

The Invention of Sustainability

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This paper will examine the place of ideas of durability in discourses on agricultural and forestry practice during the period c.1500-1840. Although cultivators had long (and perhaps always) recognised the possibility of land becoming 'out of heart' through over use, it will be argued that the way this problem was framed before the latter part of the eighteenth century did not allow the sense that this could lead to enduring or systematic problems of degradation and undermine either the household or wider polity. Earlier writers were largely preoccupied with the maintenance or improvement of income, and utilised theories of the soil focused on balancing qualities rather than the retention of essential nutrients, combined with a belief in beneficent providentialism. In the case of wood resources, however, a combination of politically convenient rhetoric and the direct perception of failing supplies combined to create a strong linkage between the fate of the polity and the management of wood reserves. In agronomic literature such a linkage was only made by the 'new husbandry' after c.1760, that would come to bring together new 'systems' thinking, a reductionist theory of the soil based on manure recycling, and older forestry-derived rhetoric to develop theories of states' fortunes based on their management of the soil and natural resources: the antecedents of modern thinking about sustainable development.