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Summer marshland,
Spring Run Wildlife
Management Area.
Photograph by Carl Kurtz.
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Concerns about urbanization’s impact on agricultural production capacity have spawned “literally dozens of programmes of farmland conservation.” At a time when overproduction is a preoccupation in western economies, such concerns seem “misplaced.” Yet, “continuing problems of famine and undernourishment in many parts of the world” and resource degradation caused by “the search for continual increases in agricultural production efficiency,” provide “more gristle for the agricultural land conservation mill.”

The central theme of the book is the complex set of transformation processes that affect agriculture in the city’s countryside. To explore these processes, the authors use a series of conceptual frameworks that demonstrate the complexities affecting modern agriculture near cities.

Two themes provide the basic framework—a system perspective and an interests-inland perspective. Within the first perspective, four fundamental dimensions are explored in detail, including the resource base, the “market,” the farmer, and the government. This section contains a succinct description of the concepts of urban fringe and urban shadow.

Included under interests-inland are the dimensions of land speculation, land as a support for family farm systems, land for food production for present and future generations, and land as support for amenity. This perspective also provides the framework for investigating the diversity of private and public responses to the changes that have been transforming agriculture in the city’s countryside.

Underlying these two main perspectives are two recurring themes—individual versus collective interests in land and technological change. Land-use planning and management are viewed as a continual process of trying to resolve the tension between individual rights and societal needs.

Technological change is seen in the light of its impact on agricultural production but also in creating an increasingly interdependent national food production system. As an urban technology, the private car is seen as a driving force behind the development of new settlement forms in urban regions.

Most of the book, four of the six principal chapters, is taken up with describing the dimensions of agriculture in the city’s countryside. The fifth examines farmland protection programs and their rationale in the United States, Canada, western Europe, and New Zealand.

The authors draw upon a very wide body of research literature, most of it from the geography community, which has conducted most of the research on this subject. The book contains an extensive bibliography. Essentially missing, however, is literature from the rural sociology field, which helps to explain the forces that shape farm operator behavior in using land resources.

In the concluding chapters, which serve as syntheses and retrospect-prospect, the authors argue for better research methodologies. These are considered essential if the results continue to be used as a basis of public policy. They urge the abandonment of “the myths that, a) agriculture is on a downhill path, b) that agriculture can be treated as a homogeneous structure, and c) that most of agriculture’s problems are linked to the urban environment.”

How well the authors make their case in support of these conclusions is left to the reader to discover. One gets the sense that the authors’ desire to sell the positive aspects of strengths of agriculture in the city’s countryside may suffer as much from data limitation as the advocates of the doom and gloom scenarios. Whatever the case may be, it is a stimulating and informative read and it is by far the best available data compilation on the subject.—

David R. Cressman, P.Ag., is president of Ecologistics Limited, Waterloo, Ontario.

General


Ecology

Ecology of Greenways: Design and Function of Linear


Forests

Land Use

Pesticides

Pollution

Soils


Water Resources

Drainage Principles and Applications-Revised Edition. By the International Institute for Land Reclamation and Improvement. 1,200 pp. 1993. ILRI, P.O. Box 45, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands. Dfl. 175.00/ U.S. $100.00.

Ground Water Vulnerability Assessment: Predicting Relative Containment Potential Under Conditions of Uncertainty. From the Committee on Techniques for Assessing Ground Water Vulnerability; the Water Science and Technology Board; the Commission on Geo-