

Henry George Newsletter

High School Edition

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Special Topic: Natural Resources

The American frontier may be closed, and people may feel removed from their simple past when so many lived and worked closely with the land. Nevertheless, the United States is still blessed with tremendous natural resources. This country grows far more food than it needs, and annually exports millions of tons. Vast potential lies untapped; for example, it is estimated that a network of windmills on the Midwestern plains could provide one-third of this nation's electricity. Millions of Americans own their own homes.

However, our country faces grave inequities and vital problems in maintaining and administering its land. About three per cent of this nation's people own or control 95% of its privately-owned land (Harpers Magazine, 1979). In New York City, the most populous and heavily-built place in the country,

fully ten-per cent of the land available for building is vacant, entirely unused, while more than 100,000 people are homeless.

Just as the land has been such a defining factor in our history, the decisions we make about the use and care of our natural resources may well determine whether our country will remain the powerful, free and bountiful land we know as the United States of America. The availability of land has played a unique and powerful role in the shaping of our history.

Historically, as a result of the closing of the American frontier, several significant changes in land policy occurred. As the availability of free land was basically exhausted, the Great West diminished as a factor in American development. Free land had always acted as an economic safety valve, providing all with a chance to get a living. Free land also meant higher wages, because employers had to induce their workers not to seek better opportunities in the West. At the closing of the

frontier, we entered a period of concentration - of capital, as with monopolies and trusts - and of labor, responding with unions and cooperation. Connected with both of these changes was an impetus for expansion beyond the continental limits of the United States - expansion that was both political and social. Some historians have suggested that without the safety valve of the frontier, economic and

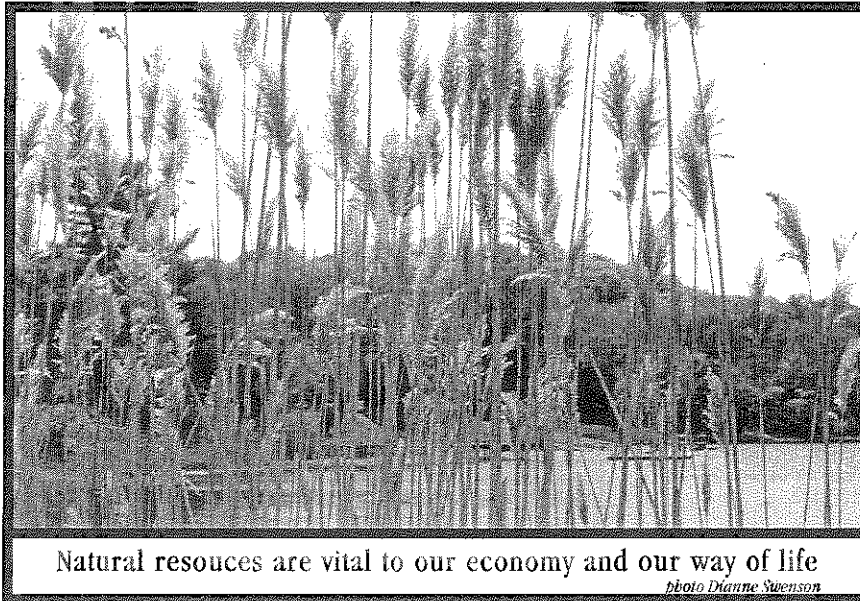
social pressures were such that the lot of the average workers declined. With the frontier gone, so too was the chance that one could pick up stakes, escape the confines of the city and strike out on one's own.

In the 20th century, cities became increasingly dominant centers of economic power as the great public and private

institutions came to play a larger role in this country's social and political life. As large metropolitan areas expanded, so did demand for urban land. This in turn led to land speculation, the hoarding of land for future gain. People began to make fortunes buying and selling land. As population and the demand for land increase, speculators reap huge profits. By making much of the land most in demand virtually inaccessible, land speculation has a negative effect on our economy. Land, a natural resource and therefore a natural opportunity, becomes the exclusive province of the few.



Lesson plans that can be used with this issue: American History # 17, *The Closing of the Frontier* and # 20, *Land Our National Heritage*. Also: Economic Studies # 6, *Economic Institutions*, # 7, *Supply and Demand* and # 16, *The Single Tax*. In World History: # 3, *The Feudal Land System*, and #6, *The Enclosure Movement*.



Natural resources are vital to our economy and our way of life

photo Dianne Swenson

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Free Lesson Materials for High School Teachers

A Rift Over Rio Grande Water Rights

by Ross E. Millroy

BAYVIEW, Texas - After one of the driest summers on record along the border here in South Texas, tensions are growing between local farmers and Mexico over water rights to the Rio Grande.

Mexico has warned that not only will it fail to meet a September 30 deadline to release millions of gallons of water it is required by treaty to provide farmers for irrigation but also that it needs to hold back even more water because of prolonged drought.

Farmers in South Texas are outraged, pointing out that it would be the second time Mexico has breached an agreement negotiated in March between the Bush administration and President Vicente Fox of Mexico.

"We are upset, angry and scared," said Gordon Hill, general manager of the Bayview Irrigation District. "We've got farmers going out of business because Mexico has broken its promises on releasing water. That water is our lifeline, and they're shutting it off."

Mexico says it needs the water for its border towns and cities. But South Texas water officials say Mexico is hoarding the water for its own farmers' crops next year, giving them a competitive advantage over their American counterparts just over the border.

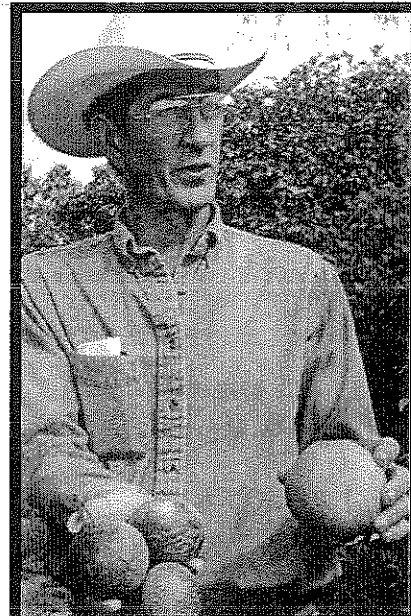
Under a treaty signed by the two countries in 1944, Mexico agreed to send the United States one-third of the runoff from six tributaries to the Rio Grande, or at least 350,000 acre-feet per year (an acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons). For its part, the United States was to provide 1.5 million acre-feet of Colorado River water to Mexico. Because a long drought has reduced some reservoirs to less than 12 percent of capacity, Mexican officials say, they have been in arrears on their water payments since 1992.

In the latest round, Mexico first said it could not release almost 300,000 acre-feet of its total water debt of about 1.4 million acre feet by September 30, and then said it would seek a loan of water from the U.S. to supply its own border communities.

Alberto Szekely, an adviser to Mexico's foreign ministry on the issue, said that when the water repayment agreements were reached last March, negotiators developed a timetable based on the estimated projected rainfall. One plan paid the debt down by July 31 and a

fallback plan repaid the water by September 30. Neither happened. Instead, Mr. Szekely said, "something a lot worse happened, and that is no water."

Although Mexico began honoring the agreement, sending about 300,000 acre-feet of water downstream from March to June, northern Mexico has received only half of the rainfall projected in the negotiators' worse case scenario, and Mexican reservoirs are now at an all-time low, Mr. Szekely said.



A Texas farmer shows smaller grapefruit produced by lack of rainfall

"This has forced us to advise the U.S. that we will have to request a water loan," he said.

But even before hearing that Mexico would seek a loan, South Texas farmers and water managers were saying that, even as they refused to release sufficient water downstream for Texas agricultural operations, Mexico was stockpiling water to build up its own agricultural export industry.

Of Mexico's request for a water loan, Gordon Hill, general manager of the Bayview Irrigation District, said, "It will be a cold day in hell when that happens."

Mr. Hill, whose grandfather helped create the system of 28 local irrigating districts that built a four-county area in the Rio Grande Valley into a major Texas agricultural center, said local agricultural jobs and facilities were moving across the border because

Mexico was exploiting water owed to the United States for use by its own farmers.

Large corporations have shifted some of their operations from the Valley into the Mexican state of Chihuahua, which holds about 80 percent of Mexico's water storage capacity along the Rio Grande, Mr. Hill said.

"They're using our own water against us," he said.

Thousands of South Texas agricultural jobs depend upon water pumped from the Rio Grande. Since 1992, Mexico's shortfalls on its water debts may have cost Texas farmers as much as \$3 billion, Texas economic development officials say. In that same period, Mexican produce exports along the border increased by one billion pounds.

Javier Mendoza, a spokesman for the National Water Commission in Mexico City, said that while there was some water in the northern reservoirs, it was being held back for human consumption. But records of the International Boundary and Water Commission, an agency monitoring compliance with the treaty show that Mexico has sent over 100,000 acre-feet to Mexican farmers and added 263,480 acre-feet of water to Mexican reservoirs this summer, even as it missed a July 31 deadline to release 600,000 acre-feet of water to the United States.

As supplies build, the water is released downstream - to serve users with predetermined rights to certain quantities. "It operates like a bank, with the users making deposits of certain amounts of water and then 'writing checks' when they need to draw down water," Ms. Spener said. "If the bank runs out, everybody's out of business."

-reprinted from the NY Times

Questions

1. What effect has drought had on the water supply?
2. Why do the farmers in Texas claim the Mexicans are being unfair?
3. Describe the water rights agreement between the U.S. and Mexico.
4. What effect has the disagreement had on the economy. Why?

Now the Ancient Ways are Less Mysterious

by Henry Fountain

Each June for at least the last four centuries, farmers in 12 mountain villages in Peru and Bolivia follow a ritual that Westerners might think odd, if not crazy. Late each night for about a week, the farmers observe the stars in the Pleiades constellation, which is low on the horizon to the northeast. If they appear big and bright, the farmers know to plant their potato crop at the usual time four months later. But if the stars are dim, the usual planting will be delayed for several weeks.

Now Western researchers have applied the scientific method to this seeming madness. Poring over reams of satellite data on cloud cover and water vapor, Benjamin S. Orlove, an anthropologist at the University of California at Davis, and colleagues have discovered that these star-gazing farmers are accurate long-range weather forecasters. High wisps of cirrus clouds dim the stars in El Niño years, which brings reduced rainfall to that part of the Andes. In such drought conditions, it makes sense to plant potatoes as late as possible.

Professor Orlove's work, which was reported this month in the British journal *Nature*, is just the latest example of indigenous or traditional knowledge that has been found to have a sound scientific basis. In agriculture, nutrition, medicine and other fields, modern research is showing why people maintain their traditions.

Take the Masai of East Africa, who are famous for the kind of high-fat diet, rich in meat and milk, that would make a cardiologist swoon. Timothy Johns, a professor at McGill University in Montreal and director of the Center for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment, has long studied the Masai to determine how they stay healthy.

The Masai add the roots and barks of certain plants, including a species of acacia high in antioxidants, Professor Johns said.

They also chew a natural gum, related to myrrh, that helps to break down fats.

"It's not a magic bullet protecting the Masai against heart disease," he said. "But there is a benefit from what they are doing." In a 1998 study, two Cornell University researchers analyzed the spices used in 36 countries and found a correlation between average temperature and cooking with spices like cumin, turmeric, ginger and chili peppers, all of which have antimicrobial properties. The hotter the climate, the hotter the food—in part, at least, to keep it from spoiling.

Sometimes, however, the benefits of tradi-

ciprocal altruism. "Everybody gets more rice and variation in harvest disappears, so there's no reason to be envious of your neighbors," said Professor Lansing, who now teaches at the University of Arizona. "It's a bottom-up system of management that's worked very well." The green revolution, he added, "was very much top down." The traditional system has been re-established.

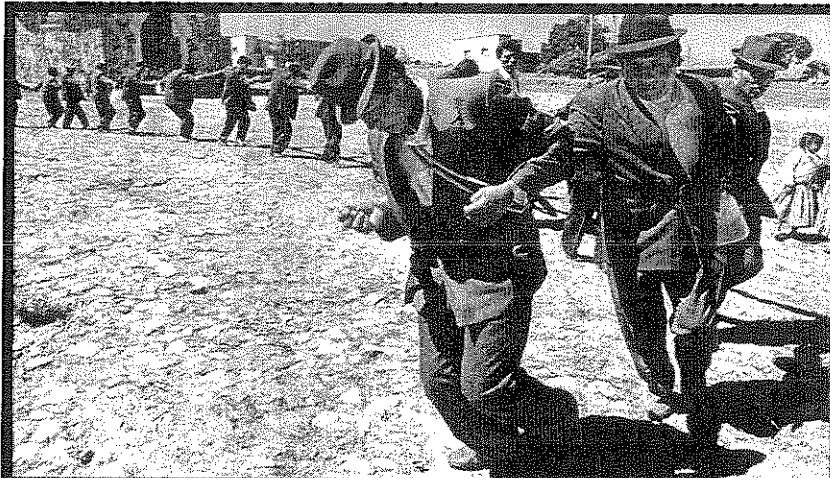
Professor Orlove has studied similar traditional resource management around Lake Titicaca, on the border between Bolivia and

Peru. A distinctive feature of the lake is the reeds growing in its shallows. The people around the lake use them for rafts and livestock feed, among other things.

"They are a major component of the household economy," said Professor Orlove. The residents replant the reeds, which also serve as a spawning ground for some of the 22 species of fish that are unique to the lake.

However, some anthropologists are challenging the notion that all indigenous groups have somehow developed a blissful oneness with their world. Sometimes, indigenous knowledge can be faulty. Traditional people sometimes get things right, and sometimes get things wrong," says Alan Fiske, a psychological anthropologist at the University of California. "It's always been the case that some things people do are bad for them."

-reprinted from the NY Times



Bolivian men dancing during an end of harvest celebration

tional knowledge are not so obvious to those outside the culture. In Bali in the 1970's, the Indonesian government, persuaded by international advocates of the "green revolution," forced rice farmers to adopt new growing schemes. Among other things, the farmers were made to stop their centuries-old ritual of meeting in small groups at a series of water temples set at the forks of rivers, to negotiate seasonal schedules for flooding their paddies.

The new techniques resulted in disaster. Farmers were pressured to plant as often as possible. With little coordination of irrigation, water shortages and pest infestation were the norm.

At about this time, J. Stephen Lansing, an American anthropologist, began to study the water temples. What he found, which was supported later by computer modeling, was that the old system was quite sophisticated and efficient, encouraging cooperation among thousands of farmers. Water was shared and controlled through a process involving re-

Questions

1. What natural resources do many traditional peoples use?
2. What sometimes happens if they try to adopt "modern" methods instead?
3. What role does the land play in traditional societies?
4. How can we learn from traditional knowledge?

Historical Background - Our National Heritage

Excerpted from American History lesson #20, Land our National Heritage. The entire lesson and others dealing with historical and economic issues can be downloaded for free at our web site - www.henrygeorgeschool.org

LAND: OUR NATIONAL HERITAGE

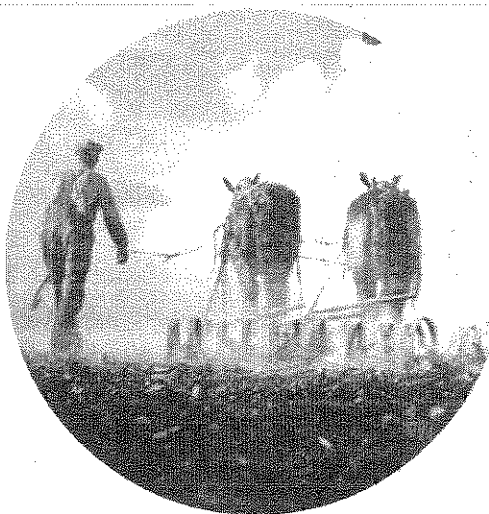
"Plenty of good land, and liberty to manage their own affairs in their own way, seem to be the two great causes of the prosperity of all new colonies." That statement by Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, comes close to summarizing the history of the United States in a single sentence. The abundance of land and natural resources in the New World was the single most important factor in this country's development. Since the beginning of the United States, policies concerning the acquisition of land, its distribution and its management have been a constant topic of political debate, second in importance, perhaps, only to questions of personal freedom. However, as we have seen in many ways, and in many time periods, issues of land ownership, land access and land use are intimately bound with issues of freedom and justice.

Of course, land is an integral part of social and economic life in every time and every society, because the land is where we live. Every material thing we make, use or enjoy comes ultimately from the land. However, this universal relationship has had a special character in the United States of America, because of our colonial history, and because of the great westward march that came to be known as "Manifest Destiny."

In the first days of colonization, trading companies controlled the parceling out of land. In time, European monarchs, competing for the wealth of empire, laid claim to lands in the New World, and proprietary colonial possessions were given out by kings. As settlers moved west, land that the U.S. government had acquired through sale or conquest was granted to settlers, or to land corporations, or to railroads. Finally, great acreages of land - nearly one third of the area of the U.S. - is still held by the Federal Government. Much is used by the military; some is leased to ranchers or miners; some forms the National Park system. Finally, a

tiny fraction of the land of North America is held by those who once claimed this entire continent as their home, but not their possession: the Native Americans.

From the incredible variety of terrains and climates in this country evolved different regional economies. The industrial Northeast, the agricultural South and the wide-open West all pressed their regional economic interests on the national government. These sectional disputes came close to fracturing the Union. The



wealth of different traditions, attitudes and folklore of the United States arose from the relationship of restless Americans to their land.

Most Americans have believed in private property. Indeed, the promise of their very own piece of land was one of the greatest reasons why colonists endured perilous sea voyages, and settlers covered thousands of dangerous miles. The concept of private land ownership was utterly foreign to most Native Americans, many of whom were nomads who could scarcely imagine that

the land's bounty had any limits. The Europeans, unable to afford land in their own countries, insisted that the land they claimed was theirs by right, to own, to sell,

Land is an integral part of social and economic life in every time and every society.

or to bequeath to their heirs as they wished. No one suffered from this, as long as there was plenty of land to go around (and there was, for awhile, once the original inhabitants were subdued or destroyed). Nevertheless, an inevitable question emerged: what about those who could not claim or inherit land? Had they no right to it at all?

Many important American statesmen understood that question. Here are statements of two of our Presidents:

Abraham Lincoln: *The land, the earth God gave to man for his home, sustenance and support should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society or unfriendly government, any more than the air or water, is as much. An individual, or company, or enterprise requiring land should hold no more than is required for their home and sustenance, and never more than they have in actual use in the prudent management of their legitimate business, and this much should not be permitted when it creates an exclusive monopoly.*

Thomas Jefferson: *The earth belongs in usufruct to the living. Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have so far been extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for men to labor and live on.*

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