Shifting Cultivation Encyclopedia Article

Shifting Cultivation

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Shifting Cultivation

Shifting cultivation refers to a practice whereby a tract of land is alternately used for crop production and then allowed to return to native vegetation for a period of years. Typically, the land is cleared of vegetation, crops are grown for two or three years, and then the land abandoned for a period of 10 or more years. To facilitate land clearing prior to cultivation, the vegetation is cut and the debris burned. The practice is also called slash-and-burn agriculture or swidden agriculture.

Shifting cultivation is most common in the tropics where farming techniques are less technologically advanced. The soils are usually low in plant nutrients. For two or three years following land clearing, the nutrients brought to, or near, the **soil** surface by deep rooting trees, shrubs, and other plants support cultivated crops. With native management, the available nutrients are removed by the cultivated crops or leached so that after a few years the soil will support only minimal plant growth. It is then allowed to return to native vegetation which slowly concentrates the nutrients in the surface soil again. After a period of years the cycle repeats. **Erosion** is often severe on sloping land during the cultivated phase. On some soils, particularly in the tropics, the soil structure becomes massive and hard.

See Also

Leaching; Soil Compaction; Soil Organic Matter

Resources

Books

Ramakrishnan, P. S. *Shifting Agriculture and Sustainable Development: An Interdisciplinary Study from North-Eastern India.* Park Ridge, NJ: Parthenon Publishing Group, 1992.

Vasey, D. E. *An Ecological History of Agriculture.* Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1992.

Periodicals

Monastersky, R. "Legacy of Fire: The Soil Strikes Back." *Science News* 133 (April 9, 1988): 231.