 1983: 6 states noted historian Henry Clepper uses the term to imply the responsibilities of "one who has charge of the household of another" or "one who manages the property of another." Clepper's interpretation is that "we are in charge of our household - the planet earth - and have a responsibility to pass it on in a condition that will benefit our children's children." Finally, E. William Anderson suggests stewardship "is essentially a synonym for conservation" (Anderson, 1983: 271).

## **America's Conservation Ethic**

Before and during the 1930's, stewardship seemed to have a religious connotation and was not associated directly with conservation. This period was clearly an era of agricultural degradation. The worldwide depression, propelled by agricultural scarcities and high food prices, was exemplified in America by natural resource disasters such as the Dust Bowl.

National, state and local leaders recognized stewardship of agricultural natural resources as a necessary ingredient to make America productive again. Establishment of Federal and private conservation institutions, initiated in the thirties, provided agricultural producers with information, technical assistance, and financial assistance. The stewardship flame of farmers and ranchers, never wholly extinguished, was now being fanned by many aspects of our culture including the government, private sector, and religious groups. At the basis, however, conservation work was fueled by the stewardship ethic of the American farmers.

The origin of Soil Stewardship Week goes back to 1946 (Simms, 1970). It later became known as Soil Stewardship Sunday, the first day of Soil Stewardship Week. In 1955, the National Association of Conservation Districts took over national sponsorship and expanded it from a regional to a national level, as the observance grew rapidly in the rural areas of the United States.

Through the forties and fifties, farmers and ranchers voluntarily installed conservation on their land because it was the "right thing to do." Federal agencies such as the Soil Conservation Service and their private sector partners, the local Conservation Districts, assisted agricultural producers. State agencies were developed and strengthened. The

U.S. Congress passed laws to extend the reach of conservation work so that it had agricultural production components as well as protective elements. According to Franck (1969: 154, 228) by the mid 1960's stewardship and conservation of natural resources were married through an expanding environmental interpretation of both.

Even in the face of difficulties, including human caused (e.g., market failures) and natural disasters (e.g., droughts and floods), many agricultural producers have maintained an ethic toward the land that treats farming and ranching as *a way of life rather than a business*. Many social surveys during the 1960's and 1970's, and even today, confirmed that farmers choose both life style and profits as goals (Gibson, 1993; Kolodge, 1993). Farmers and ranchers wanted to achieve their goals of living a vital and rewarding life style and passing their farmstead on to their children, in better shape than when they first got it.

However, the early 1970's partially shattered this ethic. World markets offered opportunities for expanding agricultural operations, and marked a boom for productivity, but a bust for stewardship and conservation work. Earl Butz's now famous statements advising American farmers to "get big or get out" and "plant fence-post to fence-post" put stewardship on hold for a time during this dizzying and gray episode in American agriculture. However, stewardship did not fade away, it was only suspended for a short period.

Legislation in the 1980's and 1990's unsheathed the proverbial "stick," which used the loss of program benefits to discourage breaking up new farmlands, disturbing wetlands, and farming highly erodible lands without using appropriate conservation practices. These programs have caused many agricultural producers to come into the conservation fold regardless of their stewardship attitude. Once they installed conservation practices,

however, studies show that they may want to continue using these practices because of multiple reasons, including aesthetics, off farm impacts, community social pressure, and the difficulty of breaking newly formed habits (Wright et. al., 1989; Wunderlich, 1991).

Over the past 20 years, there has developed a stronger link between stewardship, spirituality, and conservation. In 1979, Pope John II, in a speech to Iowa farmers said, "You who live in the heartland of America have been entrusted with some of the earth's best land. While it is true that farming today provides an economic livelihood for the farm, still it will always be more than an enterprise in farming. In farming you cooperate with the Creator in the very substance of life on Earth" (Bear, 1986: 286).

## **Durability of Stewardship**

Farmers and ranchers take seriously the charge to protect the natural resources that are under their control. In a recent Gallup Poll (1995), the public recognizes the job the agricultural sector is doing to conserve land and water. The public ranked farmers and ranchers highest as environmental caretakers compared to others who work with natural resources such as oil, manufacturing, and high technology companies. The public also ranked agricultural producers above homeowners in how they care for their land.

The consciousness of America and the rest of the world has been lifted regarding stewardship issues. However, it would be disingenuous not to recognize that regulatory legislation at national, state, and local levels as well as the threat of regulation has spurred some agricultural producers into protecting more fully the natural resources they manage. Whole industries and specific companies now recognize that the marketplace can exert a tremendous force over those that pollute the environment. At the same time, the voluntary spirit of stewardship has also changed so that farmers and ranchers are told they

must deal more holistically with agricultural natural resources. Holistic planning actually is similar to the thirties, forties, and fifties, with notable differences such as general improvements in scientific knowledge and a finer focus on air quality, water quality, and threatened and endangered species.

These variations come about during a changing of the guard in agricultural ownership, operations, and management. Americans have witnessed the loss of half the farms in the United States over the past 30 years. Two percent of the farms in 1993 generated about 40 percent of the gross farm sales (USDA, 1996). Just recently, however, there has been a slight increase in small, part-time farms across the nation, especially in "exurbia" (the area just beyond the suburbs). Many who operate these middle and small agricultural enterprises continue to have a special relationship with the land. To them, private ownership means stewardship or trusteeship, not the right to do whatever you want. Larger agricultural enterprises, like other industrial sectors, have either already learned this lesson or run the risk of blindly running into the regulatory stick.

## **Future Stewardship**

The force of public opinion is highlighted by a group of 34 prominent scientists -- including Carl Sagan, Freeman Dyson, and Stephen Jay Gould -- who issued an "open letter to the religious community" in 1990. The scientists stated that the earth's problems are so serious they must be "recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension." Religious leaders responded and founded the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. This group includes the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S. Catholic Conference, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and the Evangelical Environmental Network. In 1994, the organization distributed 53,000 environmental "starter kits" to congregations throughout the United States. "Science may

have alerted evangelicals to the problem, but it's Scripture that's moving them to action" (Atkisson, 1995: 15).

Over the next 20 years, stewardship, spirituality, and conservation will be impacted by conflicting forces. These forces include population growth, export opportunities, and greater internal production demands. This trend goes hand in glove with the downsizing of government programs and the move toward a fuller free market that is represented by the so-called Freedom to Farm Bill. The fierce forces of competition reemphasize and reinforce the bottom line, which can influence farmers to suspend what we believe is a strong stewardship attitude in favor of maximizing production to survive.

In contrast, the weight of public opinion reveals itself through voting behavior, membership in environmental groups, financial contributions, legislation, and changes in personal behavior. Organized religions have also begun to focus heavily on the issue of stewardship and laws that protect threatened and endangered species (Mahan, 1996). Agribusiness has recently begun many stewardship initiatives. In the early 1990's, USDA's "Crop Residue Management Campaign" had active participation from 9 Federal agencies, about 20 states, and approximately 80 organizations that represented the private sector and non-governmental organizations. This successful campaign made crop residue a household word among farmers and the practice of leaving crop residue on their fields benefited both production and conservation. As another example, the Chemical Manufacturer's Association in 1988 announced the first single industry initiative on environmental stewardship (Hoffman, 1995: 63). Since that time, industries such as petroleum, printing, textiles, paper, lead, and automobiles have designed similar programs.

The stewardship of natural resources has changed greatly since the beginning of the twentieth century. For many farmers and ranchers, the traditional land and water ethic has endured. Many in the countryside manage land resources because it is the "right thing to do." Others protect natural resources because of regulations or the threat of regulation. Although the voluntary protection of natural resources has changed, many stewardship elements are still encased in spirituality, which may ensure its permanence.

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