

Rural Values

From Green to Green: The Environmentalization of Agriculture

By Jessica R. Cattelino

Abstract

This essay analyzes an important but understudied trend in rural America: the repurposing of agricultural lands and waters for the purposes of environmental conservation and ecological restoration. As shown by ethnographic research in a mostly-drained agricultural region of the Florida Everglades, which is centered on the proposed buyout of a large agricultural corporation for restoration purposes, this transformation is as much a social and cultural project as it is a political-economic one. The environmentalization of agriculture is a rural American story that is only beginning to be told.

Keywords: Florida, land politics, environmental policy, Everglades

The Green New Deal, a set of policy proposals popularized in 2019 by breakout progressive Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, proposed to yoke environmental responsibility to job creation and economic stimulus. While some critics complained that the Green New Deal overlooked rural America by focusing on urban jobs and raising energy prices, rural leaders in some states, led by Maine and Minnesota, gingerly embraced the vision. The Green New Deal represents a new chapter in a twenty-first-century story identified by anthropologist Jane Adams (2003), who observed a “sharp shift” in rural America, whereby “‘green’ politics have become an increasingly important aspect of debates regarding farming and farm policy.” Today, a small but growing body of anthropological literature (Cattelino 2015; Gewertz and Errington 2015, 2017; Guthman 2019; Sayre 2002) offers insight into an important but understudied trend in rural America: the repurposing of agricultural lands and waters for the purposes of conservation and ecological restoration.

An ideal perch from which to examine the environmentalization of agriculture is rural South Florida. The region is home both to an expensive ecosystem restoration project in the Everglades wetlands and to large-scale agriculture, on their northern edge. The twentieth-century drainage of the Everglades ecosystem was said to “open up” vast acreage for growing sugarcane, winter vegetables, and citrus. South Florida farms and ranches, whether owned by families or corporations, have long been large in scale; this is not a region where small farms are giving way to “big agriculture.” In recent decades, the region’s diverse rural communities have faced the question of whether one version of “green” (Green Revolution-style intensive high-yield agriculture) can be converted to a green economy and waterscape based on environmental priorities.¹ Such a transformation is as much a social and cultural project as it is a political-economic one.

Buyout

The news bombshell hit in June 2008: the State of Florida announced plans to purchase the United States Sugar Corporation and all of its assets for \$1.75 billion, with the goal of repurposing the company’s 187,000 acres for Everglades restoration. US Sugar is the nation’s largest sugarcane grower, and its

¹ The Green Revolution refers to a style of farming defined by a combination of high-yield crop varieties, synthetic fertilizers, mechanized agricultural technologies, and professionalized expertise. Although the term is frequently used in international development, the same techniques were widely adopted in the United States, including South Florida.

headquarters are in Clewiston, a quasi-company town of 6,000 known as “America’s Sweetest Town.” US Sugar was agriculture’s most recognizable face in regional battles between “ag” and “environment” over Everglades water quality and quantity. In rural America, environmental regulation and land use often are understood to diminish agricultural production and harm rural economies, while big agriculture is seen to endanger ecosystems and imperil environmental health. But this opposition of ag to environment should not be taken for granted. Archival and ethnographic research in the Everglades shows how these two groups are not simply represented in water and land struggles but, rather, are observably coproduced through them. For decades, US Sugar had earned Clewiston residents’ loyalty through direct employment (with generous benefits) and indirect job creation, intertwined with acts of corporate citizenship. For example, the company underwrote the annual Sugar Festival, provided student scholarships, and donated funds for the public swimming pool, auditorium, library, and other civic infrastructure that distinguished Clewiston among the region’s agricultural towns. Clewiston’s robust civic sphere and generous government services coexist with many residents’ criticisms of government, especially of environmental regulation (see also Shoreman and Haenn 2009). Those criticisms align with the farm-style libertarianism that ethnographers Kathryn Dudley (2000), Julie Guthman (2004), and Peter Benson (2012) have found to pervade American agriculture.

Unsurprisingly, shock reigned in and around Clewiston after the announcement. Many residents felt especially betrayed because US Sugar had cut a deal with the state (and for ecological restoration, no less)! While the deal might have seemed to mark a transition from private to public use of land and water, for many residents it felt like the end of both an economy and a public. Meanwhile, the line between the public and the private was further blurred as environmentalists, in Florida and elsewhere, increasingly expressed the value of rural land and water in the market logics of ecosystem services valuation. By the early 2010s, environmentalists often repeated the claim that Everglades restoration would yield a four-to-one return on investment.

Within a year of the spectacular buyout announcement, which had captured the imagination of journalists and environmentalists far and wide, the proposal began to wither on the vine. The timing was abysmal; with the 2008 recession, the state lacked the funds to complete the purchase. Meanwhile, the buyout’s booster, Governor Charlie Crist, was replaced by Rick Scott, who was cool to the buyout plan and eventually oversaw its demise. As the years passed, the torn social fabric of Clewiston was (mostly) repaired. Sugar prices rose. For many, life returned to normal.

Beyond the buyout, though, farmers in South Florida pay other economic and perhaps cultural costs for the environmental greening of rural America. They pay “agricultural privilege taxes,” earmarked for cleaning up nutrient-rich water leaving fields. They hire lawyers and engineers to manage their water permits. They must accrue points for implementing environmental “Best Management Practices.” (Such costs arguably pale in comparison to the economic benefits enjoyed by farmers thanks to public investments in irrigation, drainage, and other infrastructure.)

Other shifts are voluntary. Increasing numbers of farmers take part in government programs that environmentalize agriculture while maintaining private property ownership. Conservation easement programs, for example, incentivize landowners to repurpose agricultural land and water for ecosystem restoration. One farmer converted a portion of his land into a bird sanctuary. Just up the road from Clewiston, the State of Florida purchased and manages a 21,700-acre ranch for restoration purposes. Other agricultural landowners (especially cattle ranchers) are paid by the state to “farm water”: to hold water on agricultural lands for the purpose of ecosystem management. Programs that pay farmers to take land “out of production” for environmental purposes can cause social strain but may also, as generations pass, foster changing values.

Whose Sacrifice?

If the Everglades is an American “national treasure,” as is often stated, then some of the region’s rural residents, including farmers, question why they must bear the burden of Everglades restoration. Why, some ask, should they sacrifice for others by taking land out of production when suburban homeowners are never asked to give up their houses, and while real estate development spreads ever inward from the peninsula’s east and west coasts, chewing up the Everglades?

Indigenous Seminoles residing on the nearby Big Cypress Reservation pursue both agriculture and environmental conservation and restoration. Yet some Big Cypress residents voice worries that they have become an “unfunded mitigation bank” enabling coastal development and (sub)urban expansion. Land in Big Cypress, like many other reservations, has not been “developed” to the same extent as in other communities. As a result, reservations often are treated by environmentalists and state agencies as biological preserves. Kirwan and McCool (2001) call this settler-colonial formation “the *last refuge* perspective” (266; emphasis in original). It renders Indigenous communities and their territories as things of the past. That said, following the #NoDAPL resistance at Standing Rock, there may be a new opening for settler Americans to understand Indigenous rural territorial practices as simultaneously grounded in history and oriented to a newly configured rural future (Estes 2019).

What does it mean to reorient from green agriculture to green environment, which would include sustainable agriculture as well as a transformed rural future? When rural Americans backed Donald Trump in 2016, journalists told a reductive story of their feeling left behind by a new economy. By 2019, though, a competing narrative gained some traction: one of rural America as holding keys to future environmental and economic sustainability. From South Florida, we learn that going from green to green is a cultural and social project, one that requires building new civic attachments while undoing others linked to settler colonialism, one that encompasses moral and economic value, even (shared) sacrifice. How the environmentalization of agriculture changes rural America is an unfolding story that calls out for ethnographic attention.

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