

## **Book review: Consulting the Genius of the Place, by Wes Jackson**

Rich Heffern | Dec. 8, 2010 Eco Catholic

CONSULTING THE GENIUS OF THE PLACE  
AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO A NEW AGRICULTURE

By Wes Jackson

Published by Counterpoint Books, \$26

Wes Jackson, founder of The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, has been a leading voice of the agrarian movement over the last four decades. The themes of place, biodiversity and the virtues of perennial plants that have figured in his previous books converge in Jackson's thorough argument for a new approach to agriculture that is dictated not by market economies or agribusiness but rather by the land and ecology of a given place.

Jackson pleads for us to look to natural ecosystems -- or nature in general -- as the measure against which we judge our agricultural practices. He believes the time is right to do away with crop monocultures, such as corn, which are vulnerable not only to national security threats but are partly responsible for the explosion in our health care costs. Soil erosion, overgrazing, and the poisons polluting our water and air, all associated with our contemporary form of American agriculture, promise a future with our land destroyed, our fertile topsoil completely absent. Jackson asks us to look to nature itself to lead us out of the mess we've made. We do this by consulting with the natural ecosystems that will tell us, if we listen, what should happen to the future of food.

Jackson's argument is fairly simple: We need to learn to shift our agricultural efforts away from large-scale monoculture operations which contribute to the catastrophic effects of erosion and of the chemicals in the fertilizers and pesticides that such monocultures demand. Instead, he argues, we should return to diverse plantings that include perennial crops and that fit with the land, climate and other ecological features of our particular places.



Indeed, the work of Jackson's Land Institute is just that ? engineering

through plant breeding perennial grain crops that fit the land and climate of the nation's breadbasket, the central Plains.

He says in the book's preface: ?As our minds sweep over the past and back to the present, I want them to center on the natural ecosystems still with us as our primary teachers. They are our source of hope. Reduced in number and limited in scale, they still hold answers to countless questions we have not yet learned to ask?

The primary natural ecosystem, of course, that Jackson and others at The Land Institute have trained their focus ? given their home base in the heartland ? is that of the prairie. Jackson takes his time, leisurely narrating story after story that illustrate and flesh out the key points of his argument.

The stories he tells range from his own experiences growing up in Kansas and spending summers working on a relative's ranch in South Dakota, to those of Nikita Khrushchev's visit to Roswell Garst's hybrid seed farm in Iowa in 1959.

Jackson is not shy about analyzing the resistance. It's the first time I have ever seen anyone discuss the resistance to new ideas coming from ecology and sustainable agriculture, or the denial about global climate change, in physiological terms. He cites brain research which shows that our minds may be inherently resistant. Evidence shows that ?when we try to correct a falsehood or urban legend with accurate information, the studies show that denials and clarifications contribute to the popular falsehoods.?

?We need a nonmaterial growth model, one that is resilient and socially just,? Jackson concludes.

?So where do we look? Maybe in a seemingly unlikely place ? where the split between humans and nature first happened, with agriculture, to the Fall. How might this happen? As the perennial grains come online as a compelling alternative to their annual relatives, with the ecosystem concept firmly in mind, we will seriously begin to assemble them in mixtures, maybe two species at first. As this process is underway, at some point, we will observe a quantum leap as the processes of the wild return to the landscape, this time on our farms. Is it too outlandish to wonder if, as a new agricultural economy becomes more like nature's economy, our minds will expand? Perhaps all of this may become a new source of metaphors and generally increase our imagination. We will be featuring nature's wisdom over human cleverness ? the Tree of Life over the Tree of Knowledge ??

It might be termed a kind of hubris to state that your own project in the world is the one that might indeed save it, but in Jackson's case, he might just be right.

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