A number of new books articulate how some of society’s most important questions involve the Earth’s soil and how to improve land management. Part of this literature flies under the banner of land husbandry, a concept pioneered by Francis Shaxson in Land Husbandry and Better Land Husbandry (Shaxson et al., 1989, 1997). Jon Hellin, of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, El Bat n, Mexico, adds to this literature with Better Land Husbandry–From Soil Conservation to Holistic Land Management.

Land husbandry is a concept motivated by concerns that land degradation is outpacing our ability of control it. Hellin, like Shaxson and Hudson (1992) before him, review these concerns and critique “conventional soil conservation” as being too narrowly focused on soil loss rather than on the quality of soil that remains in a farmer’s field. Land husbandry considers soil erosion a consequence not a cause of land degradation, and that broad-based social, economic, and ecological approaches are required for improving land management.

Despite the best of intentions and much hard work, conventional soil conservation efforts have often not been effective at facilitating sustainable farm economies. Shaxson, Hudson, and now Hellin use the pace of land-user adoption of soil-conservation practices as key evidence for judging the effectiveness of conventional approaches.

Land husbandry attempts to put the land user “at the center of the extension equation,” to collaborate in research with land users, and to develop recommendations based on the economics, agro-ecosystems, and motivations of the farmer. Rather than to aim explicitly at reducing soil erosion, there is an implicit expectation that soil erosion will be reduced as farmers succeed at improving soil quality and farm productivity. Given the pace of deforestation across many nations in the tropics, such criticisms are important to improving land-management programs designed to benefit farming communities and to forestall adverse effects of land use.

Hellin’s book has six chapters. The first introduces general concepts and the second and third explore social-economic and agro-ecological components of land husbandry. The fourth chapter argues vigorously that land husbandry represents “a new paradigm” in land management. A fifth chapter, Better Land Husbandry in Practice, includes interesting case studies mainly from the author’s experience in Honduras, and the book concludes by exploring how better land husbandry can be supported by agricultural and developmental policy. The book is easily read by many readers including researchers, teaching faculty, students, and the many professionals who work with the land directly or indirectly.

The book is presented as an argument: the old is contrasted with the new, conventional soil conservation is strongly contrasted with a new paradigm of land husbandry. This dichotomous presentation is understandable, as accepted ways-of-thinking tend to become entrenched and budgets are difficult to change. Yet, the land husbandry approach seems less a new paradigm, at least as defined by Thomas Kuhn (1970), than a well articulated, fresh perspective aimed at benefiting collaborations among farmers, scientists, and policymakers; the productivity of farms and the land itself; and the wider environment. A long line of persons have worked in parallel with this land-husbandry paradigm, and much of land husbandry appears to be directly derived from humanity’s long experience with the soil, including much of what the author calls conventional soil conservation.

Using soil without damaging it, is never easy, and to Hellin’s credit, his special interests are the steep lands in the tropics, ecosystems currently being extensively converted by small farmers for food production. Such small-farm systems provide some of the most daunting challenges for sustainability of agriculture and perhaps the best tests for better land husbandry.

REFERENCES