

BLOOD-SOAKED FEATHERS: URBAN FARMING MEETS URBAN FLOOD CONTROL-CREATED HABITATS

Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.

Summary

This piece explores the unintended clashes due to the recent surge in farming in urban neighborhoods and ecosystem modifications due to the need for aggressive flood control in rapidly growing urban areas.

MetaTags

urban farming, urban growth, community conflict, conflict resolution, free range, organic farms, flood control, animal corridor, animal cruelty, endangered species

Endangered Foxes and Coyotes

The stench of death hung heavily in the humid July air.

"I've already taken care of one fox. Now I'm going to take care of the other," snarled the fat, unshaven man standing in front of me. Sweat trickled down his grizzled white chin. Vultures were already circling overhead.

My heart sank. Just two weeks ago, I took photos of the shy and still endangered red fox which nosed his way through the fence from the flood-control wetlands that bordered my dad's acre of urban oasis. The fox had a distinguishing white spot next to his tail. Who would possibly want to kill such a beautiful creature?

The man let out stream of cursing under his breath. He most definitely had extermination on his mind. He loved his chickens. But, so did the foxes.

How had it come to this?

Collision Course in an Urban Context

The hallmark of being a good neighbor is tolerance and a "live and let live" attitude. That hallmark is something I take to heart. But, sometimes it leads to problems.

It started several years ago when the city decided to dramatically widen and deepen the small tributary that ran between neighborhoods in order to control flooding. Coincidentally, the neighbor decided to turn his tennis court and back yard into a place where he raised chickens.

I was appalled. On the one side of my dad's yard, the gently sloping concrete banks of the creek that created a lovely shaded park and garden walk up the heart of the

town, had been turned into impassible wetlands, terrible for walking, but which easily handled torrential rains and runoff.

On the other side of my dad's yard, I saw the transformation of an architectural showcase into something else. The tennis court was a part of a home and a very large lot that had been the showcase for the most distinguished architect in town whose company had won the contracts to for almost all the public buildings in town. The home was split level and had a "Falling Water" Frank Lloyd Wright feel with its windows, integrated pool, gardens, and tennis court.

Here I reveal my aspirational elitism. I would have loved to have purchased that home (or at least, a home like it, since I would not to live in a house where the mother of my childhood friend committed suicide), and to have made it a showcase, even using it to host parties and get-togethers for family, friends, and colleagues. Who knows. With a home like that, I might achieve great things.

At least, that's the way that one of the American Dream success narratives goes. It is not one that I'm very comfortable with.

But to continue with how things were, a classmate and childhood friend (we were in Bluebirds and Campfire Girls together) lived there.

All was good until the suicide of her mother. The family sold the house and moved.

The house and grounds were carefully tended by the next owners until they moved.

And then, the new neighbors moved in, and no one knew what to make of them. Turning the half acre into an urban farming operation was a huge shift and it seemed the neighborhood took a plunge into the abyss of yards filled with rusty cars, boat trailers, and piles of rebar, concrete blocks, and "escombros." What was next? A landfill? Salmonella and avian flu outbreaks?

I preferred to look the other way. I heartily disapproved of the way they introduced chickens, and all I could think of was salmonella.

Lifestyle and Habitat Evolutions in an Urban Setting

But, their conversion of a *House & Garden* show piece to vegetables, chickens, and outbuildings coincided with a national trend. "Organic mini-farms" and small-scale agricultural sustainability seemed to take the country by storm, and I felt very uncomfortable openly judging what I felt to be not at all in the spirit of "free range" and "urban farming."

Further, there were other urban gardens sprinkled throughout Norman, and I tended to think they were a great idea. I liked the idea of the "Farmer's Market"

(although I do not know where one exists in this town), and the idea of the only food source being large commercial farms.

Widely celebrated urban farming projects in New York City, Chicago, and Lima have provided a great deal of satisfaction for those who work with the plants, and some produce enough produce to feed hundreds of people, even though they are on small plots of land. Further, they can alleviate the issue of "food deserts" in very poor communities, and provide access to affordable fresh produce.

In fact, urban farming has gained popularity. The [Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations](http://www.fao.org/urban-agriculture/en/) reports that 800 million city dwellers worldwide are involved in urban farming (<http://www.fao.org/urban-agriculture/en/>).

But, there are a few problems with urban farming, especially when there is animal husbandry and when the gardens are not weeded, and attract mice, rats, snakes, and more.

In my father's neighborhood, and urban farming experiment would have a dramatic impact on the neighbors. With the exception of my father's land, and a few others, most of the homes were on tight little square lots.

Urban Farming's Unexpected Dark Side

The city-engineered flood control wetlands introduced a whole host of other health issues, but there seemed to be little one could do about it. Water moccasins, potentially rabid skunks, coyotes, and rats were among the less desirable new inhabitants of the new habitat.

Anything that took place in the neighborhood would most definitely affect the health and safety of a large number of people; in fact, the street they lived on was a major north-south access road for many of the town's most visited destinations (the University, a basketball stadium, baseball fields, and more).

The chickens (which I studiously avoided looking at; the sight of the abused tennis court felt like a racquet smacking my leg) ... multiplied.

The chickens (and their eggs) attracted mice, snakes, opossums, raccoons, coyotes, foxes, crows, and more, who were, after all, right on the edge of the urban farm.

I believe that the regular way to deal with such pests is to keep the area clean and to use chicken wire.

But, that was not to be.

Once, three years ago, after finding a 7-foot snake (clearly headed toward the eggs) and being visited by at least 3 different opossums, and seeing hawks circling

overhead, it started to be fairly apparent that the wetland fauna were migrating toward the . The robins, mockingbirds, squirrels, rabbits, cardinals, finches, and raccoons had company.

Watching Too Many Episodes of "Forensic Files"?

And suddenly, they did not. One day, my dad commented that every single living thing had suddenly disappeared from his yard.

It was just at that time that the neighbor, a professor at the university, who spent hours each day nurturing her Oklahoma wild flower garden, collapsed with seizures which seemed to come from nowhere. She had never had any illnesses at all, and was an avid cyclist and folk dancer.

Silent summer. Silent fall.

Then slowly, slowly, after two unusually rainy years, the animals re-established themselves, and my dad's yard was alive again with birds frolicking in the bird baths, squirrels, rabbits, crows, and even the two adorable foxes -- a mother and her kit -- who spent time in the back extent of the yard, near the creek.

And then, again, all fell silent.

Coincidentally, a day after all fell silent, my dad had an attack of vertigo and complained that he could barely move. His frailty was frightening.

Then, it became clear that someone had been sprinkling poison in my dad's back yard. It was becoming airborne in the stiff southern breeze and blowing directly into the home with the windows always kept a few inches open for fresh air, and the patio door left open for fresh air.

And, for the first time, I realized that my desire to be tolerant, and my secret shame of being a snob, had endangered the neighborhood.

The chicken excrement washed directly into the creek, which was a major watershed, going directly into one of the most important rivers in this part of the state.

The chickens were victims, too. They looked miserable in their habitat, and undoubtedly, they were not only in dirty, cramped quarters, where they could get sick, but they had to watch as their brothers and sisters were mutilated by foxes and coyotes. I felt very sorry for them.

If the man had become attached to his chickens, I could partially understand his desire to eliminate any possible threat.

Paranoia or Prudence? A Narrative Without Closure

But ... poison???

Setting out poison would contaminate the watershed.

The poison could contaminate the topsoil, and if airborne, cause health problems for all who were in contact: neighbors, people working in construction, landscapers, visitors.

The man continued to shout and his face turned red. I looked at the 8 old vehicles he parked in the yard, and images of "Ranch Apocalypse," David Koresh, and Waco, Texas, came to mind. I felt a surge of uncertainty. He could be dangerous.

The hot breeze pushed the heavy smell of death and I felt a surge of nausea. The hallmark of a good neighbor is not tolerance. It is mutual respect.

The shadow of a vulture flitted across the lawn. I looked at the creek which had been expanded and re-engineered to provide better flood protection. One had to blame the city planners for part of the problem, because the wetlands they had created were the ideal habitat for opossums, red foxes, coyotes, squirrels, water moccasins, and more within the city limits.

Further, as an important tributary of the South Canadian River, all the weed killers, synthetic fertilizers, and other lawn care chemicals flowed directly into the watershed.

But, I never saw any sort of public awareness campaign to protect the watershed, or to instruct people how to interact with the wildlife and how to appreciate the diversity, rather than resorting to trapping and killing what interfered with your selfish human-centric plans. It gave rise to ethical issues. Which lives matter? Animal? Human? Both? None? And when confronted by the expedient decisions, there were hard realities to face.

Convenience or conscience?

Someone would have to decide.