



The Subsistence Gardener

WATER

One of the driving forces behind economic development has been the application of modern technologies to water. Rivers have been dammed, reservoirs built, bore holes drilled, pipelines and pumping stations installed, and old patterns of water management overturned and forgotten. Generally, the assumption has been that however much water you want, for whatever purpose, you can have.

It is the modern water infrastructure that has allowed cities to reach their current size, and for so many people to leave the countryside and live in an urban environment. All of this development has been based on the unconscious assumption that water is something that can be controlled, and will bend to the human will.

In some ways this is reminiscent of ancient civilisations, which were often based around river deltas, and on the flood plains of major rivers – places where water was plentiful. Rich soils, intense sunlight, and abundant amounts of water, led to high crop yields, dense populations, and the development of large cities. The rise and fall of these civilisations was linked to how well people were able to work together to build irrigation canals on the one hand, and prevent flooding on the other. But they were not typical of agriculture in general, and did not represent the way most people lived.

In places where water was less plentiful, even with the most careful management, crop yields were lower, the human population less dense, and, as a result, there were fewer towns; civilisations were more dispersed, and government less centralised. This could provide a better model for modern times.

Looking for a Property

When looking for a property in the countryside, it makes sense to try to find somewhere that has had a dwelling on it for a considerable amount of time. If people were able to live in a place over the course of centuries, then there must have been a readily-accessible, natural source of water there, and little risk of flooding.

Springs and wells are ideal sources of water, as underground water is in a state of constant motion, slowly making its way to the ocean, so there is no risk of it becoming stagnant, and it is being filtered as it passes through the rocks and soil.

Streams can also be a reliable source of water, but you need to know about all the human activity upstream. Generally, people did not build their homes close to larger rivers, preferring instead to give rivers space to overflow their banks in wintertime.

Rainwater can be stored, but, traditionally, has not been relied upon as a primary water source, partly because it can run out in protracted dry periods, and partly because it is difficult to keep water fresh when it is standing still.

When looking for a property in the countryside, it makes sense to try to find somewhere that has had a dwelling on it for a considerable amount of time. If people were able to live in a place over the course of centuries, then there must have been a readily-accessible, natural source of water.

A Shared Resource

When one starts to look carefully, one can see that water has been a shared resource even in low-density agricultural communities. If a place has a good well, or a strong spring, then people can build their homes around it – but no matter how good the well might be, there will be a limit to the number of homes that it can support, how many people can live in those homes, and how many animals they can keep. By managing the land well – by having trees, small fields, banks, and terraces – they can slow down the rate at which water drains away, which helps to keep the water table higher during spells of dry weather, which means there is more water in the wells, and more people can live around them. But there is still a limit, and the community is stronger, and more successful, if people are able to get on with each other and share the available water fairly.

Climate Change

One of the elements being most affected by climate change is water; the infrastructure that has been built up over the past few hundred years – reservoirs, flood defences, building zones, sewage systems, water purification plants, etc. – has been based on the assumption that established weather patterns would remain unchanged, and no one now imagines this will be the case. It is doubtful that it is even possible to rebuild everything to take account of new weather patterns, and even if it was, no one can be sure what the new weather patterns will be. And, to make matters worse, the economic activity involved would probably have a further, unpredictable, impact on the weather.

On the other hand, returning to an older system of water management, in which springs and wells are carefully nurtured, and everyone takes responsibility for managing water well, and helping to keep it pure, does make sense, and offers the best hope for a brighter future.

