

## Three Ways to Use the Land

### A Fable for the Age of the Pill

Paul Barclay-Estrup

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Once there were three islands of great beauty, each set in a sparkling southern sea and rimmed with fine beaches. Above, lay meadows and heights of land, and the meadows were filled with grass and flowers. Along the heights were forests and cathedral-like groves, dotted with sunlit openings. Higher still rose mountains, cliffs and scree slopes sheltering serene alpine meadowlands and lakes. Fresh water was plentiful in these lakes, and in the many streams and ponds. The climate was moderate on these islands, the vegetation was lush and green and the watercourses full.

There were no large animals or birds on the islands, yet they were far from deserted. On them, lived small rodents and their predators, many song birds, some hawks, and great colonies of sea birds around the edges of the sea. The streams and lakes teemed with fish and invertebrate life. There were no insects such as mosquitoes, black flies or fleas.

These three lovely islands were owned by a man with three sons. This man loved his sons. He also had a deep and abiding affection for goats. He loved goats, and he had passed on this love of goats to his three sons. When the father was an old man, the three sons were middle-aged.

The first son had scientific training and had gone into agriculture on a large scale. He had unlimited finances. He had great respect for proven facts and logical concepts. He was known as Ecologist John.

The second son was a practical fellow who had been very successful in finance and industry. He had vast resources at his command. Businessman Bert, as he was known, was unshakably conservative. He distrusted new theories and held to the firm belief that More, and Bigger, must always be Better.

The third son, James, was a missionary. He was not penniless, but had no funds at his disposal to compare to those of his two brothers. Missionary James was a highly moral man who had a profound respect for life. He speculated a great deal on the purpose of life. He believed that man should interfere as little as possible with the workings of nature.

The three sons shared a wholesome love for their father and a genuine affection for goats. When the father knew that the time had come for him to die, he gathered his three sons around him. "To each of you, I leave one of my three beautiful islands," he whispered. "Each of you will have a herd of 200 goats who will make the islands their home. You must do all in your power to make the best possible life for these goats. The interests of the goats will be foremost. Promise me that their freedom and well-being will always be uppermost in your thoughts."

The promises were given and the three sons at once began to carry out the wishes of their father.



The first son, Ecological John, gathered together a team of ecologists. They studied his island to determine the resources available, the productivity of plants edible by goats, and all other aspects of the environment. John wished to establish a balanced system in which no part could work to disrupt the harmony of the whole.

The goats also had to be studied, for their well-being was vital. A happy goat has certain requirements. Goats need the companionship of other goats. They like lush food made up of a variety of plants. They like clear water to drink, meadows to feed in and run through and rocks through which to climb.

Ecologist John found that his goats could have all these things forever, and without destroying the capital resources of the island – as long as the population of the island did not exceed 500 goats. He also discovered that, with such an abundance of food, his goats would be healthy and would multiply rapidly.

Goats can live a healthy life for 20 years, especially if proper medical care is available. Under the favorable conditions on the island, the goats would double their population every five years. Therefore, in five to seven years the optimum population should be reached. Ecologist John's first move was to establish a veterinary station on his island. This was partly to ensure the good health of his animals, but also to control the population by adding The Pill as a food supplement whenever the population threatened to soar above the permissible level of 500 goats.

The second son, Businessman Bert, did not believe in population controls for economic (and therefore, moral) reasons. Increasing human populations were good for markets, good for business, and this was good on principle.

Population controls hurt business, and were therefore bad. Bert believed that what was good for business was good for everyone and everything, including goats. The more goats the better, and the goats would be allowed to have kids at any time.

In a very few years, the goat population (which was geometrically increasing) began to outstrip the food supply, and the island could not

produce enough food for the herd. Soon food had to be imported, but this was no real problem for wealthy Businessman Bert. As the goats began to multiply, their living space dwindled rapidly. Almost all of the vegetation was soon destroyed and erosion was rampant.

Because space had become so restricted, Businessman Bert erected a huge building along the lines of a multi-storied car-park structure. To provide exercising space for the animals in their new but already cramped quarters, long treadmills were built on each level. With the help of modern technology, an efficient method of disposing of the enormous quantities of waste was found. With the first signs of overcrowding on Bert's island, mental diseases and physical diseases (that were mentally-induced) began to appear. Many of the stricken animals required treatment with tranquilizers.

Eventually, each goat had to be given a daily dose of tranquilizing pills in order to prevent widespread aggression and depression. The effect on the goats was mass conformity in their behavior. They continued to increase, but as Bert's vast resources still remained available, the structure housing the tranquilized goats and their treadmills extended on up into the sky.

The third son, Missionary James, allowed his goats to reproduce freely, as he was opposed to birth control on religious and philosophical grounds. Soon, more was being taken out of the land than could be replaced. Erosion removed the soil, and eventually the goat population began to decline rapidly. The animals were decimated by starvation and disease.

Within his limited financial means, James did all he could to help his goats. But with each inadequate supply of food or medical care he brought to the island, there followed a temporary increase in population, followed by a decrease, and more starvation and disease.

The three sons, John, Bert and James, tended their islands for 35 years. At the end of that Time, Ecological John's island retained the fresh beauty of its flowers, beaches, meadows, trees and clear lakes. On it dwelt a herd of 500 goats, each destined to live to a happy and healthy age. The only restriction on their freedom was that they were allowed to bring only a limited number of progeny into the world.

On Businessman Bert's island, there were more than 50,000 goats, all living in complete conformity in an enormous skyscraper. They were happy and healthy as long as they were given their daily supply of "happy pills," and there were no restrictions at all on their freedom to reproduce.

On the third island belonging to Missionary James, the passing of 35 years had left a herd of only 200 goats, all stunted and diseased. They lived in an environment of eroded slopes and mud-filled valleys.

They suffered always from malnutrition and starvation, while the original beauty of the island was destroyed forever. But, like the goats on Businessman Bert's island, the goats had unrestricted freedom to produce their kind.

Each of the three sons had honestly and sincerely carried out the father's wishes. Each had done what he thought best and right for the goats.

And yet what two of the sons thought best for the goats turned out to be calamitous.

*If you were a goat looking for a home, which island would you choose?*

*Dr. Paul Barclay-Estrup (editor's note – in 1969) is on the staff of Lakehead University in Port Arthur, Ont., where he is now assistant professor of biology. As a change from the routine lecture, Dr. Estrup last year related the substance in this article to his plant ecology class. The humor – and pathos – of the tale made a lasting impression on the students. The fable illustrates something of man's haplessness when faced with proper land use.*

*Editor's Note (2014) - Dr. Paul Barclay-Estrup was a Professor of Biology at Lakehead University from 1966 to 1990. While on sabbatical in 1987, he was diagnosed with leukemia. Shortly thereafter, ill health forced him to take early disability retirement and he died in 1993. Over 1100 vascular plant specimens in the Claude E. Garton Herbarium were collected by Dr. Barclay.*