

Faith in the

Three farmers show us how to trust nature again

Silence is a way of life in the High Plains: Antelope slip from one place to the next; cows rarely bellow; and of course coyotes are nothing if noticed too soon. When there is a noise—the beating of wings, the thud of a kill—it is muffled by a sea of grasses or lost to the open sky.

Not so in the Childress, a 4,000-acre valley in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming. It is the ugly duckling of Mark Gordon's pastureland. On March 19, there is no grass here, only dry dirt that rises in a mound every five yards. Between the humps, prairie dogs run madly, as if under fire. Wherever they go they chirp, and the noise bounces off the bare ground and into the air. As we drive through, their chorus hangs above the land like music in a supermarket.

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA M. HAMILTON

Many Americans are getting in touch with good food—organics have gone mainstream, farmers' markets proliferate, and co-ops are no longer the sole domain of the granola set. But how much do we know about where food actually comes from? The land and its cultivators are often overlooked as we consider the quality of the foods that sustain us. Here, sustainable agriculture writer Lisa Hamilton profiles farmers who have a deep intimacy with nature. And acclaimed novelist Barbara Kingsolver reveals the satisfying world of farmers who revel in their role as stewards of the land. She echoes Hamilton's call to deepen our relationship with the food on our tables. —The Editors

Mark explains that it's natural for prairie dogs to cultivate bare ground. By disrupting soil with their mounded burrows and shearing vegetation to nothing, they are better able to see predators. The problem here is that the last rancher to lease this land practiced short-term pragmatism: When the rodents made it unprofitable for grazing, he plowed the ground and planted wheat. No matter that the bumpy, unirrigated valley was not given to growing grain; if he couldn't get a crop, at least he could collect the federal wheat subsidy.

The plan backfired. He got his subsidy, but plowing made the ground softer and more hospitable to prairie dogs. In no time their town became a metropolis, and the rancher moved on to greener pastures. That's when Mark Gordon took over.

He's a successful rancher—one who for years now has actually made money off his herd. But since he's not the type to poison prairie dogs, I figure he is resigned to call this 4,000 acres a loss. From what I can see, the Childress is hopeless.

And yet Mark looks on this pasture with soft eyes.



Land

He is a cowboy in the old-time sense, with massive hands and the kind of rough, dashing face that launches Western movies. His cowboy hat is battered, with sides that have curled over time. When Mark enters a building, he instinctively removes the hat, rests it before his heart for a second, then clutches it by his hip. Likewise, he meets problems with the integrity on which the cowboy archetype was built: not with the paranoia or victim mentality of many modern ranchers, but with a calm will to survive.

Looking over this frenzy of rodents, Mark laughs at the absurdity. But he's not daunted. "You can't see it now," he says, "but in June this will be covered in grass. It happens every spring, a little better each year."

I ask him if he has faith in the land.

"Well, yes," he says. "I guess that's it."

HAVING FAITH IN THE LAND is a concept that dissolved in the 20th century. A number of things are to blame. Mechanization decreased the value of a crop and drastically increased the amount a grower had to produce in order to survive; corporatization made that product ever less

profitable by allowing a few large companies to control prices. When the land could not keep up with increased demands, it was said to have failed the farmer. This set the stage for the advent of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, which played to farmers' fears. "Your land isn't strong enough to support you," the chemical salesmen whispered. "These tools will make up for what it lacks."

As faith eroded, so did the sense of exchange between farmer and earth. The land went from being a living partner to being a raw resource—no more than a medium in which a person produces a crop. Agriculture became a business of pure extraction, and nature a series of impediments to overcome.

Though antagonism between grower and land seems almost inherent to farming today, it represents only a moment in the long history of agriculture. The partnership that it replaced had been the foundation (if not always the practice) of agriculture for over 10,000 years. In his essay "A Practical Harmony," Wendell Berry catalogs authors over two millennia advising agriculturalists to work in response to their land's unique qualities. The American horticulturalist Liberty Hyde



With patience and a long-term vision, Wyoming cattle rancher Mark Gordon made his land more productive and its ecosystem more diverse.

Bailey, writing in 1913, put it differently than the Roman poet Virgil had in 36 B.C., but the message was always the same: Learn from the land. Alexander Pope put it eloquently in 1731: “Let Nature never be forgot,” he wrote. “Consult the Genius of the Place in All.”

That heritage has not been lost completely to modern agriculture. There are farmers, old and new, who believe their work should not be done any other way. Among them is Peter Martinelli. He farms on land that he owns with his family in Bolinas, California, but he was not born into the produce business. If you have been to a farmers’ market in recent years you have encountered his likeness: someone who studied English at Berkeley rather than animal science at Cal Poly—a young farmer who chose the profession out of passion.

When Peter is outside, his eyes never rest. He’s constantly looking, thinking, and questioning, then rearranging the pieces of his farm into a whole that makes more sense. It’s an ongoing challenge, since this is not the sunny California of travel brochures but the foggy coastal belt, where you might wear a sweater in July. Some years ago, Peter tried growing strawberries. Because the fruit’s sweetness is a direct reflection of heat and sun, he planted in his warmest field, in the flat, treeless valley. Total failure. He ended up with tart berries and plants that died over the winter. So he kept looking.

Three years ago he planted strawberries in a clearing on the hill, a 20-minute walk from the other fields. Being so far away, it wasn’t an ideal spot for the little fruits, which

ripen suddenly and are gladly stolen by critters from the surrounding woods. But he did it anyway. He had a hunch.

The berries were exquisite, delicious in a way that forces you to stop and consider each one deeply. When I asked him why the success, he led me from the field into the forest. There, wild strawberries stretched their tendrils across the litter of leaves. He explained that in the woods along the lower, sunnier field there grew lush nettles and delectable watercress, but no berries. Something about this place on the hill was just right. He needed only to notice it.

WHILE THE EQUATION BEGINS with learning from the land, there is a necessary second step: extraction. The word alone makes good land-lovers bristle, but it’s unavoidable. Paying attention to nature is essential, but if one doesn’t then extract a product, that person is a naturalist, not a farmer.

This is the other half of the problem that began when agriculturalists lost their partnership with their land. As they became purely extractors, they abandoned their role as caretakers. The post was claimed by environmentalists, but in their hands it was redefined: They would appreciate and protect but not work the land. The taking and the giving that were once the single job of the farmer were separated into two distinct, often opposing, pursuits. In the public mind, the land became too fragile to take from.

I don’t mean to belittle the devotion that comes with loving a wild place. Without the fruits of that love, our

country would be spiritually handicapped (not to mention paved from one end to the other). But I do mean to say that people know a place differently when they depend on it for a livelihood. In needing something from the land, you learn how much it will share, when to take that, and what to give in return. Rather than view the land as a delicate giant, you respect it as a partner full of power and energy. It is a relationship of reverence and gratitude, but also one of exchange.

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Our best farmers, the people we must count on if American agriculture is to be saved, are those who recognize that. They defer to the land's natural structure and seek its wisdom. But they also believe in its strength.

Ask Mark Gordon about the haggard pastures of the Childress and he'll say there's nothing wrong with the land itself. He'll tell you that even the prairie dogs aren't inherently bad. They aerate the soil, and their grazing makes the grass—what's left of it—more nutritious. The problem is that right now there is *nothing but* prairie dogs. If the system were more diverse, he contends, the land would balance itself.

And yet his solution is not to rest the land completely, but to work it more intensely. The idea is to replicate the conditions under which the pasture evolved originally, which means making his cows act like wild bison, the most influential animal force in the shaping of the Plains. To do this, he packs herds in 10 times more densely than most ranchers would—400 cows on 800 acres—to mimic the way bison naturally clustered to protect themselves from predators. The cattle switch pastures as the wild grazing animals would, every 10 to 30 days, depending on how fast the grass is growing. They return only when the grass shows no sign of their last visit. Mark monitors the land daily, and if the system appears to be stressed—say, there is no water or the grass is all gone—he moves them early.

In these tight groups the animals' impact turns positive: The heavy hoof traffic breaks up soil, giving it a roughness that helps to absorb precipitation. The hooves leave hardened depressions that collect water and plant litter and act as protective pots in which new seeds germinate. The cattle eat not just the tender plants but all of them, including dry, old grass and weeds. This pruning inspires vigorous regrowth, and the leveled playing field allows slower-growing perennials to compete. The animals trample their manure, returning its nutrients to the soil.

In the Childress, the thick grasses that follow will conceal predators, who eventually will taper the prairie dog population to healthy numbers. With less rodent distur-

bance, more grass will grow and less topsoil will erode. When rain falls, less will run off and more will be absorbed (a critical advantage in this land that receives only 14 inches of annual precipitation). That increased water supply will enable the repopulation of more complex plant species, most importantly the native bunch grasses.

These plants meet Mark's holistic goal of increasing the land's diversity; in fact, as the cornerstone of the prairie ecosystem, they are harbingers of success.

The grasses also meet his practical goal: Being the Plains' most nutritious and reliable feed, they grant Mark fat cattle, which means he can pay his bills and stay in business—instead of turning the Childress over to another short-term thinker.

IN THE SUBURBS OF BOSTON, where I grew up, there was no reason to value a place. Our street and its anonymous homes were no different from the neighboring streets and their houses. The local park was dangerous and neglected. When a strip mall rose beside it, nobody said a word.

So why would we have cared about where our food came from, what kind of landscape it encouraged? We didn't even notice the one we lived in. Food was judged for its value, defined simply as quantity divided by price.

Today, consumers are redefining what makes food valuable, particularly by choosing food that is grown without chemicals. But this distinction is perhaps not distinct enough; after all, many large corporate organic farms practice the same kind of pure extraction as their nonorganic counterparts. When we determine value, we should consider also what partnership the grower has with the land, and in that, what kind of place the food represents.

My mind turns again to the suburbs, but this time to the town of Kouda, outside Hiroshima. Above the noisy main road there, in an anonymous duplex, lives a woman named Yuko Tanabe. She works on her family's orchard, which, like most in Japan, is squeezed between several others on a scrap of the country's scant farmland. The family gets by with a tiny farm for two reasons: They push the land hard with pesticides (per acre, Japan sprays six times as much as the United States), and shoppers pay great sums for the flawless products that result. The system makes the family dependent—on chemicals, on consumers with rigid expectations—but it keeps them in business.

When Yuko suggested the family turn their farm into a new kind of place, one that uses no chemicals, the reply



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Japanese farmer Yuko Tanabe, left, pollinates her pear orchard by hand.

was a flat no. They would go out of business, her parents said. The land could not support it.

Yuko is hearty and direct, not someone to take no for an answer. On the day that I visited her, she wore thick high heels but still trudged up the hill behind her apartment as if she were wearing work boots. Together we wound along the road to a field of tall weeds, behind which lay her response to the family's decision.

There lay a clearing 60 feet long. Along one side ran a forest of brush; downhill was a trash-strewn cliff that ended in a dusty baseball field. In the middle, though, on two terraces cut into the hill, Yuko had planted pears and peaches: 12 trees in all. It was land nobody wanted—for farming or anything else—but that was a good thing. Isolation meant the trees would never be threatened by drifting chemicals.

As most Japanese orchardists would, Yuko had secured the tree limbs onto overhead trellises. The branches were meticulously arranged in a fan pattern so their fruit would get maximal sunlight and thus grow larger. But below the trees, the earth was wild with grass and clover, the air speckled with falling petals.

When we arrived, Yuko stopped at her shed there. She picked up a cottony wand and a tin can full of

pink powder, strapped the can over her shoulder with a loop of string, and slipped under the pear trees. Every few feet she would dip her wand into the can and reach up to anoint blossoms with the powder. A fairy in muddy high heels.

She explained that because space is limited, she could plant only fruiting trees, not the usual companions that provide pollination. So she acts as a surrogate bee: She collects blossoms from pollinators at the family farm, pulverizes them, puts the powder into her can, and dabs life onto the flowers herself.

Yuko knows this land will not fail her. Instead, the big question, the one that decides her fate, is whether the consumers will fail her. I imagine she would gain the allegiance of every shopper in Japan if each one could sit there as I did: with white blossoms falling into my hair, watching pink powder rain back down on Yuko's face. But at the supermarket, who would ever know? By the time her pears sit on the shelf with all the others, they have lost the sweet air of that clearing, the soft green of its clover, the genius of that place.

► Lisa Hamilton writes about sustainable agriculture and lives in Marin County, California. Her photo of Yuko Tanabe, above, is part of "Shumei Natural Agriculture: Farming to create heaven on earth," a landmark series of stories and photos by Hamilton available at www.NewFarm.Org/international.