

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Doing Good and Doing Well: Prairie Wetlands, Private Property, and the Public Trust

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ABSTRACT In this article, we focus on a gift of land and its restoration. The land is a 300-acre lakeside family farm near Brookings, South Dakota. We gave this farm to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 2012 to be taken from cropland and restored to prairie wetland—and at a time when high commodity prices are encouraging many farmers to do precisely the opposite, albeit not without challenge. Our intent is to explore a range of critical values—values apparent under conditions of conflict—as they have been playing out in this portion of the U.S. heartland. By going against the grain of contemporary agricultural practice, we have inserted ourselves into this conflict and have become strategically placed to contribute ethnographically to ongoing anthropological, philosophical, and environmental discussions of what nature is worth, to whom (in the past, present, and future), and why. In so doing, we follow in the footsteps of Lewis Henry Morgan and Aldo Leopold, both of whom pondered similar issues in similar places. [*South Dakota, conservation, hunting, Lewis Henry Morgan, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, values*]

RESUMEN En este artículo, nos concentramos en una donación de tierra y su restauración. La tierra es una finca familiar de 300 acres a orillas de un lago cerca a Brookings, Dakota del Sur. Le dimos esta finca al Servicio de Pesca y Vida Silvestre de los Estados Unidos en el 2012 para ser sacada de tierra bajo cultivo y restaurada como humedales de pradera—y en un momento cuando altos precios de las materias primas están incentivando a muchos agricultores a hacer precisamente lo contrario, aunque no sin retos. Nuestro intento es explorar un rango de valores críticos—valores aparentemente bajo condiciones de conflicto—en la medida que ellos se han desarrollado en esta porción del centro agrícola de los Estados Unidos. Al ir en contra de la tendencia natural de la práctica agrícola contemporánea, nos hemos insertado en este conflicto y hemos llegado a estar estratégicamente colocados para contribuir etnográficamente en las discusiones antropológicas, filosóficas y ambientales en curso sobre el valor de la naturaleza, para quién (en el pasado, el presente, y futuro), y por qué. Haciéndolo, seguimos los pasos de Lewis Henry Morgan and Aldo Leopold, los cuales reflexionaron sobre cuestiones similares en lugares similares. [*Dakota del Sur, conservación, caza, Lewis Henry Morgan, Servicio de Pesca y Vida Silvestre de los Estados Unidos, valores*]

And when a flock of bluebills, pitching pondward, tears the dark silk of heaven in one long rending nose-dive, you catch your breath at the sound, but there is nothing to see except stars. This same performance, in daytime, would have to be looked at, shot at, missed, and then hurriedly fitted with an alibi.

—Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* [1949:110]

In this article, we focus on a gift of land and its restoration. The land is a 300-acre lakeside farm near Brookings,

South Dakota, that has been in Fred’s family since homesteading days. At the request of Fred’s mother, we gave the farm in 2012 to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to become part of the public trust. By ensuring that its marshes would remain forever undrained and its cropland and pasture, restored to prairie, her gift was to affirm the value of “nature.” Furthermore, her gift was to compel both us and others to emulate her in reappraising the



FIGURE 1. *Prairie pothole on the former Errington farm. (Photo courtesy of Frederick Errington)*

relationship between nature as a resource for private profit and as a source of common good. Specifically, the gift would protect the collective interest in the otherwise diminishing “prairie potholes.” Created during the retreat of the Wisconsin glaciation some 10,000 years ago, these wetlands, with their surrounding grasslands, are essential to the successful breeding of millions of ducks and geese that migrate along the Mississippi flyway (see Figure 1).

Once we had relinquished ownership of the farm, we began to inquire about it more systematically and made several startling discoveries. We learned from a Brookings-based Realtor that, had we developed the waterfront property into vacation cabins, it might eventually have grossed six million dollars.¹ And we learned that, as a “Waterfowl Production Area” (WPA, its current USFWS designation), the property might eventually sustain 10–20 breeding pairs of ducks, with an annual population increase of approximately five percent as well as a modest number of other ducks passing through on their way to northern breeding grounds.² The newly restored prairie wetland would also support some 100–250 pheasants, South Dakota’s state bird.³ It should be noted that these ducks and pheasants will be available to hunters, including members of “Ducks Unlimited” and “Pheasants Forever”; this, in a region where most conservationists hunt and regard preservation of U.S. hunting heritage as crucial and where the species and corresponding habitats primarily targeted for conservation are those of particular interest to

“sportsmen and women” (most of whom do recognize that other species may benefit as well).

What to make of such equivalencies and relationships as between the money, which could have been our inheritance, and these game birds, which now belong to us all? To answer this question (and as something of a counterprestation to Fred’s mother, one prompted by her gift), we explore here a range of critical values that are apparent under conditions of conflict such as have been playing out in this portion of the U.S. heartland. Here, wildness (nevermind wilderness) has been under concerted attack, especially given high commodity prices encouraging the systematic conversion of wetland and grassland (whether prairie or pasture) into Roundup Ready[®] row crops. By going against the grain of this conversion—by restoring tilled land to prairie wetland—we have inserted ourselves into this conflict. In so doing, we hope to contribute to ongoing anthropological, philosophical, and environmental discussions of what “nature” is worth, to whom (in the past, present, and future), and why.⁴

Our argument will focus on three Midwestern creatures around which have coalesced questions regarding the appropriate relationships between humans and their environments—that is, questions concerning the desirable balance between what is commonly distinguished as the “social” and the “natural.” The first is the beaver as depicted by anthropology’s apical ancestor, Lewis Henry Morgan, in his

1868 venture into natural history, *The American Beaver and His Works*. We continue with the continental lesser scaup, widely known as the bluebill, described by many as one of the more vulnerable of the waterfowl likely reliant on our lakeside, pothole-punctuated former farm. Finally, to consider what sort of configuration of the social and the natural is likely in a future South Dakota, we discuss a bird of a different feather, the pheasant. All three creatures have featured in appraisals and arguments about what should come next: debates about how prairie wetlands should be used and how their use should be decided upon and evaluated.⁵

ON VALUE AND VALUES

Discussions of nature's worth in South Dakota (and elsewhere) frequently take the form of competing value claims concerning private gain versus public trust, nature as having instrumental versus inherent significance, and the control of private property versus state and federal systems of authority. A fruitful terminological distinction for probing these value claims within a broadly capitalist sociocultural context, one that is ethnographically productive because it captures the usage of many South Dakotans, is between *value* and *values*. This distinction is not just a matter of number (as we have employed the terms thus far) but also of kind. As a matter of kind, *value* is the domain of the market where activities can be commensurably measured while *values* are the domain of ethics where activities cannot be so measured. (Daniel Miller [2008], emerging from his consideration of the copious value-focused anthropological literature, likewise favors this distinction as reflecting the everyday usage of people one actually meets—in his case, on the streets of London.)

In explicating these terms, Michael Lambek (2013) provides contrasting everyday examples: *value* is the capacity to assess the cost of a new violin against the cost of a children's toy; *values* refer to the incapacity to assess playing the violin against playing with one's children. However, we must stress that the relation between buying a violin and buying a children's toy remains commensurate only to the degree that parents consider their own well-being as separate from that of their children. Similarly, the relationship between playing the violin and playing with one's children remains incommensurate only to the degree that neither is associated with the market and its commensurate value. Once it becomes plausible to connect playing with one's children to their acquisition of the nurturing that will give them the self-confidence to prosper in life, the values and value of the play become thoroughly intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In fact, as Michael Chibnik's (2011) critique of rational choice theory demonstrates, in our U.S. context, value and values rarely appear in isolation.

Certainly Max Weber (see Weber 2002) knew that, under the spirit of capitalism, linkages between values and value come to be particularly effective in compelling and justifying social action, whether at home, in the work place, or elsewhere: a circumstance of potential win-win when virtue

appears blessed by prosperity; when doing good and doing well can seem agreeably conjoined. Of course, unalloyed win-wins rarely materialize. Rather, values and value appear in a diversity of more or less compelling configurations—of different aggregations and disaggregations of the commensurate and the incommensurate and across a range of social contexts. Deployed and invoked, they may generate wrangles concerning where values leave off and value begins (and vice versa): they may, as Jarrett Zigon (2007:139) would note, create “moral breakdowns” that jar “the unreflective dispositions of everydayness.” When, for instance, does doing good become doing poorly? In relation to the WPA that our South Dakota gift created, that we have supported 10–20 breeding pairs of ducks may be seen as doing good or as a six-million-dollar foolishness. Conversely, when does doing well become doing ill? Hence, that landowners blocked access to public hunting areas in South Dakota in assertion of private property rights may be seen as doing well or as antisocial greediness.

These issues of value and values—again, of private gain versus public trust, nature as having instrumental versus inherent significance, and the control of private property versus state and federal systems of authority—become especially salient relative to significant “changes in the land.” (Here we reference to William Cronon's masterful 1983 comparison between settler and Native American ecologies and economies.) In the case of our former farm—and farms like it—these issues are imminent because they manifest on land long regarded as fundamentally changeable. Consequently, and as we anticipated in our introduction, central to understanding the value-values configurations as they have been playing out in the prairie pothole region is to recognize that our former farm was to be restored to a particular status—that of a prairie wetland.

Prairies, of course, have been plowed and planted. Wetlands (including swamps, mires, marshes, bogs, and fens) have, as well, been profoundly transformed through draining and planting. Certainly with European settlement, there was the prospect that such land could or should become something else. As such, the land and its salient denizens have often been up for grabs, subject to ongoing appraisals of what they are and what they might become—appraisals in which particular configurations of value-values become apparent in arguments about what prairie wetlands (and nature more generally) are good for.

Indeed, the three creatures with which we are concerned might each be seen as referencing a system of land use: a system both natural and social, one complexly linking people, plants, and animals (and, of course, much more). All serve as what Roy Rappaport calls transducers, entities that translate “changes in the state of one subsystem into information and energy that can produce changes in the second sub-system” (1968:229). In his as well as our discussion, the first subsystem is the ecosystem, and the second is the human activity affecting that ecosystem. Already of broad interest (unlike the often-esoteric organisms designated by

ecologists as index, indicator, or sentinel species), beaver, bluebill, and pheasant can compel stocktaking of nature's worth: they reveal not only how people engage with the ecosystem but also how people engage with each other in so doing. For instance, should the decline in their numbers signal that current trends are auspicious? Should the conversion of wetlands and privately owned prairie (or, more modestly, grasslands) into economically valuable row crops therefore continue or even accelerate as with positive feedback? Or should the decline of their numbers signal that a change in course is called for—that some negative feedback, or even restoration, is in order? And if people who are doing well with these conversions are also seen to be doing ill, should the state get involved as with restrictions and incentives regarding prairie wetland use?

MORGAN'S NORTH AMERICAN BEAVER

Morgan addresses these questions of feedback in his megarodent-focused natural history, one displaying many of the impressive skills of observation and documentation that informed his Iroquois studies. He took special note of the beaver in 1855, several years after becoming director and stockholder of a railroad venture in Michigan. The venture was to provide a rail link from inland iron-ore deposits to the port of Marquette, some 40 miles distant on Lake Superior. Not only did this venture prove gratifyingly successful, it piqued Morgan's scientific interests:

It so happened that this Railroad passed through a beaver district more remarkable, perhaps, than any other of equal extent to be found in any part of North America. By opening this wilderness in advance of all settlement, the beavers were surprised, so to speak, in the midst of their works, which, at the same time, were rendered accessible for minute and deliberate investigation, in a manner altogether unusual. A rare opportunity was thus offered to examine the worlds of the beaver, and to see him in his native wild. [1868:viii]

Combining the pleasure of trout fishing with the challenge of understanding the beaver and its ways, Morgan continued to summer in the area after the completion of the railroad. The resulting monograph was impressive as a detailed and careful natural history of an important species (see Figure 2). However, given the era, it is not surprising that Morgan's concerns went beyond scientific observation and documentation. Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1999, 2001) concludes from Morgan's work on the beaver and on kinship that his preoccupations were of a strongly religious nature. When Morgan writes in *The American Beaver* that "life in all its forms is a mystery" (1868:256), he is not offering some catchphrase about the inevitable limitation of human knowledge. Rather, he is suggesting a topic for serious inquiry—inquiry of the sort in which he and his close friend, the distinguished theologian, Reverend Joshua McIlvaine, were engaged. Not coincidentally, their considerations of life's mystery were informed by the discussion in Genesis of the primal separation between land and water: a separation then ongoing in swampy areas of Michigan, with the beaver as a significant operator.



FIGURE 2. Frontispiece of *The American Beaver and His Works*. (Public domain photo)

More straightforwardly, *The American Beaver* argues that the beaver is particularly revelatory of God's plan in the creation of life whether of humans or of animals, the latter referred to as the "mutes." In addition to mediating between land and water, this semiaquatic, swamp-dwelling species—with its impressive industry, construction skills, forethought for winter exigencies, and with its social life focused on common residence, common provisioning, and common endeavor of couples and their offspring—was a vivid demonstration that humans and the mutes all possessed the same general attributes: of mind, will, intelligence, and reflection, albeit in significantly different measure.⁶ Hence, for Morgan, the beaver demonstrated the God-given unity of life. (In contrast was Darwin's view that this unity derived from common ancestry. Morgan, as well, differed from Darwin concerning adaptation over time; in Morgan's understanding, beaver and humans gradually improved their circumstances through the long-term application of their God-given intelligence.⁷)

For such reasons, Feeley-Harnik (1999:217) suggests that the beaver was for Morgan the objectification—the repository—of incommensurate values; the beaver contained and revealed life's mystery, facilitating "a more integrated understanding of the life processes." In this sense, Morgan's *The American Beaver* was not just an exercise in natural history; it was a manifesto for the divinely authored history of nature.

Morgan, along with many of those living in the United States, knew that the beaver (or, more accurately, the dead beaver) also had commensurate value; its pelt could be sold and its territory, developed. Surprising the animal in the midst of its work reflected for him a “rare” and fleeting opportunity. After all, the processes of European settlement and ore extraction taking place on the Michigan frontier, processes that Feeley-Harnik (1999:34) aptly dubs from “fur” to “furo” and then to “fer,” anticipated and facilitated—set the stage for—the vast and mutually accelerating transformations of the 19th-century United States as it sought to fulfill its manifest destiny. Central to these transformations were the industrialization of the east and the westward push of the railroad that opened up the prairies of the central Midwest to settlers, linking them as producers for eastern agricultural markets and as consumers of eastern manufactured goods. Significantly, these goods included the likes of plows and nails along with vast amounts of cheap lumber—lumber that Fred’s great-grandparents used in replacing their South Dakota sod hut with a far more comfortable balloon-frame farmhouse. And, as the vast forests of the upper Midwest—northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—were logged, sawed, and shipped away, additional land was opened up for settlement and farming. Correspondingly, in both portions of the Midwest (upper and central), swamps, mire, and other wetlands that had supported an abundance of natural creatures were drained, converting the habitat of beaver, muskrat, and waterfowl into the productive (and, in the view of some, more healthful) firmness of pasture and tillable fields.⁸ In fact, these massive and generally obvious changes in the land were to pervade the entire upper Mississippi River Basin (an area exclusive of Michigan). From the time of European contact, a beaver population estimated at 40 million and its attendant wetlands estimated at 51 million acres (11% of the basin) would diminish by 99 percent (Hey and Philippi 1995).

It must be said, as Morgan biographer Daniel Moses (2009:164–165) points out, that “Morgan lived well from his investments in iron and railroads, industries that destroyed animal habitat and caused the death of countless muskrats, beavers included.” Yet, Morgan urged that progress be balanced by restraint, at least at some advanced stage of “civilization.” The conclusion of *Ancient Society*, in which Morgan insists that “a mere property career is not the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past” (Morgan 1969 [1877]:561), is anticipated in *The American Beaver*. In the latter volume, on behalf of those fallen by the wayside and unable themselves to speak, he states:

The arrest of the progress of the human race can alone prevent the dismemberment and destruction of a large portion of the animal kingdom. . . . Man’s dominion over the muskrats is in virtue of his superior endowments; but it is equally clear that the great Author of existence designed the happiness of the smallest and

least endowed of all His creatures as completely and as absolutely as He did the happiness of man. [Morgan 1868:283–284]

Whatever Morgan’s misgivings, the idea of “the progress of the human race” did continue to confer upon the westward expansion a divine authority, one that, as is generally recognized, reaffirmed a particular aggregation of doing well with doing good. From the perspective of many of Morgan’s fellow North Americans, including Fred’s great-grandparents with their new farmhouse, matters had not gone too far. According to the stocktaking that the decline in beaver numbers afforded, the trade-off was still acceptable. Therefore, this aggregation of value and values did not signal a systemic shift of the ongoing trend. Indeed, to have advocated that the worth of the muskrats should trump that of the railroad—that doing well had become doing ill—would have struck many as foolish. Consequently, at least for this time and place, declining beaver numbers did not signal that the course of ecological change should be reversed. Although considered a hard worker that embraced family values, the beaver, it seems, was already a “goner,” already measured commensurately with many other items of value.

LANDS TRANSFORMED

Since Morgan’s day, changes in the land have accelerated, eventually affecting both the bluebill and the pheasant. By the 1920s, virtually all of the wetlands in Iowa and southern Minnesota had been drained and converted into excellent farmland. Further west, draining—otherwise known as tiling—proceeded more sporadically. In South Dakota, with its relatively short and dry growing season and only moderately fertile soils, the costs of draining frequently outweighed the increased income from converted land. However, this ratio of costs and benefits was to change dramatically with the creation of a newly efficient farmscape.

During the 1990s, improved agricultural inputs and new varieties of GMO corn and soybeans greatly improved yields in South Dakota. These inputs and varieties extended corn and soybean cultivation from the eastern border of South Dakota nearly to the mid-state Missouri River. Moreover, in recent years, commodity prices of these two crops, spurred in part by ethanol mandates and increasing exports to Asia, have reached all-time highs. Land prices followed suit—with prime South Dakota farm land selling in 2014 for \$13,500 an acre. If high commodity and land prices didn’t provide enough motivation, federally subsidized crop insurance further encouraged farmers to convert what had been their agriculturally marginal land—especially pasture or even prairie grassland—to row crops (see Johnston 2013 and Wright and Wimberly 2013).

These trends affect farmers differently—depending, for instance, on how much land they own and how much they rent. Still, the overall result is for operations to grow and to farm everything possible. Big machines must ply enormous fields—with the oft-expressed justification that

farmers should profit when they can, given that they “feed the world.”⁹ This is, not surprisingly, the perspective of the South Dakota Corn Growers Association. It is also the perspective of the locally active and widely influential “Hefty Brothers.” The Brothers sell a full array of crop inputs (including GMO seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, fungicides, plant hormones); strongly promote draining; and brag to the thousands of farmers attending their annual field days, as we witnessed in 2013 and 2014, that their own fields are remarkably productive and entirely weed free. In addition, their weekly television show, “Ag PhD,” has a segment on eradicating the “weed of the week,” often a prairie flower.

Consistent with this modernist vision of nature’s worth, the landscape is “cleaned up” with maximal acreage converted to the uniformity of row crops. Many farmers told us that they strongly appreciate the “clean” of the weed-free and the regimented over the “dirty” of the dispersed and the loosely organized; this “clean” aesthetic has been systematically produced by capitalist technology.¹⁰ One farmer told us forthrightly: “Thinking like a farmer, and I do think like a farmer, I would plant as much as possible. I’d get rid of the shelterbelts, clean up the fencerows, and drain the wet spots.”¹¹ In effect, “thinking like a farmer” disfavors any wildness that doesn’t pay, including the wildness at the margins.

If the shelterbelts and fencerows are regarded as a waste, the wet spots, including the seasonal wet spots of late spring, are not only a waste but an active nuisance. Such spots remove valuable—often very fertile—land from production; at the same time, they seriously impede the passage of 36-row planters up and down mile-long rows. However, help is at hand. As the Hefty Brothers display at their annual field days, tiling has become ever easier and more cost effective. Whether a farmer buys a specialized plow to “rip” a trench into which he feeds continuous perforated plastic drainage tubing (with the plow’s depth controlled by GPS information) or hires a specialist company to do so, there is little doubt that tiling can pay for itself within five years (see Figure 3). Concomitantly, since the Supreme Court decision in 2001 known as the SWANCC Decision (the case concerning the Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County), restrictions on draining have been significantly lifted with most potholes no longer protected by the Clean Water Act of 1972. Furthermore, formulations of the Farm Bill have in recent years weakened the antidrainage deterrents of what was known as “Swampbuster” provisions. As well, with high commodity prices, many farmers have no longer signed on for the Farm Bill; they neither needed price supports nor wished to be restricted in the use of their land by the likes of “Swampbuster” provisions, weak or strong.¹²

For many of Morgan’s contemporaries, as we have seen, to argue for the beaver’s inherent and inimitable grandeur would likely seem foolish. More recently, though, the aggregation of value—values that authorized the demise of these wetland denizens as necessary for progress has been challenged. The conversions marking the newly efficient

farmscape—whether through cleaning-up in general or drainage in particular—are increasingly troubling many South Dakotans, especially those with hunting interests. They are strongly wondering whether some—mostly farmers—who seek to do very well with their land may have gone too far: that their ongoing concerns with enhanced profitability are doing a cumulative ill to others; that they hardly are creating a situation of win-win. Those arguing that stocktaking is imperative often invoke two salient game birds: the bluebill, denied the wetspots, and the pheasant, squeezed from the margins.

ON HUNTING, THE PUBLIC TRUST, AND THE BLUEBILL

Hunting interests are important in South Dakota. And, despite the fact that wildlife viewing is of moderate recreational importance to the majority of nonhunters, it is the hunters who provide most of the economic support for wildlife conservation in this largely rural state (and in many other states)—this, according to Larry Gigliotti of South Dakota State University, an expert in attitudes concerning natural resource use.¹³ Gigliotti likewise reported (based on a survey of the 19 most Western states by Tara Teel and Michael Manfredo [2010]), that 49.9 percent of South Dakotans (trailing just Alaskans at 50.4%) have a “utilitarian” or “instrumental” view of wildlife, regarding it primarily as of potential benefit to humans, including its benefit as game; in contrast, only 15 percent have a “mutualist” or “empathetic” view, regarding wildlife as sharing human characteristics and rights.¹⁴ To be sure, the actual experiences of South Dakotan hunters (likely, most hunters) are more than merely expression of a utilitarian or instrumental perspective. As many monographs, newspaper accounts, personal testimonies, obituaries, and interviews attest, hunting can be complexly compelling, ontologically consequential. In part, this is because hunting involves something of a blood sacrifice: it is “a matter of life and death” (Boglioli 2009). In the words of the environmental sociologist and hunter Jan Dizard, “hunting is not just a walk in the woods. The gun changes things” (2003:99).

Hunting may, as well, be compelling and consequential because it frequently involves multigenerational family engagements of mentorship, companionship, and seasonal gatherings of a ritual sort. In South Dakota, for instance, we were told that the opening day of pheasant season was, next to Christmas, the primary occasion for family get-togethers.¹⁵ In addition, hunting provides a context for ventures into “nature”—ventures that are pleasurable and intellectually engaging. (Although hunters may be mainly attuned to the habits of their favorite game species, many with whom we have ventured out are impressively knowledgeable about their natural world, an observation supported by Dizard [1999:98–106].)

These ventures into nature are also sometimes transcendent. Whereas nonhunters, particularly those from less rural states, may regard hunting as the opposite of



FIGURE 3. *Ripping a trench at the Hefty Brothers' field day. (Photo courtesy of Frederick Errington)*

transcendent (as Bronner 2008 clearly shows), we were told by dedicated Midwestern duck hunters—some in Fred's family; some our informants and friends—that their experiences as hunters were among the most wondrous of their lives. These were the moments when everything came together: when, communicating with decoys and duck calls, they enticed a cascading abundance of high flying ducks down amongst them while, in the midst of this dazzle, still making clean kills. It should not surprise, hence, that a well-known and respected wildlife biologist—described as a “champion for the outdoors”—requested that his ashes be scattered across his duck blind and among his decoys by his colleagues and hunting companions. Accordingly, as Stuart Marks's compelling analysis of rural South Carolina hunting makes apparent, “in hunting humans engage in activities of heavy significance. Their actions and thoughts are meaningful and connected to other things” (1991:7).¹⁶

In glossing these valued activities and experiences, participants often state that hunting is a vital part of North American heritage. Correspondingly (no doubt, encouraged by hunting outfitters like Cabela's, whose catalogue covers may feature, for example, freshly flushed pheasants), they passionately insist that it is essential to “preserve our outdoor traditions” of hunting.¹⁷ (See, too, Boglioli 2009; Cerulli 2011; Dizard 1999, 2003; and Marks 1991.) Indeed,

whether in speaking to these hunters, attending hunter education courses, or visiting the websites of the USFWS, Ducks Unlimited, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, and Pheasants Forever, we frequently found variants of a charter myth that accords hunting in North America with special historical significance: a significance reflecting the conviction that wildlife—game—belongs to all of the people.

One influential formulation of this myth has come to be known as the “North American Model for Wildlife Conservation.” This model is explicitly cited in the manual used for South Dakota's hunter education course. According to *Today's Hunter in South Dakota*, “Wildlife is public property. The government holds wildlife in trust for the benefit of all people.” In contrast to hunting practices in places like Great Britain, the manual continues, “hunting, fishing, and trapping shall be democratic. This gives all persons—rich and poor alike—the opportunity to participate (South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks 2011:82).¹⁸ However, despite the widespread understanding (whether explicitly formulated or not) that wildlife is a public trust resource, that it should remain a source of public “wealth” rather than of private “value,” the 2013 website of South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks cautions hunters that

True, South Dakota does have over 5 million acres of hunting opportunity on public land and private land that has been leased for public hunting.

The fact remains that the vast majority of the state is land held in private ownership. Permission is required to hunt private land in South Dakota. We encourage you to work . . . to create a personal and working relationship with private landowners. Respect their rights and their land. [South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks 2014]

That “hunting opportunity” takes place both on land open to the public and on privately owned land closed to the public plays out in instructively different ways, as we shall see, for migratory birds such as bluebills than for nonmigratory birds such as pheasants. In short, that bluebills and other migratory waterfowl come and go means that there is little motivation in South Dakota for private landowners to foster their well-being. After all, why leave sloughs and other wet spots as duck habitat rather than converting them to prime farm land, especially since the ducks one might help raise could, with fall migration, fly off to someone else’s wet spot (if such still existed) and, thus, not even be yours to shoot?

Of these flighty migrants experiencing habitat loss, bluebills are in the somewhat special and potentially vulnerable category of what waterfowl biologists call “capital breeders.” Migrating in the spring from the deep South, they funnel through the prairie pothole region, pausing during April and May. There, waiting for the snow and ice to melt in the bogs and fens of Canada and Alaska, they build up the fat reserves—the capital—that allow them to nest immediately upon their northern arrival. This is to say, they have to “pack their lunch” during their Midwest stopover to sustain them while they lay their eggs. And, in contrast to locally breeding ducks like mallards that can feed at more leisure, bluebills must eat with some alacrity because late arrival will subject their broods to increased predation (see Figure 4).

Bluebills are also capital breeders of a specialized sort. A variety of diving duck, bluebills feed largely on aquatic invertebrates found in prairie potholes of reasonable size yet of only semipermanence. These aquatic invertebrates require a rich brew of nutrients: nutrients released every six to seven years when the potholes dry up, exposing the layer of organic sediment to the decomposing effects of heat and oxygen.

It is just this sort of hydrological cycle that has been increasingly obstructed in recent years with wetland draining. Draining, although designed to produce dry, cultivatable land, often has an inadvertent consequence: some of the drained water flows into semipermanent wet spots, changing them into deeper and more permanent lakes. Consequently, with the reduction in the amount of wetland generally available for waterfowl, there has been a significant alteration in the quality of the remaining wetland. As a South Dakota State University–based research proposal notes, “Levels of wetlands receiving water from consolidation drainage are typically higher and considerably more stable than levels prior to drainage” with the predicted consequence that the

decline in aquatic invertebrates has influenced “lipid accumulation during spring migration,” a fact that has “been implicated in recent declines of scaup [bluebill] populations” (Stafford 2012:5; see also Anteau and Afton 2008).¹⁹

These declines—from seven million in 1978 to a record low in 2006 of 3.25 million—have, according to the USFWS, made the bluebill “a focal species of management concern” (USFWS 2011). Undoubtedly, deeming the bluebill a species of concern validates institutional and professional interests, those of the USFWS, South Dakota State University, and Ducks Unlimited along with their staffs. Beyond this—or concurrent with this—hunters have noted the decline. Certainly those volunteers we met as fellow participants in waterfowl biologist Alan Afton’s long-term project of weighing and banding bluebills were willing to stand in the near-freezing Mississippi River in part because of their concern as hunters with bluebill numbers.²⁰ Their concern, it should be mentioned, is focused primarily on habitat transformation because, as Afton makes clear, the problem bluebills face is not hunting; rather, it is likely spring conditioning and breeding success (see Afton and Anderson 2001).²¹

If the bluebill can be nominated as a transducer of ecosystemic change, the ensuing stocktaking is selective in its focus. While many lament the loss of duck-friendly wetlands, we have heard few South Dakotans criticize farmers for striving to make their farmland more crop productive. Instead, the criticism focuses on efforts to curtail access to the public trust resource of free-flying waterfowl, a resource central to the North American democracy of hunting. It is here that doing well moves into the perception of doing ill.

PRIVATIZING NATURE AND THE STATE BIRD

If the propagation of ducks is not likely to strike anyone as a moneymaker, understand that, in fact, there are efforts to privatize access to prime hunting areas. Although such efforts do little to support waterfowl and add a class dimension to their “harvesting,” they become most controversial when they concern public lands. Currently, some South Dakotan landowners are, in effect, privatizing the public shooting areas that lie across or within their private holdings. They may, for example, plant crops over section lines that had hitherto been deemed public pathways. One situation was seen by local duck hunters as undemocratically selfish, as ominously disdainful of the public good. It concerned a Game Production Area owned by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, albeit purchased with federal money from the sale of the duck stamps required to hunt migratory waterfowl. According to our outraged friends in the Brookings Wildlife Federation, local landowners were illegally blocking public access to that public shooting area. Since the area was no longer available for public hunting, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks was being pressured, they thought by the governor (who was believed in the pocket of farming interests), to sell the land cheaply to local landowners. Furthermore, these landowners were rumored



FIGURE 4. Bluebills. (Photo courtesy of Fred Greenslade/Delta Waterfowl)

to be interested in mounting their own commercial duck shooting operation in the area. Both landowners and the governor were seen as behaving badly.

In contrast to migratory ducks, it is not only access to pheasants that can be readily commodified but the birds themselves. The state bird, as both a homebody and a game bird, has considerable economic importance: pheasant hunting by resident and nonresident hunters in South Dakota has become big business, allowing many, including landowners, to profit. (According to one estimate, pheasants have a \$223 million impact on the state's economy [Pollman 2013]). Significantly, as the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks website indicates and as our informants attest, private landowners—many of them farmers—control most of the land on which pheasant reproduction and hunting take place. This is to say that although pheasants may be considered a public trust resource, they can, with their highly localized ranges, be propagated as private property and, thus, offered up for sale.²²

Those who do elect to foster pheasants, either by preserving or creating habitat, can do so with the same efficiencies, techniques, and objectives that they bring to the cultivation of row crops. Their existing equipment and skills can easily be used to plant cover and perhaps feed plots of

corn or grain sorghum. If they do need agricultural help, the Hefty Brothers are there for them. When we asked a Hefty Brother agronomist how we might have managed our former farm for propagating pheasants, he immediately suggested RyzUp SmartGrass[®], a growth enhancer that, if used with proper fertilizer and herbicides (specifically ForeFront[®] HL for broadleaf plants), would have given us excellent pheasant cover in one season.²³ And if a farmer were to cultivate pheasant-friendly “wildness” on some of his high-value agricultural land, he would likely expect income from affluent and often out-of-state pheasant hunters, charging them a minimum of \$150—200 dollars per gun, per day. (He might go so far as to guarantee hunting success by supplementing wild pheasants with less-than-wary farm-raised ones.)

Under these circumstances of increasing commercialization, creating “a personal and working relationship with private landowners,” as the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks website advises, may no longer be sufficient to gain access. As a local native and former game warden told us: “It used to be that you would knock on a farmer’s door, ask to hunt pheasants, and he would say yes—and you would drop off a 12 pack or help with some fencing in return. Now he’ll say, ‘Sorry, I have people coming in from Minneapolis, and they are paying me a lot.’ Or

maybe he'd let me hunt free on the last day of the season."²⁴ No doubt, there is nostalgia for what is seen as a more neighborly past—and people do lament that pheasants are less accessible to members of the hunting public than formerly and that the dollar is increasingly all important; despite this, landowners are thought to be within their rights.

There are, of course, controversies concerning pheasant hunting as an ever-more elitist activity. Should the state acquire more public land for pheasant hunting? Should the federal government provide more money for initiatives like the Conservation Reserve Program—a United States Department of Agriculture initiative that encourages landowners to create pheasant habitat by converting marginal cropland to grassland? Regardless, since pheasants can be privately and profitably controlled and fostered, their survival would appear reasonably assured.

In fact, the pheasant population is closely monitored—in effect, audited. “Brood counts” are taken each August, and harvest numbers are collected after the hunting season is over. These numbers provide a focus for annual stocktaking that can initiate compensatory activity in habitat creation to ensure that the population stays at a reasonable level. In this manner, pheasants serve as effective transducers. For instance, low pheasant brood survey numbers during August of 2013 led South Dakota Governor Dennis Daugaard to hold a “Pheasant Habitat Summit” in December to which academics, conservationists, and those with economic interests in agriculture and tourism were invited to “identify the causes and seek potential solutions” to the problem (Brookings Register 2013). Following this summit, he created and appointed a South Dakota Governor’s Pheasant Habitat Work Group, the members of which submitted their final report in September of 2014. It should be noted that in both the summit and the report, the language of win-win predominated, along with the explicit understanding that recommendations “must be voluntary and designed in a manner that respects producer property rights” (South Dakota Governor’s Pheasant Habitat Work Group 2014:8).

In many ways, pheasants can be regarded as any commercial crop. Farmers will provide habitat, even if only at the margins of their fields, when it is worth their while. Farmers will calculate the risk to pheasants of “weird weather” events (including the icy and prolonged blizzard of late April 2013) as they would for other crops. Under these circumstances, growing pheasants rather than corn and soybeans does not necessarily appear to be doing good at the expense of doing well—to be engaged in foolish sentimentality.

* * * * *

As transducers, bluebills and pheasants signal the state of the natural and social system and provide occasions for stocktaking. However, while both index a measure of distress, they differ in the effects of their respective messages. We have argued that, because pheasants can be readily ascribed market value as private property, a sufficient number of South

Dakotan landowners will work to ensure their habitat and survival. In contrast, doing good for migratory waterfowl, including bluebills, by insuring that prairie potholes are not drained remains in tension with doing well. (Moreover, if someone wished to do good by preserving semipermanent wetlands, the result might be permanent lakes, again to the disadvantage of invertebrate-dependent bluebills, given the draining decisions by multitudinous others.) This is far from a win-win when virtue appears blessed by prosperity.

CONCLUSION: DOING GOOD AND DOING WELL

In speaking for the mutes and the habitats they require, the most common contemporary rhetorical stratagem derives from arguments for “the green economy”—that is, that with appropriate compensation and incentives, preserving nature can be a win-win. These arguments about nature’s worth begin by calculating the commensurate value of the likes of pheasants, along with grasslands, wetlands, and waterfowl. Proponents might emphasize that wetlands perform the services of water purification, flood protection, and aquifer recharge. They would point out that these ecosystemic services—especially considering the effects of agricultural pollution on Gulf Coast fisheries and on places like Des Moines (which spends over \$7,000 a day removing nitrates from its river-drawn drinking water)—are measurably important (see Beeman 2013). Corresponding arguments link the (economic) value of wetlands to the viability of wetland denizens. Waterfowl are ascribed value, not merely because people spend money in hunting them. In addition, they are ascribed value because they fertilize fields during postharvest gleanings, help to control mosquitoes, act as early warning indicators for pathogens including the avian flu virus, and so forth.²⁵ Likewise, they may be ascribed value in the form of amenities and cultural services calculated as “contingent valuation”: what people say, for example, they would pay to enjoy a spring waterfowl migration.²⁶ Yet, as Chibnik (2011:6) points out, “‘utility’ . . . is a murky concept that is almost impossible to define and measure.”

In considering such a market model (apart from the problems of determining who would pay whom for what), the environmental sociologist John Bellamy Foster concludes (as do many) that it is not only difficult to put a price on the likes of a song bird and its song, or—to return to our prologue—on the likes of the pondward pitching of a flock of bluebills. It is virtually impossible to fix a price sufficient to ensure survival in contexts of competing interests (Foster 2002; see, too, Foster et al. 2010; Norton and Hannon 1997; Parsons 2007; Sagoff 1988, 2004). Foster concludes that, by following a market model purporting to protect nature by ascribing economic value to it, nature will usually lose. Such a model, he argues, is fundamentally flawed. It will not create a sustainable world as it cannot mend the “metabolic (or ecological) rift” between what humans demand and extract and what an ever-under-siege environment can provide.

We find ourselves in agreement with Foster. It is the case that, as with the pheasant, statements (approximating)

absolute values (such as an appreciation for the out-of-doors or the preservation of hunting traditions) can be bolstered with economic justification. Yet providing this justification may be responding to the wrong question of what a creature is worth. What, then, to do?

Morgan, though writing as we have said during a period of economic expansionism, did envision an answer relevant to our time of economic intensification. In his hope that the final destiny of mankind not be merely a property career and that mutes and humans could coexist, Morgan's message was of restraint and inclusion. In this regard, he seemed to anticipate Aldo Leopold's often-cited land ethic. Leopold (1949:204), in advocating that "the boundaries of the community [should] include soils, waters, plants, and animals," urged us to rethink and rework our relationship to the environment. Together, Morgan and Leopold were calling for a fundamental recalibration of the relationship—the relative weight—of value and values.

We suggest that one way to effect this recalibration is through a certain kind of performance, one that links attitudes with behavior (a linkage that the environmental sociologist Thomas Heberlein [2012] finds crucial). People may demonstrate that they are serious about values—serious that values have a stand-alone, incommensurable importance—by yielding up value: by laying down their money, offering up their time, putting themselves at risk. Indeed, Lambek suggests that performative acts that involve elements of sacrifice may become sanctified. Perhaps, and here we follow Rappaport's lead, these performative acts may provide nature with a measure of sanctification and hence protection (Lambek 2013:146–147; Rappaport 1999).

As a performative act—one of putting your money where your mouth is—the gift of the family farm had material and symbolic importance. To be sure, it provided a context such that nature, manifested in part through at least 10–20 pairs of breeding waterfowl, along with other creatures such as transient bluebills and resident pheasants, could flourish. It turned out that the gift helped establish strategic connectivity within a natural(ized) landscape, a fresh piece in a mosaic of prairie wetland restorations effected some years previously by public and private agencies. The gift was, as well, to profess, in a way that might resonate, the values that others had emulated and would emulate. In this regard, the gift Fred's mother set in motion could be linked with, for instance, a multitude of gifts—with a flow of prestations. Such gifts, for example, enabled The Nature Conservancy to create the impressive Emiquon Preserve: to elevate public over private interests through the purchase and restoration to wetlands of 7,000 acres of prime farmland in central Illinois.²⁷ On a much smaller scale, following an article in the Brookings Register regarding the gift of the farm (Curley 2012), we received numerous (and, we admit, personally gratifying) plaudits from strangers for supporting the public interest in nature such as "the land will be here forever for everyone to enjoy" and "it's nice to see that

someone cares for more than the almighty dollar." This is to say, yielding lots of money for 10–20 pairs of breeding ducks and their avian companions may not have been all that foolish.

However, one really cannot count on philanthropy and professions of the sacredness of nature to save the South Dakota wetlands. It would take a lot of work to make prairie wetlands with their bluebills (and their fellow travelers) as charismatic as old growth forests with their icon of the spotted owl—as definitive of that which must not be lost. Even if the bluebill were to become a poster child for a critique of progress of a certain sort, interceding on its behalf would be tricky. At the moment—especially in a so politically conservative part of the United States as the prairie pothole region—ongoing outside intervention, whether by the state (South Dakota or Federal) or by the likes of The Nature Conservancy or the Sierra Club, is viewed with suspicion. In this regard, a prominent billboard located between Brookings and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is multiply telling about politics and about nature. It reads: "We Dakotans Reject Animal Activists. Furs, Game, Fish & Livestock Are Our Economy." An "occupy the wetlands, save the bluebill" movement is both unlikely and would provoke huge pushback.

Some hope may come from within South Dakota—from those sharing roughly the same worldview, the same spectrum of values and value, as many of their adversaries. For instance, the president of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation recently sent an e-mail to the organization's members (again, mostly sportsmen and women) urging all to continue their struggle—their expenditures of time and money—to combat attempts to privatize and so restrict access to public hunting areas and to game. He wrote: "We're fighting for South Dakotans against GREED. And we've come out on top the majority of the time because we're doing the right thing."²⁸ His statement suggests that defense of the public interest in nature may be particularly salient in contexts in which access to the game species that are supposed to be a public trust resource is threatened.

Consequently, this struggle by hunters—dare we say, their performative acts—is to establish not that nature is inherently sacred but, rather, that their access to it as North Americans is sacred.²⁹ Such hunters are arguing that they have a transcendent right—a birthright—to have meaningful engagements as hunters with nature. In fact, for those many hunters who find transcendent moments in hunting, rites and rights may become powerfully conjoined. Their claim that others have been acting badly seeks to precipitate a "moral breakdown" of the kind Zigon (2007:139) describes; they are insisting on a moment of stocktaking about the everyday, unreflective collapse of values into value. Although invoking neither the land ethic nor bluebills, their argument that things have gone too far may be the strongest affirmation of the incommensurate values nature provides, at least in a place like South Dakota.

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NOTES

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1. Interview with Kevin Ishol of Best Choice Realty in Brookings, SD, June 24, 2013.
2. E-mail to Errington from wildlife biologists Joshua Stafford, June 26, 2013, and Adam Janke, July 9, 2013.
3. E-mail to Errington from pheasant population specialist, Spencer Vaa, October 23, 2013. Introduced only in the early 20th century to South Dakota, the pheasant became the state bird in 1943.
4. See Cattelino 2009; Cowell 1993; Cronon 1996; Haenn and Wilk 2006; Ingold 2000; Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouimet 2011; Norton and Hannon 1997; Parsons 2007; Regan 1981; Sagoff 2004; West 2005.
5. The linking between the social and the natural is sometimes conveyed by the term *socionature* or *social nature* (see Castree and Braun 2001). Although the term usefully indicates that the social and the natural are inextricably intertwined, in our view it collapses the fact that these realms have both significantly different internal dynamics and significantly different effects on each other. Certainly, in the examples we will discuss, it is humans who have had the “creatures” on the run.
6. Morgan rejected the concept of “instinct” as creating an arbitrary distinction within God’s creation, as between humans and mutes.

7. For a discussion of Darwin’s and Morgan’s intellectual and personal relationship, see Feeley-Harnik (2014).
8. See Valencius 2002 concerning the ways that settlers viewed the healthy places.
9. In this regard, a popular video among the farmers to whom we spoke was titled “I’m Farming and I Grow It” (PetersonFarmBros 2012).
10. That a system of classification with the contrast of “clean” versus “dirty” exists within a broader system of industrial production would hardly surprise Mary Douglas (1966).
11. Interview with Robert Fredrickson, July 8, 2012.
12. While the 2014 Farm Bill purports to be more conservation friendly, its effects are as yet unknown.
13. E-mail communication to Errington, September 22, 2014.
14. E-mail communication to Errington, October 22, 2013. See also Gigliotti 2012.
15. Interview with Kurt Forman, June 19, 2014.
16. In his 2008 survey of 1,420 South Dakota waterfowl hunters (his survey most relevant to the wetlands focus of this article), Gigliotti (2009:50) found that the principal motivations for duck hunting are “excitement,” “nature,” and “social [interactions],” followed very distantly by “challenge,” “solitude,” “additional,” “meat,” and “trophy.”
17. E-mail from Richard Widman to the members of the Brookings Wildlife Federation, October 21, 2013.
18. This is virtually the same language used in the manual issued to Fred’s 2012 hunter education class taken in Massachusetts and in a recent newsletter sent to all members of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation.
19. The term *implicated* is prudent because other factors may include the possible effect of climate change on the bluebill’s boreal breeding ground. See Drever et al. 2009.
20. Dr. Alan Afton of Louisiana State University headed this study.
21. The Northern Pintail, a duck whose numbers have also significantly declined in recent years, would be another possible transducer for ecosystemic changes in the Prairie Pothole Region. However, since this decline is more likely linked to grassland loss than to wetland loss, we have settled on the more wetland-dependent bluebill.
22. The Lacey Act of 1900 was a U.S. Federal law to eliminate commercial hunting so as to preserve game species. The act, in combination with U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations that meat, if not inspected, cannot be sold, effectively keeps wild (though not farmed) game off the U.S. market. This contrasts with practices elsewhere, such as in Great Britain, where game can be privately owned and can be sold year round. Thus, the act defined *wildlife* as subject only to “use value” rather than to “exchange value.”
23. Interview with Rob Fitz, July 10, 2013.
24. Interview with Spencer Vaa, June 13, 2013.
25. Green and Elmerberg (2013) explore the economic value of these ecosystemic services.
26. An especially informative example of the “contingent valuation” method (known, too, as “Willing to Accept-Willing to Pay”) concerns the worth of Australia’s Kakadu National Park (see Bennett 1996 and Carson et al. 1994).

27. This preserve was established before Mark Tercek, the new CEO of The Nature Conservancy, embraced the “green economy” as his primary stratagem for protecting nature (see Max 2014).
28. E-mail from Richard Widman to the members of the Brookings Wildlife Federation, September 29, 2013.
29. Boglioli (2009:43–44) makes a similar point, arguing that Vermont hunters, unlike some indigenous peoples, do not view the animals they kill as spiritualized beings.

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