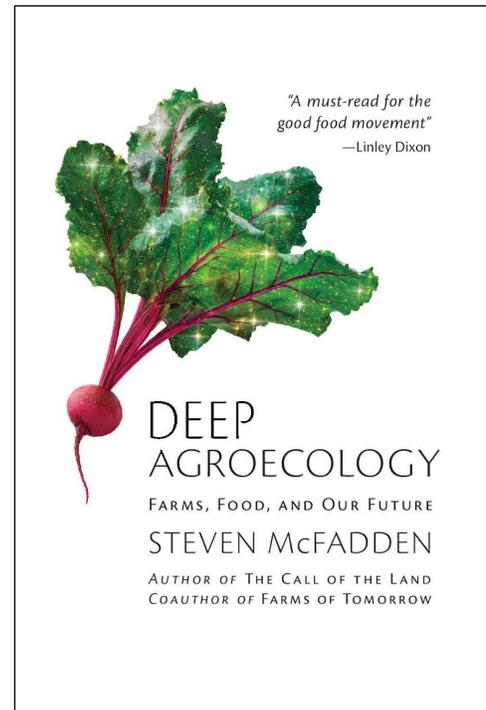


The encyclopedia of agroecology and Indigenous wisdom: Reflections on McFadden’s *Deep Agroecology*

Review by Alissa Boochever *
 University of Vermont

Review of *Deep Agroecology: Farms, Food, and Our Future*, by Steven McFadden. (2019). Light and Sound Press. Available as paperback and Kindle; 294 pages. Author’s website: <https://deepagroecology.org/>



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Presenting an array of facts and an encyclopedia of ideas, *Deep Agroecology: Food, Farms, and Our Future*, by journalist Steven McFadden, urges the reader to activate their ‘spiritual understanding’ of

* Alissa Boochever is a second year Master’s candidate at the University of Vermont; she is also pursuing a Certificate of Graduate Study in Agroecology. She is a farmer who is looking to merge her interests in food production with the academic study of complex food systems in a mutually enriching way. She is in the process of planning a pilot farmer training program with Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility. Ali can be contacted at Marsh Life Sciences, Room 236, Carrigan Drive, Burlington VT 05405 USA; +1-202-365-3777; abochev@uvm.edu

agriculture in order to elevate all life on Earth. The author calls for nothing short of a spiritual awakening of all human beings to prevent further deterioration of the planet. As our climate falls into chaos, oceans warm, deserts grow, and the ice poles melt, McFadden argues, infusing and sustaining greater spirituality in farming practices is essential for the food system and farmers, for our culture, and for the health of the planet. McFadden’s goal with this book is not just to explore agroecology but to advocate for an additional “realm of critical mystery” (p. xiii) in our conception of farming.

McFadden advances the argument that agricul-

ture, being necessary for life and the basis for human civilization, also offers an opportunity to make more meaningful personal change by asking how each of us can contribute to a healthy, more spiritually compatible food system. What follows, however, is a laundry list of concepts, what McFadden calls the “right names” (p. 3) with which to explore agroecology—*Anthropocene, climate chaos, second notice, generational threat, damaged food systems, sixth extinction, our strongest lever, oligopoly, corporate colonialism, deaths of despair, ethos, harmony, and sanity*—that leads the reader on a disjointed and patchy exploration of industrial agriculture trends, the agroecological movement, and ‘deep agroecology.’

Eclectic and wide-ranging, the ideas introduced in this initial chapter, like every chapter of this unconventional book, are pieces of a puzzle that do not quite fit into a cohesive picture. In fairness, McFadden warns from the outset that his intention with this book is less to explain the concepts underlying deep agroecology than to challenge readers to discern for themselves what is important in his presentation.

Using accessible and at times prophetic prose, McFadden advocates an idealistic, and necessary, paradigm shift toward ‘deep agroecology’ by incorporating the teachings and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. In fact, one of the distinguishing features of the book is the reflection of Native American perspectives, customs, and ideologies. The author clearly has had many significant interactions with Native elders and activists across a diversity of tribes, regions, and generations—Joanne Shenandoah (Oneida Nation), Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe Nation), Loraine Canoe (Mohawk), and Barbara Alice Mann (Seneca Nation) to name a few—whom he draws on to communicate the spiritual realization that there is life within everything. Mixed in with this ancient wisdom are scientific concepts and discoveries that make the required paradigm shift toward spirituality more relevant and urgent.

Unfortunately, this is not enough to overcome the overriding lack of organization and ineffective stitching together of information in the book, in addition to glaring omissions. For example, in attempting to mobilize change through a more thoughtful, holistic approach to agriculture, the au-

thor neglects to address specific capitalistic, racist, sexist, or classist structures preventing the kind of paradigm shift for which he is advocating. In the chapter “Industrial Farms and Food,” exploring Your Choice (p. 30), he writes “each individual holds primary responsibility for his or her own health,” (p. 30) which fails to acknowledge that many Americans have no choice but to eat the kinds of highly processed foods linked to illness because of the structural racism and classism that affect their access to nutrition sources and information. There is not much depth of discussion offered in the book at all beyond a narrow recitation of loosely related ideas.

Though well-intentioned, there is also a tendency to romanticize Native cultural teachings without mentioning the violent and less desirable truths affecting Native populations today. McFadden briefly mentions the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act of 1862 as the premise for a USDA-sponsored panel he attends, but nowhere does he mention the violent history behind that act’s dispossession of Indigenous lands and colonization of Indigenous People. He does, however, acknowledge an “epidemic of lifestyle disease” (p. 133) in Indigenous communities that is linked with drug and alcohol abuse and results in a life span five years shorter than the average American, although he provides no context for or explanation of the structural racism and classism that have allowed this phenomenon to occur.

For readers who are already familiar with the urgent need for a radical shift in thinking about agroecology and are looking for guidance on how to accomplish this in the framework of traditional Native wisdom, the nonlinear exploration of key concepts in *Deep Agroecology* will fall well short. At a time of major ecological unrest and the need to reassess life-sustaining systems, including food, this book will expose the reader to some Native teachings and ideas behind regenerative agriculture practices. However, it will be up to the reader to connect the dots and make sense of why some ideas are explored, and others are not. If one is feeling up to the challenge, and interested in an encyclopedia of all things McFadden finds relevant to spiritually intelligent, regenerative agriculture, this could be the book. 