



LESSONS LEARNED FROM MANAGING VULNERABLE LANDSCAPES DURING AGRARIAN TRANSITIONS IN METROPOLITAN REGIONS

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When people are asked to describe the Corn Belt, a region known for its rural lifestyle, images of neat, tidy farms on broad plains or small towns with friendly folks come to mind. As the twenty-first century emerges as the “urban century,” more people in the Corn Belt are choosing to live urban lifestyles in high-density cities, which is causing shifts in their contact with nature. One need only look at recent examples in design magazines, like *Dwell*, to note the resurgence of interest in city living that is inspired by agrarian lifestyles, local food, slow food, urban agriculture, and community participation. Those lifestyles are about dwelling in a different type of urban landscape than what we have now in many places, and this trend can be called rurban, retrorural, or the reruralification of cities. These urbanites, which I define to include all people who live in metropolitan regions, want to experience nature in different yet similar ways when compared to previous generations of Americans. This phenomenon is not an anti-urban bias, but rather an emerging reinterpretation of Americans’ relationship to rural and urban nature with the line blurring between the two. It is a phenomenon that we are only beginning to understand, but it has the potential to profoundly change the debate about what ecologist

David Tilman et al. (2009) calls the trilemma of food-energy-environment.

What is going on in Corn Belt cities today is the beginning of a profound social shift about how cities and countryside are visualized as images of nature and places to live. This is one of the most important issues—both a challenge and an opportunity—facing farmers, scientists, professionals, advocates, legislators, and policy-makers. The national audience for agricultural commodities, landscape conservation, and rural lifestyles is largely urban, and this trend will accelerate into this century as the United States becomes more urban and diverse. It raises fundamental questions about the political, cultural, and social saliency of long-held assumptions, perceptions, and values about agriculture, rural nature, and landscape conservation. I will address this issue by exploring several questions:

1. What are the traditional icons of rural nature?
2. How are perceptions and values about rural nature and agrarianism changing?
3. What are the emerging icons of rural and urban nature?
4. Why do these questions matter for the next generation of landscape conservation policies and best management practices?

This chapter represents a beginning point to address what I believe will be at the heart of the future legacy of land and water conservation in this urban century. My view on this topic is quite particular and influenced by my keen observation of human-nature interactions in urban and regional environments as a landscape ecologist and ecological designer. My view is not a common one in agricultural or land conservation circles, but it does provide alternative ideas about how to help agricultural policies, landscape conservation, and best management practices resonate better in urbanites' hearts and minds.

Traditional icons of rural nature

In the Corn Belt, agrarianism is historically associated with a particular type of human contact with nature known for its totality of spatial and sensory experience among farms, fields, and sky (Figure 1). The spatial and sensory appearance of the rural landscape reinforces particular ideals associated with rural

nature: the traditional icons—like Little House on the Prairie and Marker Tree—emphasize the human connection to the local scale of the working landscape (Figures 2 and 3). I define a traditional icon as either a landscape feature, land use practice, or a species that is associated with a particular culture or society's image of nature, including related knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and language.

The traditional icons of rural nature are powerful symbols of nature, landscape, and culture, especially how land should be ideally managed over seasons, decades, and human generations. Those icons are largely experienced and maintained through particular agricultural practices and policies. In this context, place attachment can be formed from active cultivation, stewardship practices, and other direct experiences on the working landscapes of farms. In addition, place attachment occurs not only by farming the land, but also through eye witness experiences of particular landscape features, land use practices, or species in a rural landscape. Traditional icons of rural nature provide a perceptual bridge among human generations that signal intergenerational



Figure 1. A quintessential farmstead in Wantonwan County, Minnesota, is surrounded by freshly tilled fields in early spring (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 2. The icon of Little House on the Prairie illustrates the visual experience of farmstead, prairie, and sky in the Corn Belt. This farmstead is adjacent to the Joseph A. Tauer Prairie Scientific Natural Area, in Brown County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 3. The icon Marker Tree is located on a country road in Wantonwan County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

cues about how to care for the land. Those cues are important because people have trouble perceiving environmental problems if they are too abstract, long-term (e.g., decades, human generations, centuries, and so on), and/or involve large spatial scales (e.g., region, watershed, nation, and so on).

My concept of traditional icons of rural nature draws on scientific theory from environmental psychology, conservation psychology, landscape perception, place attachment, coupled human systems, and landscape sustainability (see Gobster 2001; Saunders et al. 2006; Chawla 2007; Berkes 2008; Musacchio 2009). It builds

on the work of Paul Gobster's landscape icons (2001), Ann Garibaldi's cultural keystone species (2004), and Joan Nassauer's cues of care (1995). Out of the three, Paul Gobster's research about the landscape icons of the urban parks of Chicago is most informative for understanding how stakeholders can have different visions of nature for the same landscapes. He mentions that the concept of landscape icons can be applied to other locations and situations like rural and wilderness areas (Gobster 2001). One intriguing aspect I will explore is how icons of rural and urban nature are shifting, based on urbanites' evolving contact with nature.

Changing perceptions and values

During the twentieth century, the icons of rural nature in the Corn Belt—like Little House on the Prairie and Marker Tree—evolved to include new icons. They were influenced by the ideals of Aldo Leopold, who helped to establish the philosophy, science, and practice of land conservation and ecological restoration with his pioneering work at the University of Wisconsin and on his farm, all of which inspired such well-known books as *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold's ideals, along with his concepts of land conservation and ecological restoration, offered an alternative philosophy of knowledge and practice that reinterpreted people's contact with nature, especially in rural areas of the Corn Belt.

Leopold's farm, known as The Shack, is an icon of a new type of rural nature that emerged in the Corn Belt in the mid-twentieth century. The Shack is a symbol for how Leopold reinterpreted his contact with nature as his values and perceptions evolved to emphasize people as part of ecosystems and the cycle of life. Even today, we can trace his influence to those ideals of twentieth century land conservation and ecological restoration:

1. Coupling of humans and nature.
2. Presettlement landscape history as reference.
3. Site-scale restoration of remnant plant communities.
4. Botanical reintroduction of native plants and plant communities.
5. Participatory emphasis in the restoration process.
6. Visible and invisible spatial and sensory cues for management.

The twentieth century icons of rural nature, which were inspired by Leopold, embrace two images of nature. I call them the visible hand versus the invisible hand of the manager and designer. This issue is important for understanding icons, which are very recognizable and powerful symbols of nature, landscape, and culture, especially how land should be managed over decades and human generations. An important point to this idea is that icons of rural nature have a variable appearance, and some may look natural while others could be more cultivated, groomed, or architectural.

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the visible hand of the manager and designer in the rural landscape. Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), the distinctive flower in the foreground of figure 4, is one icon of the tall-grass prairie that is often planted in prairie restorations in the Corn Belt. The distinctive flowers of the tall-grass prairie are an example of how people's appreciation for this ecosystem is enhanced through visible spatial and sensory cues. Figure 5 shows the visible hand in the straight rows of these conservation plantings. Nassauer (1992, 1995) describes why these visible cues, like straight rows, matter to agricultural practices and policies because their vividness communicates culturally recognizable signs of human care and help to frame views of rural landscapes.

In contrast, Figure 6 demonstrates the subtle effects of the invisible hand of the manager and designer, which attempts a more naturalistic



Figure 4. The purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), one of the most distinctive flowers of the tall-grass prairie, is considered to be an icon of restored or remnant prairies. This example is in Effigy Mounds National Monument, Iowa (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 5. The visible hand of management is demonstrated in the straight rows of these conservation plantings in Wantonwan County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

approach to restoration that leaves fewer traces of human intention. This type of approach is seen as desirable in places that are managed for remnant plant communities, like the Helen Allison Savanna Scientific and Natural Area in Anoka County, Minnesota, that involve restoration or rehabilitation.

Both approaches—the visible and invisible hands—are important for understanding how the meaning of the icons of rural nature may transform over time, space, and place. This idea is important for understanding how icons of rural nature can gain new meaning in urban and urbanizing contexts and when urbanites experience them.



Figure 6. The invisible hand of management is evident at the Helen Allison Savanna Scientific and Natural Area, Anoka County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

Emerging icons of rural and urban nature

In Corn Belt cities, the new icons of rural nature and urban nature emerge from the collective loss of agrarian lifestyles and practices because rural landscapes are transforming to urban sprawl and concrete. Figure 7 shows a vista from the Sears Tower, which is now called the Willis Tower, with its vast urban expanse of neighborhoods and expressways. The lack of much vegetation from the foreground to the horizon demonstrates how much of the city's landscape is permanently sealed by pavement, concrete, and buildings, as well as how urbanites' contact with nature is radically altered. In a sense, this photograph is symbolic of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968). During the urban development process, decisions about how to protect rural nature occur at the

intersection of the public interest to preserve natural resources and the private interest to use those resources (Figure 8). Ultimately, how these two interests intersect influences urbanites' access and contact to different types of rural and urban nature. The protection of farms is usually given very low to low priority in many county open space plans because they are assumed to be a land bank for future ex-urban and suburban development (Musacchio et al. 2003). In an urbanizing context, often the only vestige of rural nature, and one of its last icons, is the farm museum, which is a small relictual patch surrounded by a sea of suburbia (Figure 9). It is a memorial to the place's legacy as a working landscape.

Yet there are some threads of continuity between urbanites' lives in the twenty-first century and the icons of rural nature from the twentieth century. Those threads of continuity build off of traditional types of rural icons and



Figure 7. This vista from the Sears Tower, now called the Willis Tower, shows the urban expanse of Chicago, including the Eisenhower Expressway, and demonstrates the vast area of the city that is permanently sealed by pavement, concrete, and buildings (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 8. Two street signs in a subdivision in Scott County, Minnesota, are symbolic of land use conflicts—how to balance at the intersection of the public interest to preserve natural resources and the private interest to use those resources (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 9. In an urbanizing context, a traditional icon of rural nature is the farm museum, which is a small, relic patch surrounded by a sea of suburbia. It is a memorial to the place’s legacy as a working landscape. This example is the Gibbs Farm Museum of Pioneer and Dakotah Life, St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

are connected to urbanites through their recreational experiences. For example, a traditional icon of rural nature for many generations of urbanites has been the roadside farm stand, which provides access to farm-fresh goods from the local region and an opportunity for a weekend recreational activity (Figure 10). Another example are farms that emphasize nature appreciation and recreational experience, like the Wildseed Farms in Fredricksburg, Texas, which advertises itself as the world’s largest working wildflower farm and is similar to the types of farms emerging in the Corn Belt (Figure 11).

Other types of icons of rural nature in metropolitan regions are important to landscape history of the Corn Belt and provide a connection to the practices of previous generations. The victory garden is an excellent example of the former, which were widely planted during World Wars I and II in cities, suburbs, and small towns. The Dowling Community Garden in Minneapolis originated as a victory garden during World War II and is believed to be one of just two surviving from that era in the United

States (Dowling Community Garden 2010) (Figure 12). Community gardens have gone through a renaissance in the Corn Belt, in part because higher food prices in 2008 and interest in local foods caused people to think about the vegetable garden as a means to make ends meet. In contrast, the forgotten prairie remnant is an example of the legacy of native plant communities and Aldo Leopold’s influence. The Wolf Road Prairie, located on the outskirts of Chicago, is an excellent example (Figure 13).

New icons of rural nature have emerged in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century in the ex-urban fringes of major metropolitan areas of the Corn Belt, like Minneapolis–St. Paul and Chicago. The conservation design subdivision is one of the most intriguing examples of those new icons because it is a hybrid of the master-planned suburban subdivision and has an agrarian, small-town feel to it. These subdivisions are built on former farms, and their major design features are intended to protect open space by clustering homes. The subdivisions are often designed with a regional design style that is rooted in the



Figure 10. A traditional icon of rural nature for many urbanites is the roadside farm stand, which provides access to farm fresh goods from the local region. This roadside farm stand is in Scott County, Minnesota (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 11. For urbanites, the new icons of rural nature are associated with recreational experiences and practices that emerge from leisure time rather than work time. The Wildseed Farms in Fredricksburg, Texas, is an example of this new type of icon that is similar to the types emerging in the Corn Belt (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 12. Another traditional icon of rural nature is the victory garden, many of which were planted during World Wars I and II in cities, suburbs, and small towns. For example, the Dowling Community Garden in Minneapolis originated as a victory garden from World War II (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 13. The Wolf Road Prairie Nature Preserve in Chicago, Illinois, is an example of remnant prairie and savanna (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

Prairie School style, which is associated with landscape architects Jens Jensen and Alfred Caldwell as well as architect Frank Lloyd Wright. The open space systems in conservation design subdivisions often emphasize the land conservation and ecological restoration principles espoused by Leopold. Prairie Crossing in Grayslake, Illinois, is one of the best national examples; its design is influenced by both philosophies.

One of the most distinctive traits of people who live in conservation design subdivisions is that they are willing to endure long daily commutes into the suburbs and center cities for their lifestyle choices. The low-housing density, which has the look and feel of a pastoral rural landscape, is a major attraction. The reason why they live so far out is that they crave a different lifestyle for their families than what is available in more densely developed places. Often, this choice revolves around their perceptions of wanting to be in contact with certain types of rural nature and having more space for their families to experience it. Not surprisingly, conservation design subdivisions have many icons of rural nature integrated into their design, including the following:

1. Red barns (Figure 14).
2. Expansive restored prairies and meadows (Figure 15).
3. Heritage plants and orchards (Figures 16).
4. Extensive trail systems.
5. Community-supported agriculture.

Those icons echo their rural counterparts, but they usually are not of the same design, size, scale, or functional purpose.

Emerging icons and pluralistic images of nature

Despite some continuity between urbanites' experiences and these rural icons, their perceptions of rural nature are influenced by how they experience those landscapes, and recent studies are providing some intriguing evidence about the pluralistic images of rural and urban nature. Gobster's research (2001) provides evidence that different stakeholders have alternative icons of nature for the same urban landscape and how those differences can create tensions about how landscapes should be managed for the public good. Researchers are finding similar patterns for people's perception of rural nature and images of nature, and there is a division between farmers and nonfarmers. For example, Buijs et al. (2006) compared farmers, urban residents, hunters, and conservationists in the Netherlands and France and found that their images of nature vary considerably. In the Corn Belt, Sullivan et al. (2004) studied whether farmers, academics, and residents supported the integration of different types of buffers on farmland in the rural-urban fringe of Champaign, Illinois. The researchers found approval across all stakeholders for the basic buffers over no buffers, whether on private or public land. Buffers going beyond the basics, however, were a point of contention; they found that academics and residents supported the extensive buffers, while farmers supported this concept



Figure 14. The red barn is an important symbol of rural living, this one located at Prairie Crossing, which is a conservation design subdivision in Grayslake, Illinois (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 15. This meadow is in a cul-de-sac at Prairie Crossing, which is interplanted with heritage fruit trees and berry plants and is part of an extensive open space system for recreational activities (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 16. This is an example of a heritage planting (currants) at Prairie Crossing (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

less (Sullivan et al. 2004). So what is causing these pluralistic images of nature? Buijs et al. (2006) emphasize that the perceptions of rural nature are evolving because the social demand for nature is moving from a functional perspective to a recreational or leisure perspective, with more emphasis on images of wilder forms of nature for self-fulfillment. This idea has important implications for the emerging icons of rural and urban nature in the Corn Belt.

Often people think that these icons of rural nature are only present in ex-urban areas of the Corn Belt where there is enough space and interest in rural lifestyles, but this conventional wisdom is not holding as true as it once did, especially in high-density cities. One of my most important observations after living in the Corn Belt for seven years is how much place attachment those urbanites have with the

countryside—often these people never grew up on a farm but can trace their roots back to agrarian living just a generation or two ago. Not surprisingly, the new icons of rural nature are emerging from inside of center cities like Minneapolis–St. Paul, Chicago, and Milwaukee and are reinterpretations of rural nature through urban experiences and practices. Those icons of rural nature are creating alternative icons for urban nature, and typically, they emphasize the cultivation of edible landscapes in community gardens, school gardens, yards, and other open spaces. These trends have been influenced by the emergence of the local food movement, slow food movement, and environmental activism. Figure 17 is the image of a garden shed in a community garden in Chicago that mimics the design of a barn, and a hand-painted sign announces the ethos behind the



Figure 17. A hand-painted sign at Waters School Community Garden, Chicago, Illinois, expresses the creative energy that is generated by the participants of this community garden (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

change in the social demand for nature in the Corn Belt: the enthusiastic words “Growth Express!”

The icons of rural and urban nature in the Corn Belt are changing, and the reasons for this are likely quite complex because of multiple interacting factors influencing people’s contact with nature. One can speculate about some probable explanations. The area with the most intriguing changes in recent years is urbanites’ relationship to food. This is much more than the “whole foods” phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Interest in organic foods and locally grown foods has steadily increased since the 1990s, but the energy-food price surges in 2008 made urbanites more aware of the connection between the two; they realized that more of their food will likely need to be grown in their regions. This trend accelerated in 2009 when Michelle Obama planted her kitchen garden at the White House. Urban agriculture and community gardens went from being the focal point of a small group of enthusiasts to a broader social trend in the cities of the Corn Belt and across the country.

Some shrinking cities in the Midwest, like Detroit, have proposed a radical plan for using urban agriculture as an urban renewal strategy, to rejuvenate areas with abandoned homes from the foreclosure crisis. This process is causing some debate in the landscape architecture, architecture, urban design, and planning professions. In the design literature, it is now common to see buildings being proposed with small urban farms on their rooftops or entire skyscrapers proposed as vertical farms. How realistic are these plans is a good question, but the plans definitely mark a sea change in perception, values, attitudes, and beliefs about where rural nature can exist, which means not just in the countryside anymore. The division between rural nature and urban nature is becoming blurred in the twenty-first century because urbanites are challenging previously held ideas about what is rural, what is urban, and where

nature is located. Urbanites have an unmet need for contact with nature that is being played out in their reinterpretations about how rural nature and urban nature fit into their experience within high-density cities and metropolitan regions.

The shifting icons of rural nature and urban nature in the Corn Belt suggest that a segment of urbanites have practical and personal reasons to adopt urban lifestyles with more emphasis on agrarianism. Buijs et al. (2006) emphasized that people’s perceptions are influenced by their functional experiences with landscapes and the types of practices performed. An example of this is the urban coops that are icons of the environmental movement of the 1970s and have introduced urbanites to community-supported agriculture. Subscribers to a community-supported agriculture have a direct connection to a specific farmer and receive fresh boxes of produce during the growing season. Community-supported agriculture also can be considered a new icon of urban nature, with rural origins, that builds on the icons of u-pick orchards and roadside produce stands. The ethos of community-supported agriculture also relates to Aldo Leopold’s philosophy of land conservation.

The shifting icons of rural and urban nature extend to other examples inspired by the environmental movement of the 1970s. Several groups of enthusiasts are important to understand: The heirloom plant advocates, seed savers, guerilla gardeners, and crop mobs. Heirloom plants are an icon to many urban gardeners who are interested in the legacy of human agrarian history and plant breeding. Those heirloom plants have multiple cultural origins and sources that reflect the diversity of cultures that reside in the United States. For example, Hmong immigrants have been active urban farmers in Minnesota and provide much of the fresh produce at local farmers markets in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. The seed savers are another example of people who preserve heirloom plant species and their seeds and form

social networks across the United States. In contrast, the guerilla gardeners prefer a more spontaneous form of urban nature and are catalysts for gardening underutilized urban spaces in vacant lots, trails, roads, parks, and so on. For this group, their icons are more about the functional act of spontaneous planting in the most mundane, vacant, urban places. Crop mobs are related to guerilla gardeners, but they emphasize volunteer efforts to help a farmer plant crops, weed fields, and so on. The volunteers usually live in nearby cities.

Chefs and restaurant owners have been important catalysts to introduce urbanites to local foods from their surrounding region, and new food cultures are developing throughout the Corn Belt (Figure 18). In the 1980s and

1990s, locally grown food on the menu was usually associated with a small group of cafes and restaurants. Now, locally grown food almost defines mainstream eating experiences in larger Corn Belt cities, like Chicago and Minneapolis–St. Paul, because there are so many cafes and restaurants that have adopted those practices. By introducing urbanites to new local foods, heirloom plants, and local producers, chefs and restaurant owners have helped their patrons begin a new functional relationship with the regional landscape and a new praxis of social eating and gathering. For example, eating in a restaurant is starting to become more than just ordering a menu item; instead, eating is being connected to the scale of the local food system, like restaurant owners



Figure 18. The Common Roots Cafe in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is well known for its locally grown menu and its support of local farmers (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).



Figure 19. The lawns in the backyards of two homes were converted to vegetable gardens by the owners and staff of the Common Roots Cafe in Minneapolis. The gardens are icons of the movement to convert yards to edible landscapes. Vegetables from the gardens are selected and cooked for their patrons to enjoy (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

who sponsor volunteer work days for their patrons at local producers' farms. Some cafes have gone one step further and introduced a new icon of urban nature by converting backyard lawns to edible gardens that supply their menus with fresh produce (Figure 19).

One of the least likely icons of rural nature to emerge as an icon of urban nature is the small farm with an urban agriculture and horticulture emphasis. A number of important examples are located in the cities of the Corn Belt, including City Farm in Chicago and Growing Power in Milwaukee. Those farms are an urban interpretation of what Jordan et al. (2007) called the emerging bioeconomy of



Figure 20. The City Farm in Chicago, Illinois, is a well-loved icon that is located just north of downtown, between Cabrini-Green and the Gold Coast. The aesthetic appearance of the farm embraces a wilder look with the large tomato patch in this photograph, and the contrast between its appearance and the famous architectural monuments of the city skyline is intriguing (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

multifunctional landscapes in the Midwest. Often those farms help by providing job training for young people and rejuvenating neighborhoods by their presence as social catalysts. Those farms often have links to local restaurants and farmers markets by providing locally grown produce, like tomatoes and lettuce. City Farm in Chicago is an example of this type, which is run by the staff of the nonprofit Resource Center (Figures 20 and 21). Growing Power in Milwaukee, which is the brain child of Will Allen, is an example of a national nonprofit and land trust that emphasizes a holistic approach to building a community food system. Its urban farm serves as the social



Figure 21. Some parts of the City Farm have a more groomed appearance, like these neat rows of lettuce (photograph copyrighted by Laura Musacchio; used with permission).

catalyst. Allen’s model has been so successful that people are looking to apply the approach in other cities. For example, the Women’s Environmental Institute will be applying this model in the Minneapolis–St. Paul region.

Lessons learned

The United States has more arable land than any country in the world; yet many Americans do not have direct, repeated experience about how a farm, as a working landscape, functions throughout the year. For example, direct knowledge about the practices needed to cultivate crops and animals probably peaked in the

mid-twentieth century when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2010) estimated that the number of farms peaked at 6.8 million in 1935. In addition, the rural population of the United States is declining, so fewer people are living purely rural lifestyles. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service estimated that 16 percent of the U.S. population was classified as rural in 2009, which was down from 20 percent in 1980 (USDA, Economic Research Service 2010). On its demographics web page for agriculture, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2010) states in the introductory paragraph that less than 1 percent of the U.S. population describes its occupation as “farmer.”

Because so many of the people who read this web site are not farmers, the next section is called “What is a farm?” This exemplifies the decline of an American icon that several generations ago would have needed no explanation.

The decline of farming as an occupation has not necessarily meant the decline of agrarianism in the United States or the Corn Belt, but rather a reinterpretation of what agrarianism means for an increasingly urban society, whose residents are more likely to experience nature in urban, suburban, or ex-urban landscapes. More and more people are living a mix of urban and rural lifestyles, which can be called rurban. This word is not new; it was coined in 1918 (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2010). But rurban is probably the best word to come along to describe the most important lesson coming from the emerging urban century: People have not forgotten their agrarian roots; rather, they are creating reinterpretations of those icons that are intermixing symbols of rural and urban nature in new and unexpected ways. Their perceptions of rural nature are being shaped by a different set of experiences than farmers, who make their living by working the land. Those different experiences can create a natural gap in knowledge, perceptions, values, attitudes, and beliefs about what rural and urban nature needs to be protected, conserved, or restored. Future land and water conservation policies, as well as best management practices, need to consider the urban context for rural policies, practices, and politics. For example, trying to integrate more nature areas, like trees and prairies, back into areas of the Corn Belt that are extensively farmed will be tricky, especially in the rural-urban fringe.

More and more urbanites in the Corn Belt are enthusiastically embracing a new paradigm for twenty-first century conservation that is influenced by their recreational and leisure activities. Eating more local foods, growing heirloom plants, and experiencing rural places has opened their eyes to the possibilities of

creating urban places that are a mix of rural and urban nature. Much of their interest centers on certain ideals of landscape conservation; much like Aldo Leopold’s followers were influenced by their own set of ideals:

1. Recoupled human and nature interactions to enhance people’s contact with nature.
2. Systems thinking about people and nature across multiple scales.
3. Local food systems, urban/suburban farms, and placemaking.
4. Community empowerment, public health, and local food systems.
5. Social demand for nature in unexpected places.
6. Visible and invisible spatial and sensory cues for urban and rural nature.

The emerging icons of rural and urban nature in high-density cities of the Corn Belt provide important cues about how urbanites’ connection to the local scale of metropolitan landscapes is changing. Living in cities provides many cultural and economic benefits for them, but it comes at high psychological demand, and there is a desire to have more contact with nature as an adaptive coping strategy to reduce stress (van den Berg et al. 2007). Groenewegen et al. (2006) called this the need for vitamin G because green vegetation and spaces have positive effects on human health and well-being. Urbanites are looking for a new relationship with nature that fills a gap in their lives and provides self-fulfillment. They are looking to agrarian lifestyles and values as a way to create a stronger bond with nature. Much like Leopold and his followers in the twentieth century, urbanites have their icons of nature, which are becoming more recognizable as powerful new symbols of rural and urban nature reinterpreted through the filter of their urban experience and values. This shifting social demand for nature is perhaps one of the most

important defining moments in the evolution of nature and the American mind. In the future when people are asked to describe the Corn Belt, perhaps totally new images of nature may come to people's minds, like a small, wild-looking tomato patch on an urban farm, with an urban skyline as a backdrop (Figure 20).

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