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Author

Broome, JoEllen

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Review: Old Fields: Dynamics and Restoration of Abandoned Farmland

Viki A. Cramer and Richard J. Hobbs (Eds.)

Reviewed by Joan Ellen Broome
Georgia Southern University, USA

Cramer, Viki A. and Richard J. Hobbs (Eds.). *Old Fields: Dynamics and Restoration of Abandoned Farmland*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2007. 334 pp. ISBN 1597260754. US\$40.00, paper. Recycled, acid free paper.

The editors of *Old Fields* compiled what is the first international synthesis of research on the dynamics of land abandonment, whether it is former cropland, pasturage, or tree plantations. This alone makes it a laudable achievement. Both editors, Viki A. Cramer and Richard J. Hobbs, are affiliated with Murdoch University in Western Australia. Cramer is an ecologist in the School of Environmental Science where she teaches environmental restoration while Richard J. Hobbs is a fellow both there and at the Australian Academy of Science and serves as editor-in-chief of the journal *Restoration Ecology*. Together, in the first two chapters, they offer an overview of the body of work to date and outline the theoretical principles based on them.

The case studies follow. Questions raised deal with the worldwide process of land abandonment and whether or not predictable patterns arise regardless of location. The post abandonment questions reckon with whether or not the dynamics of plant succession that follow once cultivated landscapes are peculiar to the locale or exhibit recognizable patterns globally. Why must these processes be investigated? Because understanding abandonment and post abandonment dynamics powerfully influence restoration ecology decisions. It is a useful work for scientists, practitioners and students of ecology. The interested generalist should await further synthesizing and a less technical approach.

Cramer and Hobbs remind us that land abandonment is nothing new in human history. But the most recent version of it since records have been kept is instructive. The eastern U.S. became "the first region [on the planet] to experience significant abandonment of cropland from 1870 onward" (p. 3-5). The modern day experience in land abandonment has several causes. Among them are shifts in the demand for commodities in the world market that make a once intensely cultivated crop unprofitable; population explosions requiring human habitat development of former agricultural properties; intermittent environmental cataclysms like long term droughts; and long term abuses in production practices that led to catastrophes like deforestation. The research conducted covers a wide range of topographies. Case studies included are from Puerto Rico, Brazilian Amazonia, Australian Rain Forests, arid landscapes in Southeastern Spain and central Greece, shrub land in South Africa, and Michigan flatlands and the Piedmont area of New Jersey in the United States.

One lapse in the book is the failure to mention one of the largest and dramatic restoration proposals in the U.S., which is also known as the "home of old fields ecology." In the late 1980s, a super-sized restoration plan for the Great Plains poetically labeled "The Buffalo Commons" by the staid academicians who conceived it captured national headlines. The pair of scientists who devised this plan were from Rutgers University: Frank (international land use expert) and Deborah (geographer) Popper. The Poppers addressed their restoration plan at a conference of the Society for Ecological Restoration International in Chicago in June of 1990, where the couple and the concept (now accepted by initially hostile plains residents) received a warm welcome.

The editors' end chapter offers much to ponder as restoration ecology moves into new terrain, literally. Cramer and Hobbs observe that there are actually instances where restoration is not advisable. They rightly conclude that the models developed thus far were in "temperate areas of the Northern Hemisphere" and may not apply in the other regions featured in some of these case studies. In areas where intense cultivation followed by abandonment are recent, restoration based on historically documented species that once occupied the space is possible. However, for "cultural landscapes," in Europe especially, where the original ecosystem was disturbed centuries ago, restoration ecology is less likely. This realization leaves room for other creative options for abandoned lands.

Joan Ellen Broome, MLS, MA. <jbroome@georgiasouthern.edu>, Associate Professor and Information Services Librarian, Zach S. Henderson Library, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro GA 30460-8074, USA. TEL: 1-912-478-7823.

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