Nature’s Second Chance, by Steven I. Apfelbaum

By Debra Bendis
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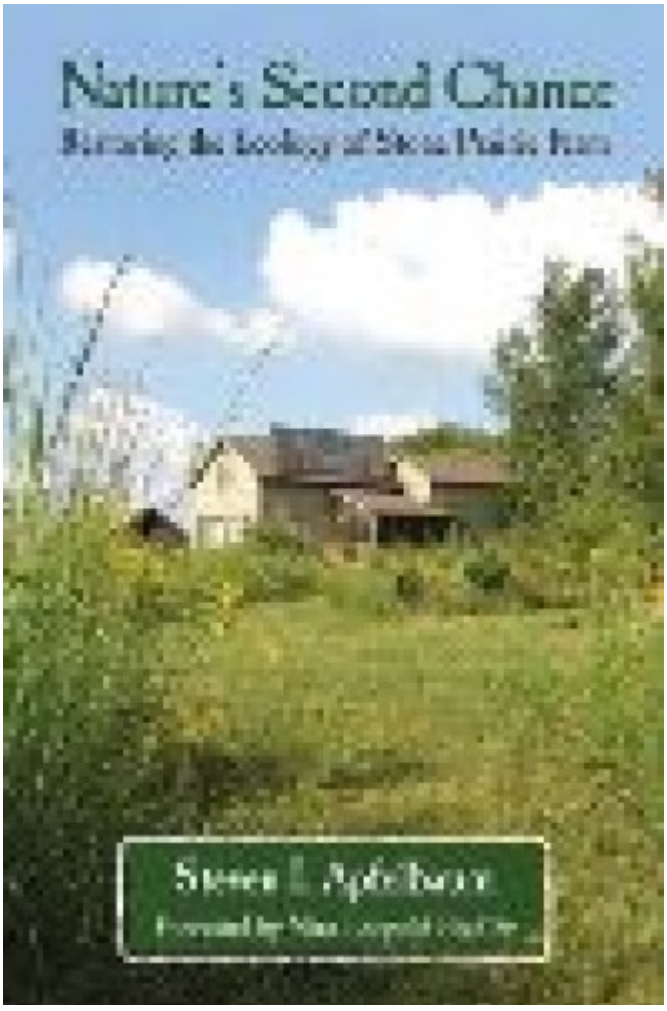
In Review



Nature's Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm

Steven I. Apfelbaum
Beacon

Back in the '70s when Steven Apfelbaum told his mom he was studying for a degree in ecology, his mother didn't know what to think. Unable to accept or perhaps even understand this new specialty, she told friends that "Little Stevie was going to be a veterinarian." She wasn't the only one wondering. Ecology was a vague, warm-n-fuzzy abstract that smacked of good but impractical intentions with some real science-botany, geology and chemistry-bundled into a degree that would be difficult to market.

But Apfelbaum had always loved being outside, from college weekends spent at Devil's Lake State Park in Wisconsin to canoeing Minnesota's Boundary Waters. By the time this book begins, he has graduated from the University of Illinois and is founder of his own company, Applied Ecological Services, and on his way to becoming an international leader in ecological system restoration, conservation development and the restoration of hydrology.

Yet *Nature's Second Chance* is not the story of that success, although Apfelbaum the ecologist shares some of what he's learned throughout the book, making it an educational as well as an entertaining read. This book is about how all of that passion for the out of doors plus his skill and vision became personal. Apfelbaum wanted not just to work on others' land and projects but to live and work on his own land. In 1982, he stumbled upon 2.7 acres of farm and farm buildings in southwestern Wisconsin and decided to purchase the land.

When the opportunity came to buy more, he couldn't refuse. Soon he was studying historical documents and maps to learn how the land was shaped and used, noting the different land types—woodland, wetland, prairie bluff—and developing a vision for how it might be healed and returned to vibrancy.

Apfelbaum tells a great story, and he doesn't leave out the evidence of his own eccentricities—he's so focused on being "back to the land," for example, that he's reluctant to renovate the house, even when rats regularly awaken the family or buckets are needed when it rains. He tries, but he simply cannot understand his partner Susan's desire to plant a nonnative species in a summer garden—petunias. The flipside of this man, however, is the tenacity and patience to collect seeds, year after year, in paper bags, when he

and Susan find rare prairie plants. Or the willingness to tell neighbors about what they are doing, and to welcome them to walk through the lush, brilliantly colored fields of restored prairie flowers.

Apfelbaum knows that his accomplishments are all fragile ones; he's seen rare prairies or tree groves disappear overnight and huge homes go up almost as quickly. He presses questions that I hadn't asked: what comes after the family farms when they're no longer viable? How do we begin to retrain ourselves to think not of the use and quality of "our land" but of a continuous stretch of ecosystem that is only healthy if all the parts make a whole?

One place to start, one that most of us can understand, is the water source. Before building, buying, farming or developing, we need to know where our water comes from, how we keep it safe and how we adjust our plans to let rain and earth replenish that source.

The other place to start is with the land where one lives, making a physical effort or a figurative, political effort, to do what Aldo Leopold—and Apfelbaum—have done. "On this sand farm in Wisconsin, we try to rebuild, with shovel and axe, what we are losing elsewhere."