

In praise of Euro-wisdom. Really? Read on. (*The Meat of the Matter*, 07)

While the competitive dimensions of the race might be less dramatic for most American sports fans than, say, the Super Bowl or the World Series, no sporting event on Earth tops the Tour de France for combining athletic endeavor with scenic splendor.

Despite being a one-time wanna-be cyclist myself, I've followed the 2004 Tour's progress this month on cable TV as much for the beauty of the French countryside as for the battles on the bikes.

In fact, unlike some of my fellow citizens these days, who cannot heap enough scorn on our allies across the Atlantic for sitting on the sidelines during the Iraq war, I confess to being a born-again Europhile.

I respect, even relish, the lifestyles and the landscapes of Europe. On various trips across the Continent over the years, I've marveled at the medieval majesty of Germany's Rhine Valley, the soaring sweep of stone and statuary that is Cathedral of Notre Dame and the quaint charm of Swiss mountain hamlets that seem impossibly pristine and picturesque.

More about Switzerland later.

Although my American upbringing sets off major alarm bells at the thought of some reverse transfusion of Euro culture, it's thoroughly enjoyable to summon up memories of a 3 a.m. sunrise one summer on the northern coast of Denmark, the warmth of Breton villagers amused at my pathetic attempts to converse *en Français* or the all too infrequent chances I've had to prove the adage that you can walk into any pub anywhere in Ireland and before the night's complete walk out as a first-name-basis buddy to every single person in the place.

C'mon – even if you're a red stater/Red hater Republican ready to roast Jacques Chirac, Gerhard Schroeder and the rest of the latter-day commies who refused to support our Iraqi "incursion," you have to admit that the history and heritage of Europe is, collectively, an absolute cultural treasure chest. Even the great capitals of Paris and London and Copenhagen – though much modernized over the millennia – possess a charm and character that is virtually non-existent in Dallas or Denver or Detroit.

Sorry if you live in any of those towns, but comparing their "ambiance" to Amsterdam or Stockholm, or even a rebuilt, relatively modern city such as Frankfurt, is like trying to rhapsodize over the lushness and verdant color of a piece of Astroturf.

Detroit may have a French name, but that's where any association with its European origins starts and stops.

Although they do have the Pistons, and you can't take that away.

Ultimately, though, what's most striking about traveling in Europe isn't its obvious geographic and architectural attractions, but the more subtle – though equally dramatic – separation of city and country.

Farmland as stand-in for wilderness

Go just about anywhere in western Europe, and you can literally draw a line at the edge of town. On one side are clustered densely packed houses, shops and storefronts. On the other side is open pasture or row crops or even a stretch of woods that's typically manicured in a manner similar to a city park in The States.

Uh, depending on which city we're talking about.

Obviously, Europeans tolerate far greater governmental control over zoning and land use than would ever fly in the United States. In this country, we enjoyed three-plus centuries of a so-called "limitless frontier," and as result, the notion that we're supposed to be conquering Nature and developing the land is practically a divine imperative for most Americans.

Although the frontier eventually gave way to progress (as we like to call it), a huge percentage of the North American land mass remains "wild," either as national parks, forests and rangeland, actual designated wilderness areas or simply stretches of undeveloped territory that at least from 30,000 feet looks a lot like it did in the pre-Columbian era.

In Europe, thanks to a couple millennia of civilization (if you count the imposition of Roman rule), there is precious little land left undeveloped, much less unspoiled wilderness.

To us, "Nature" is embodied in the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone Park or the Rocky Mountains. We dismiss the Midwest and Great Plains farm country as little more than boring flatlands we need to drive past to get to some real scenery.

For Europeans, Nature is the farm. The dairy pastures, wheat fields and vineyards that we consider merely "agricultural" land to them represent a spiritual reservoir embodying natural beauty and value.

Because they don't have anything else.

For centuries, the European continent has consisted only of cities, towns and farms. That's it.

"The average European drives out of the city with his family, and when they reach the countryside, the farmland is what they consider Nature," said Dr. Alejandro B. Thiermann, president of OIE's International Animal Health Code Commission and a frequent traveler between Europe and the United States. "In Europe, the farm is almost sacred; it's the only expression of the universal reverence for nature that most [Europeans] share."

Which explains (in part) Europe's fear of GMO foods, abhorrence of such technologies as hormone implants and fervent embrace of "green" values such as organically grown crops and humanely raised livestock. Couple their reverence agriculture with the impact of such food scares as mad cow and foot-and-mouth disease and it's no mystery why the political stance of typical Europeans on something like biotechnology is so different from that of their American counterparts.

What does all this matter to Americans? European-style "management" of land use and the landscape certainly isn't some template we could simply import, although if you love the monumental traffic congestion exacerbated by the relentless urban sprawl endemic in virtually every city in America – stick around for another 10 or 20 years.

It'll get worse.

The fact is that despite strong public support for broadly defined "environmental protection," most Americans don't include agriculture in thinking about either policy issues or private-sector initiatives geared toward that goal. Unlike Europeans, we haven't considered Nature as being connected with farming in generations.

However, that doesn't obscure the inescapable truth: Agriculture – livestock and food production – cannot be divorced from the larger issues of how we best accomplish resource conservation, environmental management and protection of biodiversity.

With resource conservation, no one fails to at least give lip service to the idea that we should use wisely our dwindling supplies of energy and other natural resources such as surface waterways and groundwater supplies. But policymaking involving farming and livestock production tends to focus on pollution and odor control exclusively, rather than including farmers and ranchers as key stakeholders in larger efforts to conserve wildlife habitat, preserve water quality and protect endangered species.

Heck, most regulators, as well as nearly all environmentalists, consider ranchers, hog farmers and corn growers to be the enemy.

Whether in the arena of public opinion or public policy, we tend to relegate "the environmental debate" to government-controlled land. Battles are fought over oil drilling in offshore waters or in the Alaskan wilderness, but no one exhibits anywhere near the same concern over the impact of farm runoff or loss of native flora associated with the intensive monoculture typical of modern agriculture.

There is virtually zero traction for "re-inventing" farming and livestock production techniques to enhance rather than degrade biodiversity, preserve rather than destroy open space or safeguard rather than sacrifice wildlife habitat. Even the most enlightened environmental activists concentrate on wilderness set-asides and parkland preservation, rather than supporting innovative farming and ranching techniques that could accomplish similar goals.

Yet such techniques as managed rotational grazing has been shown through both field trials and real-world success stories to allow not only greater carrying capacity but to serve as a conservation catalyst supporting greater diversity of plant and animal species. The “disturbance pattern” of cattle – if they are moved frequently – seems to mimic the impact of the wild herbivores such as bison that once roamed the Plains and were primarily responsible for maintenance of rich stock of grasslands and accompanying soil fertility.

And that’s only one example among dozens that would require big changes in agricultural production but could potentially yield even greater dividends.

Somewhere between the agricultural life-support systems required to maintain those cozy Swiss hamlets with a dozen dairy cows grazing on an Alpine pasture, and the often shortsighted “mining” of farming resources for maximum production of commodity crops typical in North America, there needs to be a middle ground.

We need to invest not just in federal crop supports to ensure that corn, soybeans and dairy products are competitively produced, but in development of new (and in some cases a resurrection of traditional) techniques that bring the thousands of square miles of farm country and rangeland – not to mention the millions of farmers and ranchers – into the larger initiatives to preserve and protect our essential natural resources for the future.

It all starts with a recognition that raising animals and crops are not separate from environmental efforts, that the ethic of land stewardship – although the term has been tainted by activist groups allied *against* farmers – applied to agricultural production could make a big a difference in furthering protection of the environment.

Even as debates flare up around the proper use of rangeland and forest resources on public lands, we cannot forget that far more acreage in private sector farming and ranching can and should figure into the equation. We’ll never reach the level of Europe’s reverence for farming, but we must move toward a more than enlightened view that recognizes the role agriculture has to play in improving, rather than abusing, our natural resources of air, water, soil and wildlife.

Some experts feel it’s an overstatement to suggest that we’re losing the race against time to develop effective ways to deal with the environmental impact of the six-plus billion people alive on Earth – as well as the two or even three billion more expected to be born in just the next 30 years – before our ecosystems worldwide are overwhelmed.

Maybe so, but one thing is not in dispute: Unless we take that race seriously, we may have neither the time nor the opportunity to check out the scenery along the way.

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[CALLOUT]

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