

Do We Treat Our Soil Like Dirt?

Source: nationalgeographic.com

Published: October 15, 2015

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That question headlining a 1984 *National Geographic* [article](#) on soils remains as relevant today as it was more than 30 years ago.

We lavish attention on our food, we want to know where it came from, who grew it, and whether it is “conventional” or “organic.” But we give hardly a passing thought to the ground our food grew in.

Soil could use some more attention and respect. After all, soil is the thin skin of our earth where we plant and grow the vital grain crops like wheat, rice, and corn that feed more than seven billion of us.

And while [the future rests on the soil beneath our feet](#), as *National Geographic* also put it in a 2008 article on soils, history is littered with the remains of civilizations that ignored, exploited, and degraded the soil beneath their feet.

One third of the world’s soil already has been damaged by water and wind erosion, deforestation, compaction, nutrient depletion, and pollution. By our own actions, [we are losing soil faster than nature can create it](#), and as population keeps growing we also pave over some of the most productive farmland for urban areas. The United Nations says that unless we protect the remaining soil and improve land use and conservation practices, the global amount of arable and productive land per person in 2050 [will be only a quarter of what it was](#) in 1960.

In the late 1930s, soil scientist W.C. Lowdermilk traveled across Europe, North Africa, and the Near East to investigate why past civilizations failed, and persevered, by looking at the effect of [agricultural practices over the past 7,000 years](#). He visited lands that had been in cultivation for centuries to understand the link between soil erosion and the fate of civilizations.
