



Biodiversity

Over recent years, it has become fashionable to say that almost every new development, whether it be a new farming initiative, an urban redevelopment, or a new technology, is good for biodiversity in one way or another, but one rarely hears anyone restating the basic fact that biodiversity is all about sharing.

Commercial Farming

Commercial farming does not encourage sharing: it is centred around the principle that the greater the amount of a crop that a farmer can get to market, the more money they will make, and the more secure they and their family will be. It is this formula that has driven agricultural development over the past few hundred years, leading to bigger and bigger fields, fewer and fewer trees, more and more domestic animals, and tractors, fertilisers, chemicals, and all sorts of complex machinery on the farm. When you have a multi-hectare cereal field, with no weeds, harvested in such a way that every last grain is collected and sent off to market, then there is not much sharing going on with all the other plants and animals that would like to live on that land as well. When the same thing is repeated over a whole region, or country, it is not surprising that there should be a catastrophic collapse in the populations of wild animals and plants, and a loss of biodiversity.

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Rewilding

One tentative solution that has been suggested is that large tracts of land could be set aside both from farming activity, and from urban development, for rewilding. One problem with this idea is that it does not specify how much, and what sort of, human activity would be allowed in the rewilded areas, even though all the different 'wild' areas of the world have been shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the people who traditionally lived in them.

Furthermore, the idea of rewilding generally involves passing responsibility to governments to ensure that an adequate amount of land is rewilded: on the one hand, we continue with our exploitative and unsustainable system of food production, mining, fossil-fuel extraction, road building, and forestry, while on the other hand we trust that governments will agree to preserve enough other parts of the world untouched so that nature can still flourish. We ought to be able to do better than that.

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The Subsistence Garden

The idea of the subsistence garden is that an individual, or a family, or a group of people, can meet a significant amount of their own needs (food, fuel, clothes, building materials, etc.) from a plot of land, while at the same time sharing that same plot of land with a large range of plants and animals, which they recognise as having an equal right to live there as they do themselves.

When someone is free from commercial pressure, it becomes easier for them to recognise that when they have enough, they have enough – and that the land is capable of not only giving *them* enough to meet their needs, but also to give a large range of plants that may not specifically be crop plants, plus a myriad of animals, ranging from the smallest, to the biggest, enough to meet their needs as well. To a certain extent, this may involve doing a little more work at first than you had envisaged: you might find that you have to grow double the amount of some things – the mice might eat half the potatoes, the birds might eat half the grain, etc. – but that is not necessarily a problem. Everything that the animals eat is recycled into the soil, helping to increase fertility, and, over time, more little animals eating your plants leads to more predators eating them, and populations starting to stabilise. By allowing a wide range of grasses, wild flowers, different trees, etc. to live in your garden, you are providing habitats for a much wider range of insects and small animals, which in turn make it possible for a wider range of birds and reptiles to live on the land.

This is beneficial from an environmental and economic point of view, because the land becomes able to yield crops year after year without the need for external inputs and fossil-fuel derived products. It is genuinely good for biodiversity. And, perhaps something that is not stressed enough, it is good for you: you have the pleasure of not only having good food to eat, but also hearing birdsong outside your door, seeing wild flowers in your garden, and watching insects busily going about their work. All because you were willing to share a piece of land with the rest of nature.

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