

# Light Farming: Restoring biodiversity to agricultural soils

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Imagine there was a process that could remove carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) from the atmosphere, replace it with life-giving oxygen, support a robust soil microbiome, regenerate topsoil, enhance the nutrient density of food, restore water balance to the landscape and increase the profitability of agriculture?

Fortunately, there is.

It's called photosynthesis.

## **The power of photosynthesis**

In the miracle of photosynthesis, which takes place in the chloroplasts of green leaves, carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) from the air and water (H<sub>2</sub>O) from the soil, are combined to capture light energy and transform it to biochemical energy in the form of simple sugars.

These simple sugars - commonly referred to as 'photosynthate' - are the building blocks for life in and on the earth. Plants transform sugar to a great diversity of other carbon compounds, including starches, proteins, organic acids, cellulose, lignin, waxes and oils.

Fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains are 'packaged sunlight' derived from photosynthesis. The oxygen our cells and the cells of other living things utilise during aerobic respiration is also derived from photosynthesis.

We have a lot to thank green plants for!!

Significantly, many of the carbon compounds derived from the simple sugars formed during photosynthesis are also essential to the creation of well-structured topsoil from the lifeless mineral soil produced by the weathering of rocks.

Without photosynthesis there would be no soil.

Weathered rock minerals, yes ... but fertile topsoil, no.

## **The plant-microbe bridge**

It comes as a surprise to many to learn that over 95% of life on land resides in soil - and that most of the energy for this amazing world beneath our feet is derived from plant carbon.

Exudates from living roots are the most energy-rich of these carbon sources. In exchange for 'liquid carbon', microbes in the vicinity of plant roots - and microbes linked to plants via networks of beneficial fungi - increase the availability of the minerals and trace elements required to maintain the health and vitality of their hosts (1,2). Microbial activity also drives the process of aggregation, enhancing soil structural stability, aeration, infiltration and water-holding capacity. All living things - above and below ground - benefit when the plant-microbe bridge is functioning effectively.

Sadly, many of today's farming methods have severely compromised soil microbial communities, significantly reducing the amount of liquid carbon transferred to and stabilised in soil. This creates negative feedbacks all along the line.

Over the last 150 years, many of the world's prime agricultural soils have lost between 30% and 75% of their carbon, adding billions of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere (3). Losses of soil carbon significantly reduce the productive potential of the land and the profitability of farming. Soil degradation has intensified in recent decades, with around 30% of the world's cropland abandoned in the last 40 years due to soil decline (4). With the global population predicted to peak close to 10 billion by 2050, the need for soil restoration has never been more pressing.

Soil dysfunction also impacts on human and animal health. It is sobering to reflect that over the last seventy years, the level of every nutrient in almost every kind of food has fallen between 10 and 100%. An individual today would need to consume twice as much meat, three times as much fruit and four to five times as many vegetables to obtain the same amount of minerals and trace elements as available in those same foods in 1940.

Dr David Thomas (5, 6) provided a comprehensive analysis of historical changes in food composition from tables published by the Medical Research Council, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods and the Food Standards Agency. By comparing data available in 1940 with that in 1991, Thomas demonstrated a substantial loss in mineral and trace element content in every group of foods investigated.

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**Mineral depletion in vegetables  
1940 - 1991**

**Average of 27 kinds of vegetables**

- Copper - declined by 76%
- Calcium - declined by 46%
- Iron - declined by 27%
- Magnesium - declined by 24%
- Potassium - declined by 16%

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**Mineral depletion in meat  
1940 - 1991**

**Average of 10 kinds of meat**

- Copper - declined by 24%
- Calcium - declined by 41%
- Iron - declined by 54%
- Magnesium - declined by 10%
- Potassium - declined by 16%
- Phosphorus - declined by 28%

Source: Thomas, D.E. (2003). A study of the mineral depletion of foods available to us as a nation over the period 1940 to 1991. *Nutrition and Health*, 17: 85–115.

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The nutrient depletion summarised in Thomas's review represents a weighted average of mineral and trace element changes in 27 kinds of vegetables and 10 kinds of meat. Significant mineral and trace element depletion was also recorded in the 17 varieties of fruit and two dairy products tested over the same period (5).

The mineral depletion in meat and dairy reflects the fact that animals are consuming plants and/or grains that are themselves minerally depleted.

In addition to the overall decline in nutrient density, Thomas found significant changes in the ratios of minerals to one another. Given that there are critical ratios of minerals and trace elements for optimum physiological function, it is highly likely that these distorted ratios impact on human health and well being (5).

### **Restoring nutrient density to food**

It is commonly believed that the significant reduction in the nutrient density of today's chemically produced food is due to the 'dilution effect'. That is, as yield increases, mineral content falls. However, compromised nutrient levels are not observed in high-yielding vegetables, crops and pastures grown in healthy, biologically active soils. Indeed, the opposite applies.

Only in rare instances are minerals and trace elements completely absent from soil. Most of the 'deficiencies' observed in today's plants, animals and people are due to soil conditions not being conducive to nutrient uptake. The minerals are present, but simply not plant available. Adding inorganic elements to correct these so-called deficiencies is an inefficient practice. Rather, we need to address the biological causes of dysfunction.

"There can be no life without soil and no soil without life; they have evolved together"  
(Charles E. Kellogg, USDA Yearbook of Agriculture, 1938).

Around 85 to 90% of plant nutrient acquisition is microbially mediated. The soil's ability to support nutrient dense, high vitality crops, pastures, fruit and vegetables requires the presence of a diverse array of soil microbes from a range of functional groups.

The majority of microbes involved in nutrient acquisition are plant-dependent. That is, they respond to carbon compounds exuded by the roots of actively growing green plants. Many of these important groups of microbes are negatively impacted by the use of 'cides' - herbicides, pesticides, insecticides, fungicides.

In short, the functioning of the soil ecosystem is determined by the presence, diversity and photosynthetic rate of actively growing green plants - as well as the presence or absence of chemical toxins.

But who manages the plants - and the chemicals?

You guessed it ... we do.

Fortunately, consumers are becoming increasingly aware that food is more than a commodity. Indeed, increased global awareness of the links between food quality, soil function and planetary health may well prove to be a significant driver for much-needed social and environmental change (7). It is up to us to restore soil integrity, fertility, structure and water-holding capacity - not by applying 'bandaids' to the symptoms, but by the way we manage our food production systems.

### **The soil carbon sink**

Soil can function as a carbon '**source**' - adding carbon to the atmosphere - or a carbon '**sink**' - removing CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. The dynamics of the source-sink equation are largely determined by land management.

Over millennia a highly effective **carbon cycle** has evolved, in which the capture, storage, transfer, release and recapture of biochemical energy in the form of carbon compounds repeats over and over. The health of the soil - and the vitality of plants, animals and people - depends on the effective functioning of this cycle.

Technological developments since the Industrial Revolution have produced machinery capable of extracting vast quantities of fossil fuels from beneath the Earth's surface - as well as machinery capable of laying bare large tracts of grasslands and forests. Taken together, these factors have resulted in the release of increasing quantities of CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere while simultaneously destroying the largest natural sink over which we have control. The decline in natural sink capacity has amplified the effects of anthropogenic emissions.

Currently, many agricultural, horticultural, forestry and garden soils are a net carbon source. That is, these soils are losing more carbon than they are sequestering.

The potential for reversing the net movement of CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere through improved plant and soil management is immense. Indeed, managing vegetative cover in ways that enhance the capacity of soil to sequester and store large volumes of atmospheric carbon in a stable form offers a practical and almost immediate solution to some of the most challenging issues currently facing humankind.

The key to successful sequestration is to get the basics right.

## Five Principles for Soil Restoration

### 1. Green is good - and yearlong green is even better

Every year, photosynthesis draws down hundreds of billions of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. The impact of this drawdown was dramatically illustrated in a stunning visualisation released by NASA in 2014 (8). The movement of carbon from the atmosphere to soil - via green plants - represents the most powerful tool we have at our disposal for the restoration of soil function and reduction in atmospheric levels of CO<sub>2</sub>.

While every green plant is a solar-powered carbon pump, it is the photosynthetic capacity and photosynthetic rate of living plants (rather than their biomass) that drive the biosequestration of stable soil carbon.

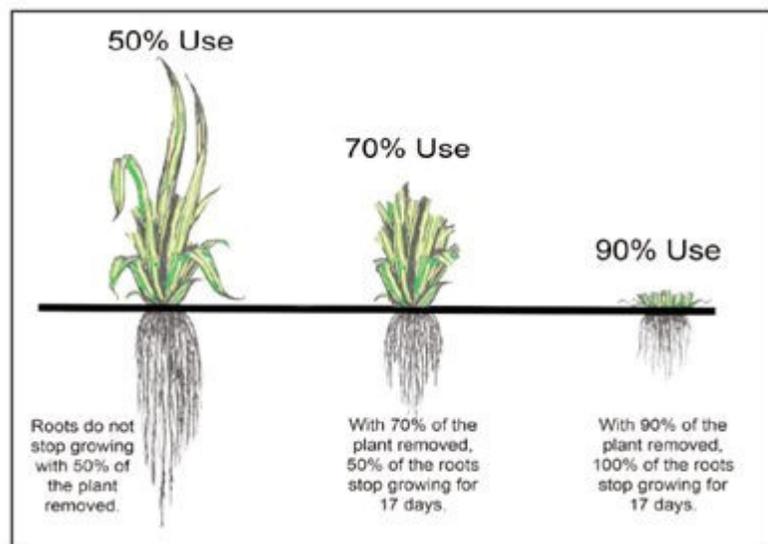
**Photosynthetic capacity:** the amount of light intercepted by green leaves in a given area. Determined by percentage canopy cover, plant height, leaf area, leaf shape and seasonal growth patterns. On agricultural land, photosynthetic capacity can be improved through the use of multi-species cover crops and animal integration, multi-species pastures and strategic grazing. In parks and gardens plant diversity and mowing height are important factors. Bare soil has no photosynthetic capacity. Bare soil is also a net carbon source and is vulnerable to erosion by wind and water.

**Photosynthetic rate:** the rate at which plants are able to convert light energy to sugars. Determined by many factors including moisture, temperature, nutrient availability and the demand placed on plants by microbial symbionts. The presence of mycorrhizal fungi, for example, can significantly increase photosynthetic rate. Plants photosynthesising at an elevated rate have a high sugar content, are less prone to pests and diseases and result in improved weight gains in livestock. Photosynthetic rate can be assessed by measuring Brix with a refractometer.

An increase of around 5% in global photosynthetic capacity and/or photosynthetic rate would be sufficient to counter the CO<sub>2</sub> flux from the burning of fossil fuels, provided the extra carbon was sequestered in soil in a stable form. This is do-able. On average, global cropland is bare for around half of every year (9). ***If you can see the soil it is losing carbon!!***

Both photosynthetic capacity and photosynthetic rate are strongly impacted by management. Leading-edge 'light farmers' are developing innovative and highly productive ways to keep soil covered and alive, while producing nutrient dense food and high quality fibre.

**Grazing management:** This topic requires far more space than available here, but it is vitally important that *less than 50%* of the available green leaf be grazed (Fig.1). Retaining adequate leaf area reduces the impact of grazing on photosynthetic capacity and enables the rapid restoration of biomass to previous levels. Over a 12 month period significantly more forage will be produced - and more carbon sequestered in soil - if pastures are grazed 'tall' rather than 'short'.



**Fig.1. Growth of both tops and roots is significantly impaired if more than 50% of the green leaf area is removed in a single grazing event (10).**

Relationship between leaf area removed and impact on roots (11):

- Up to 40% leaf area removed = no effect on root growth
- 50% leaf area removed = 2-4% root growth inhibition
- 60% leaf area removed = 50% root growth inhibition
- 70% leaf area removed = 78% root growth inhibition
- 80% leaf area removed = 100% root growth inhibition
- 90% leaf area removed = 100% root growth inhibition

In addition to leaf area, the height of pasture has a significant effect on soil building, moisture retention, nutrient cycling and water quality. To maintain photosynthetic capacity (and ensure rapid recovery) it is highly beneficial to remove livestock from a pasture before you can see their feet.

Regenerative grazing can be extremely effective in restoring soil carbon levels at depth. The deeper the carbon the more it is protected from oxidative and microbial decomposition. The 'sequestration of significance' is that which occurs below 30cm (12).

**Crop production.** Increasingly sophisticated machinery and a plethora of 'cides' have provided the means for the planet's rapidly expanding population to create bare ground over billions of hectares, dramatically reducing global photosynthetic capacity. Reduced levels of photosynthesis have in turn resulted in reduced carbon flow to soil, significantly impacting on soil and landscape function, as well as farm productivity.

Organic carbon holds between four and twenty times its own weight in water, hence when carbon levels are depleted, the water-holding capacity of the soil is significantly compromised. Low water-

holding capacity results in poor structural stability when soils are wet and reduced plant growth when soils are dry.

One of the most significant findings to emerge in recent years has been the improvements to infiltration, water-holding capacity and drought resilience when bare fallows have been replaced with multi-species covers. This improvement has been particularly evident in lower rainfall regions and in dry years (13).

## **2. Microbes matter!!**

A healthy agricultural system is one that supports all forms of life. All too often, many of the life forms in soil have been considered dispensable. Or more correctly, have not been considered at all.

The significance of the plant-microbe bridge in transferring and stabilising carbon in soil is becoming increasingly recognised, with the soil microbiome heralded as the next frontier in soils research.

One of the most important groups of plant-dependent soil-building microbes are mycorrhizal fungi. These extraordinary ecosystem engineers access water, protect their hosts from pests and diseases - and transport nutrients such as organic nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, potassium, calcium, magnesium, iron and essential trace elements including copper, cobalt, zinc, molybdenum, manganese and boron - in exchange for liquid carbon. Many of these elements are essential for resistance to pests and diseases and resilience to climatic extremes such as drought, waterlogging and frost.

When the mycorrhizal symbiosis is functioning effectively, 20-60% of the carbon fixed in green leaves can be channelled directly to soil mycelial networks, where a portion is combined with biologically fixed nitrogen and converted to stable humic compounds. The deeper in the soil profile this occurs, the better. Humic polymers formed by soil biota within the soil matrix improve soil structure, porosity, cation exchange capacity and plant growth.

Soil function is also strongly influenced by its structure. In order for soil to be well structured, it must be living. Life in the soil provides the glues and gums that enable soil particles to stick together into pea-sized lumps called aggregates. The spaces between the aggregates allow moisture to infiltrate more easily. Moisture absorbed into soil aggregates is protected from evaporation, so that soil remains moister for longer after rain or irrigation. This improves farm productivity and profit.

Well-structured soils are also less prone to erosion and compaction and function more effectively as bio-filters.

Sadly, many of the microbes important for soil function have gone missing in action. Can we get them back? Some producers have achieved large improvements in soil health in a relatively short time. What are these farmers doing differently?

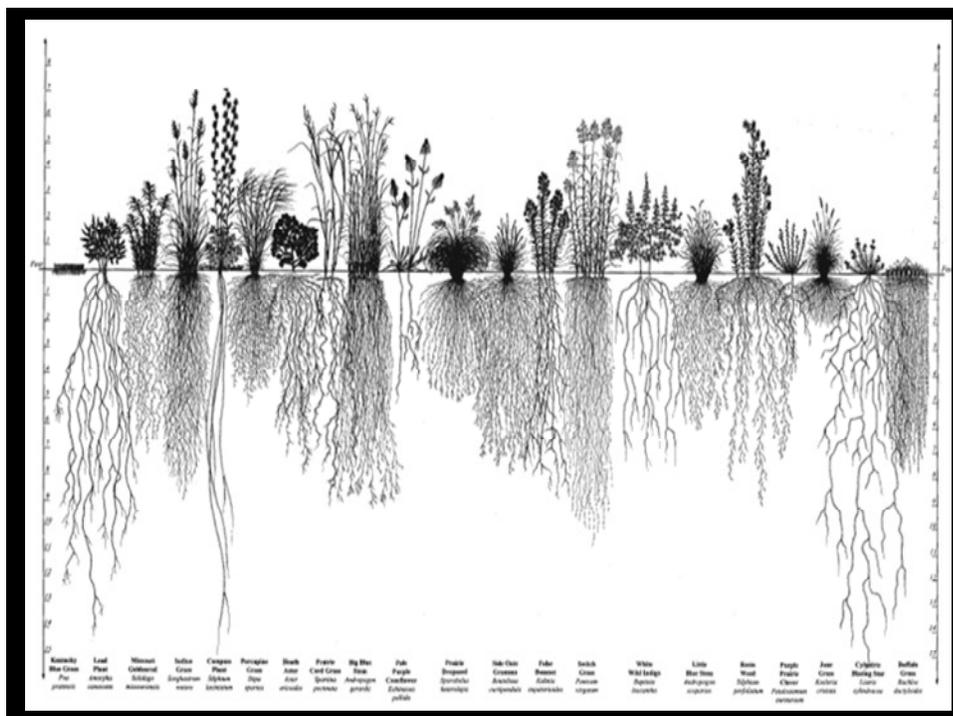
They diversify.

## **3. Diversity is not dispensable!!!**

Every plant exudes its own unique blend of sugars, enzymes, phenols, amino acids, nucleic acids, auxins, gibberellins and other biological compounds, many of which act as signals to soil microbes. Root exudates vary continuously over time, depending on the plant's immediate requirements. The greater the diversity of plants, the greater the diversity of microbes and the more robust the soil ecosystem.

The belief that monocultures and intensively managed systems are more profitable than diverse biologically-based systems does not hold up in practice. Monocultures need to be supported by high and often increasing levels of fertiliser, fungicide, insecticide and other chemicals that inhibit soil biological activity. The result is even greater expenditure on agrochemicals in an attempt to control the pest, weed, disease and fertility 'problems' that ensue.

The natural grasslands that once covered vast tracts of the Australian, North American and sub-Saharan African continents contained several hundred different kinds of grasses and forbs. Native grasslands were extremely productive prior to the overgrazing and cultivation that accompanied European settlement. The variation in plant root architecture in a range of North American prairie plants is illustrated in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2. Variation in root architecture of native American prairie plants, Illinois, USA (14).**

Innovative farmers are experimenting with up to 60 to 70 different plant species to see which combinations perform best for soil restoration. Some grain and vegetable producers are setting aside up to 50% of their cash crop area for multi-species 'soil primers'. They believe the benefits far outweigh the costs. It has been reported that two full seasons of a multi-species cover can perform miracles in terms of soil health.

The integration of animals into cropland can also be extremely beneficial.

However, it doesn't need to be complicated. Something as simple as including one or two companions with a cash crop can make a world of difference.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly common to see peas with canola, clover or lentils with wheat, soybean and/or vetch with corn, buckwheat and/or peas with potatoes ... and so on.

As well as improving soil function, companion plants provide habitat and food for insect predators. Recent research (15) has shown that as the diversity of insects in crops and pastures increases, the incidence of insect pests declines, hence avoiding the need for insecticides.

An aspect of plant community structure that is gaining increased research attention is the presence of 'common mycorrhizal networks' (CMNs) in diverse pastures, crops and vegetable gardens. It has been found that plants in communities assist each other by linking together in vast underground super-highways through which they can exchange carbon, water and nutrients (16,17). Common mycorrhizal networks increase plant resistance to pests and diseases (18) as well as enhancing plant vigour and improving soil health.

In my travels I've seen many examples of monocultures suffering severe water stress while diverse multi-species crops beside them remained green (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3. Triticale monoculture (left foreground) suffering severe water stress while triticale sown with other species (background and right) is powering. In addition to triticale, the 'cocktail crop' contained oats, tillage radish, sunflower, field peas, faba beans, chickpeas, proso millet and foxtail millet. Chinook Applied Research Association (CARA), Oyen, Alberta.**

For a humorous insight into how diverse mixes of plants collaborate with soil life to rejuvenate soil and enhance drought tolerance, see reference 19 at the end of this document.

In mixed species plantings, warm-season grasses (such as sorghum and maize) are the most generous 'givers' to soil carbon pools, while broadleaf plants benefit the most from the increased availability of nutrients.

In livestock production systems, animal health issues linked to lack of plant diversity (and hence animal nutrition) can often mean the difference between profit and loss.

#### **4. Limit chemical use**

The mineral cycle improves significantly when soils are alive. It has been shown, for example, that mycorrhizal fungi can supply up to 90% of plants N and P requirements (20). In addition to including companions and multi-species covers in crop rotations, maintaining a living soil often requires that rates of high-analysis synthetic fertiliser and other chemicals be reduced, to enable microbes to do what microbes do best.

Profit is the difference between expenditure and income. In years to come we will perhaps wonder why it took so long to realise the futility of attempting to grow crops in dysfunctional soils, relying solely on increasingly expensive synthetic inputs.

No amount of NPK fertiliser can compensate for compacted, lifeless soil with low wettability and low water-holding capacity. Indeed, adding more chemical fertiliser often makes things worse. This is particularly so for inorganic phosphorus (P) and inorganic nitrogen (N). An often overlooked consequence of the application of high rates of N and P is that plants no longer need to channel liquid carbon to soil microbial communities in order to obtain these essential elements. Reduced carbon flow has a negative impact on soil aggregation - as well as limiting the energy available to the microbes involved in the acquisition of important minerals and trace elements. This in turn increases the susceptibility of plants to pests and diseases.

***Inorganic P:*** The application of large quantities of water-soluble P, such as found in MAP, DAP and superphosphate, inhibits the production of a plant hormone called strigolactone. Strigolactone increases root growth, root hair development and colonisation by mycorrhizal fungi, enabling plants to better access soil P (21). The long-term consequences of the inhibition of strigolactone are destabilisation of soil aggregates, increased soil compaction and mineral-deficient (eg low selenium) plants and animals.

In addition to having adverse effects on soil structure and the nutrient density of food, the application of inorganic water-soluble phosphorus is highly inefficient. At least 80% of applied P rapidly adsorbs to aluminium and iron oxides and/or forms calcium, aluminium or iron phosphates. In the absence of microbial activity, these forms of P are not plant available (21).

It is widely recognised that only 10-15% of fertiliser P is taken up by crops and pastures in the year of application. If fertiliser P has been applied for the previous 10 years, there will be sufficient for the next 100 years, irrespective of how much was in the soil to begin. Rather than apply more P, it is far better to activate soil microbes in order to access the P already there.

Mycorrhizal fungi are extremely important for increasing the availability of soil P. Their abundance can be significantly improved through cover crops, diversity and appropriate grazing management.

***Inorganic N:*** The other element commonly added to soil is nitrogen. The use of high-analysis N fertiliser poses a significant cost to both farmers and the environment. Only 10 to 40% is taken up by plants, with 60 to 90% of applied N lost through a combination of volatilisation and leaching (22).

One of the many unintended consequences of the use of nitrogen fertiliser is the production of nitrous oxide in water-logged and/or compacted soils. Nitrous oxide is a greenhouse gas with almost 300 times the global-warming potential of carbon dioxide.

It is often assumed that nitrogen comes only from fertiliser or legumes. However, all green plants are capable of growing in association with nitrogen-fixing microbes. Even when N fertiliser is applied, plants obtain much of their N from microbial associations.

Farmers experimenting with 'yearlong green' farming techniques are discovering that their soils develop the innate capacity to fix atmospheric nitrogen. However, if high rates of N fertiliser have been used for some time, it is important to wean off N slowly (22), as free-living nitrogen fixing bacteria require time to re-establish.

## 5. Avoid aggressive tillage

Tillage may provide an apparent 'quick-fix' to soil problems created by lack of deep-rooted living cover, but repeated and/or aggressive tillage increases the susceptibility of the soil to erosion, depletes soil carbon and organic nitrogen, rapidly mineralises soil nutrients (resulting in a short-term flush but long-term depletion) and is highly detrimental to beneficial soil-building microbes such as mycorrhizal fungi - as well as keystone invertebrates such as earthworms.

The increased oxidation of organic matter in bare soil - particularly when soil is disturbed - coupled with reduced photosynthetic capacity - not only adds carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, but may also contribute to falling levels of atmospheric oxygen (23).

## Conclusion

All food and fibre producers - whether of grain, beef, milk, lamb, wool, cotton, sugar, nuts, fruit, vegetables, flowers, hay, silage or timber - are first and foremost '**light farmers**'.

Sadly, since the Industrial Revolution, human activities have resulted in significantly less photosynthetic capacity - that is, green groundcover - on the earth's surface, while also impacting on the photosynthetic rate of the groundcover that remains.

Our role, in the community of living things of which we are part, is to ensure that the way we manage green plants results in as much light energy as possible being transferred to, and maintained in, the soil battery - as stable soil carbon. Increasing the level of soil carbon improves farm productivity, restores landscape function, reduces the impact of anthropogenic emissions and increases resilience to climatic variability.

It is not so much a matter of 'how much' carbon can be sequestered by any particular method in any particular place, but rather, 'how many' soils are sequestering carbon. If all agricultural, garden and public lands were a net sink for carbon we could easily drawdown sufficient CO<sub>2</sub> to counter emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.

Everyone benefits when soils are a net carbon sink. Through our food choices and farming and gardening practices we all have the opportunity to influence how soil is managed. Profitable agriculture, nutrient dense food, clean water and vibrant communities can be ours ... if that is what we choose.

For our futures and the futures of our children and grandchildren, why not begin today to rewrite the story of soil??

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### About the author



To the pressing worldwide challenge of restoring topsoil, soil ecologist Dr Christine Jones offers an accessible, inspiring perspective. For several decades Christine has worked with innovative farmers and graziers implementing regenerative land management practices that enhance biodiversity, nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, productivity, water quality and community and catchment health. Following a highly respected career in public sector research and extension, Christine received a Community Fellowship Award from Land and Water Australia in 2001 for 'mobilising the community to better manage land, water and vegetation.' Three years later she launched 'Amazing Carbon' as a means to share her vision and inspire change. In

2005 Christine held the first of five 'Managing the Carbon Cycle' forums to promote the benefits of soil carbon. Over the past decade she has gained international recognition as a speaker, presenting on 'The Fundamentals of Soil' at workshops, field days, seminars and conferences throughout Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Western Europe, Central America, USA and Canada.