

BOOK REVIEWS

Better Land Husbandry: from Soil Conservation to Holistic Land Management. By J. Hellin. Enfield, NH, USA: Science Publishers (2006), pp. 323, £33.30. ISBN 1-57808-244-7. doi:10.1017/S0014479706214534

This volume advocates long known but often obscured understandings about how land needs to be treated for its productivity to be maintained. Implicit in the title is the need for husbandry of land to be improved beyond those inappropriate levels of use and management which have led to land degradation, evidenced too often in the tropics by soil erosion. Good land husbandry rests on a set of agro-ecological and socio-economic principles, not in a collection of specific practices. It is an essential concept behind land management, not just an improved alternative approach to soil and water conservation, as suggested by the author.

He outlines complexities of the interwoven lives of soils and people on steep lands in tropical America, and discusses reasons why farmers may not adopt what specialists prescribe. There is welcome emphasis on listening to farmers, on soil organisms, organic materials, soil porosity and soil water, and on the benefits achievable from mulch-based zero-tillage systems. From the text can be inferred lines of inter-disciplinary enquiry needed to improve our understanding of the roots of sustainability of agricultural production.

This interesting book combines information from fieldwork on steep lands in Honduras (until ended by Hurricane Mitch), a doctoral thesis, other people's writings, the author's interpretations and 41 pages of references. The author's enthusiasm for better land husbandry shines through the wide-ranging but rather jumbled text and the references, among which the persistent reader will discern the urgent, basic, ecological message. Stricter editing, to improve clarity and shorten the book, would have been beneficial.

Francis Shaxson

Campeño a Campeño. By Eric Holt-Giménez. Oakland, CA, USA: Food First Books (2006), pp. 225, US \$19.95. (paperback). ISBN-13:978-0-935028-27-0. doi:10.1017/S0014479706224530

The book is sub-titled, 'Voices from Latin America's Farmer to Farmer Movement (MCAC) for Sustainable Agriculture'. The author has had many years' involvement in training, action research and experiential learning within the movement. The book includes many stories from farmers that exemplify the strength and richness of their technical, social and political learning, which have emerged from resistance to wars, hurricanes, modernization and globalization, from group experimentation and the sharing of knowledge.

The author outlines the growth of the movement in Central American countries through learning, leadership and extension training with farmer groups and NGOs who have combined to develop a regenerative and sustainable agriculture on degraded land. The ownership of land has become the key to these investments in natural resource enhancement. The initial actions were focused on learning how to reverse degradation through the application of basic soil conservation and restoration activities using ground cover legumes as an alternative to slash and burn agriculture. The rapid success of this simple technology, which was introduced through learning partnerships across country borders, was a key to the growth in confidence of the farmer groups.

The whole process of change is essentially a socio-cultural-political one in which the initial resistance by peasant farmers to imposed, and often inappropriate, agrarian modernization policies, is strengthened and matures through the merging of research, training and extension into an integrated process and the emergence of integrated transnational advocacy networks and what the author calls structural literacy. There are many valuable lessons here for today's agricultural science researchers.

David Gibbon