The statesmen who laid the foundation of our public land policies in the early 1800's would have been astonished if some one could have told them that in 1936 a group of scientists would discuss the public and private aspects of soil conservation. They took for granted that the owner of the land would protect it from erosion and maintain its fertility because it would pay to do so. They believed with Arthur Young that the magic of private property turned sand into gold. So firmly did they believe this that they were willing to permit not only the farm land but practically all of our resources to become private property.

However, the very land policies which provided every pioneer with a farm were also the policies which made it more profitable for him to wear out the soil and move on. The soil has exhaustion value similar to a mine or a virgin forest. Would anyone spend money on repairs for a car if a new one could be had for the asking? As in the case of other resources, the consumer gained more than the farmer. The policy of getting as many people on the land as possible created more farms than we needed, made farm products "dirt cheap," and gave manufacturers low priced raw materials, and everybody had food and clothing at bargain sale prices.

However, cheap farm prices are not conducive to spending money for fertilizers or practices which keep up soil fertility. Exploitative agriculture was the profitable agriculture. It might have been argued that some time in the future land would be worth much more if kept in a prime condition, but in the balance of the uncertain future against a very real present, the present generally wins.

After 1900, when farm prices upward and recourse to free land of quality was closed, conditions were for a settled agriculture. The interest in conservation of 1910 was not getting some results in soil conservation. The World War, with its dramatic demand for food, for intensive cultivation, and for drive for more land, intervened. It was not a time for conserving land any more than for the conserving of human life.

Furthermore, we also expected with more stabilized agriculture a more commercial attitude toward land on the part of our farmers would result. It was universal testimony of those observers who have been in Europe that a subtle relationship exists between the farmer and his farm. The European farmer regards land more than a mere factor of production, rather an inheritance to be handed over to the next generation unimpaired and perhaps enhanced in productivity and amenities. This cannot be said of the great mass of our American farmers. Where a man gains social prestige by climbing the agricultural ladder as fast as possible, rent owner-operator just long enough so he can rent or sell and move to California (as I have been told was true of many instances), you have a different reaction toward land than where social prestige is gained by remaining on the farm and making it more attractive and fertile. The American attitude may changed as years go on, but until it is a part of the framework within which conservation policies must operate.

If the "conservation relationship" of owners to the land is weak, it is weaker, and in fact, may be entirely lacking in the case of tenants. Conservation.