

Land Abuse

We've all heard a great deal about wife and child abuse lately, and many programs and projects have been developed to combat these serious problems. However, an equally serious problem, land abuse, is being ignored despite its extremely serious long-term impact and high cost.

Every time I travel, the landscape tells its tale of chronic and vicious land abuse. Sadly enough, this is not an isolated case, here and there, but an almost universal problem. The miles roll by with an unending parade of eroded, overgrazed, slated, denuded, and otherwise burned out land. The invisible problems can be even worse, as the strong herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides, chemical fertilizers, and cultivation practices have destroyed the complex of soil organisms, organic material, and soil structure essential for health. And alien invasive weeds from Europe, Asia and the MidEast crowd out the more desirable native plants.

Land abuse isn't always obvious on simple inspection, as it is easy to assume it has always looked the same. But an education in ecology and history can quickly dispel this belief, as the richness and bounty of the early days is discovered -- and contrasts so strongly with what is visible today. In California, for example, much of the damage was done in the late 1800's, when millions of sheep and cattle grazed their way through the drought of 1882. After destroying virtually all of the plant cover, many died, and many of the survivors were killed by the massive floods that followed the next year. Conservative estimates place the permanent loss in carrying capacity due to erosion and overgrazing at more than half the original value. It has declined much further since then in many areas.

Similar, although less dramatic damage from land abuse has occurred for most land in the United States. It is time we acknowledge it and reform policies and actions to halt land abuse. As Aldo Leopold wrote in a Sand County Almanac, *“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”*