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Excerpt from Wes Jackson's new book, Consulting the Genius of the Place

Rich Heffern | Dec. 8, 2010 Eco Catholic

*The following excerpt is from**Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture**, by Wes Jackson, published by Counterpoint Books.*

We learned from a study by a graduate student named William Noll at the University of Nebraska. In the 1930s he did a master's thesis that compared a never-plowed native prairie with an adjacent wheat field on common soil. He looked at several things, but the water part of it was particularly interesting.

The native prairie allocated the rain water over the course of the year - what turned out to be the driest year on record. Even though there were plants that died, essentially all the perennial species survived. In contrast, the adjacent wheat field completely died. The prairie is a "system" that has evolved to receive and allocate water over the course of a year - it uses a natural water conservation program.

Now, if you go to the tropical rain forest, another spot in the ecological mosaic of this planet - an area with 300 inches of rainfall per year - water is the nemesis of fertility because it will carry the nutrients downward and out of reach of the roots. Here you have a "system" designed to pump huge quantities of energy - of water - back into the atmosphere. This is a system designed to do the opposite of the one up in the prairie.

Now what "Homo the Homogenizer" does, with an abundance of fossil fuel, is homogenize all these diverse environments to meet our expectations, rather than trying to meet the expectations of the landscape.

What comes to mind are the words of Alexander Pope, the great poet, who said, "Consult the genius of the place in all things." So if you think of these two extremes across the ecological mosaic and all the other realities in between, it seems worthwhile to consider designing agricultural systems that - as John Todd once called, "the elegant solution predicated on the uniqueness of place."

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