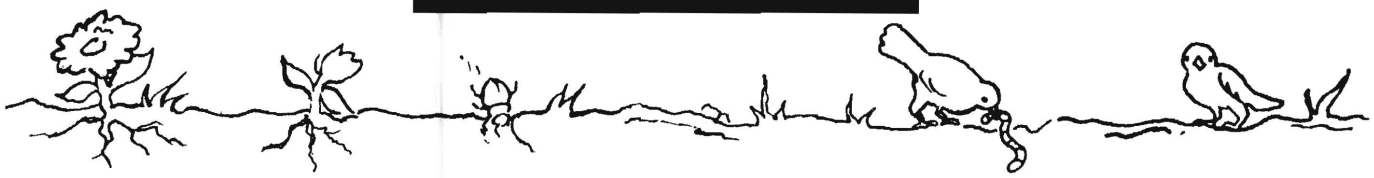
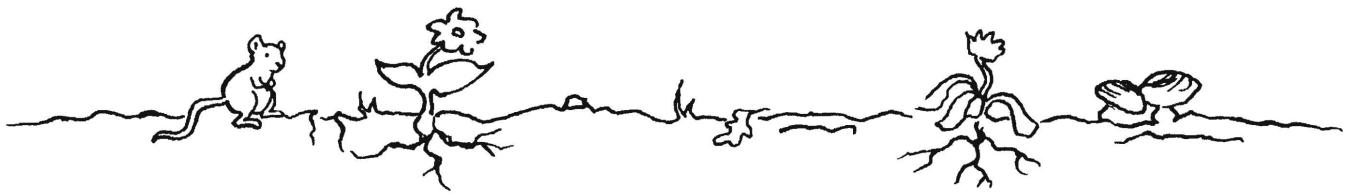
SECTION IV



Where Is Our Soil Going?

Overview

Soil erosion can be caused by water or wind. Most soil erosion on American farmland is due to moving water. It is not easy to detect this type of soil erosion because runoff from heavy rains and melting snow and ice removes soil from Earth's surface in a very thin layer. Although undetectable at first, the natural process of erosion from water and wind can lead to significant soil losses from agricultural and urbanizing land. (Urbanizing land is that which is undergoing the transition from forest, grassland, and farms to roads and suburbs.) When soil is picked up by water or wind, the field from which it is moved becomes less fertile. Soil erosion increases the cost of farming because fertilizer need is greater, crop yields are lower, and farm profits diminish on eroded soil; this in turn increases the price of food.



Where does eroded soil go? Wind picks up soil and carries it in the air, while water moves soil into waterways. Those moving soil particles become sediment that lines roadsides and clogs our streams, lakes, and rivers. Soil sediment is the greatest water pollutant in the United States.

One particularly drastic example of soil erosion is the Dust Bowl drought of the 1930s. This drought and resulting soil erosion devastated farmland, destroyed the fertility of millions of acres, and filled the air with dust.

Droughts and wind will return to the Plains States, but the Dust Bowl storms are not likely to recur because many farmers, ranchers, and conservationists have learned how to minimize erosion. They have developed practices that conserve soil and water and protect the land's long-term productivity. Most importantly, they know the difference between soils that can be plowed without serious danger of erosion and those soils best left alone, and have restored native grasses to maintain soil fertility and water quality for future generations.