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Penultimate draft

Make, Do, and Mend: Solving Placelessness through Embodied Environmental Engagement

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Abstract

How should we live in the world such that we have culturally enriching and worthwhile lives when the material and social fabric of our situation does nothing to nurture or sustain the kinds of relationships with each other and with nature that would seem to be a prerequisite for a healthy life? This chapter examines the claim that there are compensatory benefits - such as cosmopolitanism and increasing self reflection - that mitigate the psychological and social problems of living un-embedded lives in placeless environments. It then proposes the solution that simply by making things, actively engaging in things and, particularly, by mending things, we can rediscover the necessary environmental virtues to reintegrate ourselves into the material fabric of the world. Why this should work has to do with the transformatory power of active, purposive engagement with the material realm. Moreover, we can do this even in the midst of contemporary 'thinned out' spaces to make them into enriching places.

Keywords: Environmental virtues, placelessness, transition towns, sense of place.

10.1 The Placelessness Thesis

With Edward Relph's seminal work, *Place and Placelessness* (1976), there has developed a strong normative proposition within place literature that says placelessness is a bad thing. What is placelessness and why is it a bad thing?

A common distinction within the literature is that between space and place, where space is empty of meaning and could be referred to by grid reference and place has unique characteristics that make it the place it is. Placelessness could be thought of simply as standing in for the term space. However, it is more likely to be used when a place rich in local distinctiveness is destroyed by homogenising forces and turned into a space like many others. Typical examples would be when a street of individual shops is taken over by national or international companies and replaced with chain stores, or where a traditional market is covered over and turned into a shopping mall. In housing, the same shift can be seen where a national house builder rolls out the same estates with the same road layout and house types across the country; the only difference

between the estate in Doncaster and the estate in Hemel Hempstead might be that the roads and cul-de-sacs of one are arbitrarily named after poets whereas the roads and cul-de-sacs in the other are arbitrarily named after British birds. Naming can be a powerful creator of meaning but this requires that the naming is, at least germinally, apposite.

So what's the problem? There are obviously efficiencies and positive benefits to these kinds of developments. What is claimed to be missing is the rich web of relationships that places and people will weave together. Out of these relationships a place emerges that is both nurtured by and nurtures the people who live there. When these rich relationships are truncated by some kind of wholesale development design from outside, the place becomes placeless and the people alienated from where they live (Hummon 1992; Lewicka 2010; Smith 2007; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell 1996; Buchecker 2009).

The displacedness of the contemporary urbanite means they are unable to care for their environment in the same way we do not care for a bland hotel room; someone else will clear up the mess and there is no reason to polish the furniture or nurture the corporate style planting scheme in the lobby. We either don't see that these things need doing or we don't think it is our job to do them. And if moved, as I admit I sometimes am, to surreptitiously dust the leaves of a plant with my own handkerchief to let it breathe such behaviour is deemed odd. There is a particular way we are expected to inhabit public space and caring for it with direct personal action is out of place. This public lack of care or detachment from our surroundings perhaps then plays out in the private realm of the home as well, where mobility works against investing love in objects, home or relationships (Pallasmaa 2008). Some forms of mobility, such as in refugee or exile situations, can induce strong attachments to the things brought with one; where all sense of home and personal identity can be invested in an everyday object. (Many of us will have felt a pale shadow of this in finding an item commonplace at home but exotic when travelling, for example the sense of home that a taste of Marmite™ can conjure. We are cosmopolitan travellers enjoying the strange but nevertheless hankering after the familiar.) With increasing mobility these attachments could become more and more individualistic, idiosyncratic and replaceable; weak stand-ins for the rich cultural meanings that develop through embedded belonging. Without that embeddedness we perhaps lose the ability to recognise, add to, and thus maintain and enrich places.

Therefore, a strong claim of the placelessness thesis is that, not only do we build dispiriting identikit towns but that these spaces build alienated selves. How and why this happens is put succinctly by Relph when he says:

...we are creating, in Norberg-Schulz's (1969) terse phrase, a 'flatscape', lacking intentional depth and providing possibilities only for commonplace and mediocre experiences. (Relph 1976: 79)

And presumably having only commonplace and mediocre experiences then has a direct impact on what we are capable of envisaging and of doing. Kathleen Raine in her

autobiography gives a wonderful expression of this when she discusses the architecture of Cambridge and that of her hometown Ilford. She says:

On the pavements of Ilford I had shrunk into myself in shame, physically present there against my will, elsewhere in spirit. Is not the chief pleasure we experience from architecture the change it imposes upon ourselves? The justification of the cost and labour of Gothic cathedrals and Renaissance palazzos is the greatness they confer upon, and demand of, those who come and go in them, inducing in us civilised modes of being and behaviour. The mean streets of the Ilfords of the world imposing meanness of thought, make impossible, or all but impossible, certain kinds of feeling, certain modes of consciousness; or drive these into bookish dreams. Conversely, in order to escape the silent demands of dignified and beautiful proportions, barbarians must desecrate and violate, smash the stained glass and deface the statues and paint defiant slogans on the walls that tell us all too clearly, in their beauty and harmony of proportions, that we might be better than we are. (Raine 1975: 15)

10.2 Making Places and Made by Place

For its power and its positive agenda of resisting placelessness and promoting a fuller sense of human flourishing, the placelessness thesis requires the normative claim that not only do we suffer in such places but that places change who we are and what kinds of lives we can envisage and desire. We become, to follow Robert Sack's logic, 'thinned out people' and to be thus thinned out is a bad thing (Sack 1997). Alternatively, it might be claimed that this simply does not happen because, although we might not enjoy such places, they do not impact on who we are. Or, it might be claimed that while they do impact on who we are, this is in fact a good thing because we can then live quite happily in thinned out places.

More needs to be said about the nature of this relationship between people and place. Of primary importance is getting away from the idea that a relationship, in this context, is about two separate things interacting. Edward Casey makes this clear when he says:

Any effort to assess the relationship between self and place should point not just to reciprocal influence ... but, more radically, to constitutive co-ingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect there is no place without self; and no self without place (Casey 2001: 406).

This idea of co-ingredience can be used quite helpfully to undermine any idea that a place can be created merely by the addition of some meaning it has for someone. Jeff Malpas in his book *Place and Experience* takes to task those who link place to the idea of it being space plus its meaning or emotional connection to a subject. This would diminish the importance of place (as place and not just spatial location) as its existence would be entirely dependent on the perceiving subject. What Malpas seeks to do is to

unpack why there is no experiencing subject without place rather than the other way around. He says: 'The crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not, however, that place is properly something only encountered 'in' experience, but rather that place *is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience.*' (1999: 32). This helps to usefully balance the commonplace notion that people make places with the more fundamental aspect of the relationship: that places make people. Thus when we ask questions such as, 'What kind of places do we want to maintain or bring about?', we are at the same time asking the question 'what kind of people we want to be'?

10.3 The Nostalgia Critique

One of the major critiques of the placelessness thesis is that it promotes a backwards looking nostalgia for times past when people's horizons were thereby severely limited because they remained in the villages and towns where they had been born. This critique can be driven further by pointing to the stultifying atmosphere of social inclusion and the exclusion of people from elsewhere (Wheeler 1994; Leach 2002). Nostalgia can have these overtones. Moreover, it can be linked to the preservation of one story or image of the past and the eliding of others with the attendant power implications (Jackson and Penrose 1993), or simply the desire to maintain the visited other in a time capsule of one's own past (Massey 2007: 124). However, our ability to stand back from local custom and practice allows us to see these practices as local custom rather than how the world is. It is not that experience of wider horizons gives us a new access to truth it is just the different experiences allow us the possibility of self-reflection. For example, if I'm used to seeing the local harvest of apples gathered in round baskets that is how one gathers apples. If I visit another county and witness their local harvest of apples being gathered in wooden boxes I'm in a position to see that either will do. On returning home I might take a particular pleasure in seeing the round baskets again and enjoy the feeling that there is something right about gathering apples in baskets, but I can also wonder if boxes might be better. I might then realise that although boxes have certain advantages the fact that this county has a lot of willow and the other a lot of pine makes those differences understandable. In this instance local distinctiveness has come about not by arbitrary allegiance to local practice but by the availability of materials.

This is a very benign and easy example where the local practice is maintained for good reason, but what about other traditions? For example, what if our traveller comes from a place with a rigid caste system or female circumcision? In these examples the encounter with other social systems could bring about very helpful self reflection not just for the individual but for those suffering oppression when our traveller returns home. It is these kinds of examples of entrenched inequality that are presented as the down side of being embedded in place and local practice. Here the encounter with the other is seen not just as a different practice but ideas such as equality and self-determination are seen as universally better. As Yi-Fu Tuan points out practices as varied as: 'infanticide, child bride, scarification, bloody rights of animal or human sacrifice, foot binding, self-immolation of widows, demon possession, witch burning'

add to the world's cultural diversity, but the loss of them 'can be borne by anyone touched by the spirit of enlightenment' (1996: 186). It is from this perspective that Tuan speaks of a high modernism and its ability to connect with both the local hearth and wider ideals such as rationality which he terms the 'cosmos'. Although he does suggest that in thinking reflectively we do separate ourselves from place and from our 'immediate group', what we gain is a connection to a wider world, to other places and other people. And 'a Cosmopolite is one who considers the gain greater than the loss' (Tuan 1996: 188).

10.4 The Compensation Thesis

This cosmopolite's viewpoint takes us to a further move in the debate: the compensation thesis. This is the claim, which has been in the literature on place from Relph onwards, that our alienated state does allow for and indeed makes possible a thoroughly modern and good feature of being human, that of freedom. Karsten Harries makes this point about our lack of rootedness:

But once again: we must not lose sight of the gain in freedom this development has brought if the loss of place can be mourned, must it not also be welcomed as an essential part of the increasing emancipation of the individual from the rule of the accident of place? Place no longer need be destiny as it undoubtedly was for the Black Forest farmer. The more we want to emphasise freedom, the more likely we are to insist that emphasis on place should yield to a recognition of the value of open space (Harries 1998: 169).

Here the idea is that the thoroughly emplaced are living an authentic life but it is one prescribed by their situation. We need only imagine for a moment the divisions of class and gender to see how great a benefit some detachment from community, from place, from expected roles affords us as human beings living in the centuries that followed the enlightenment. In this sense the authenticity of the traditional for us has become inauthentic because what a human being is has changed; horizons have moved and to live a life prescribed by place is to no longer live a contemporary human life.

Casey discusses what he calls this 'compensatory logic of loss' (2001: 408). For him the human being is not undermined by the thinness of places because we gain so much from cosmopolitanism and self-reflection in the post-modern context. Moreover we can and do seek out thick places to further nurture our selves. The examples Casey gives of us of seeking out thickness, such as video/DVD not replacing cinema or Amazon not replacing bookstores (408), seem to me rather odd. He seems to be claiming that the continued existence of cinemas and bookstores is a marker of our continuing shared rich cultural existence. I can only imagine that Casey has neither been to a multiplex cinema recently nor asked a question that required some degree of literacy of a bookseller in one of the large stores like Borders. In many cities and towns in Britain, one can see only the latest Hollywood blockbusters and only those by going out of the town to a multiplex not easily accessible by public transport and watch such films along

with an audience of about ten people on a smallish screen. This is not, I think, an enriching social experience. Even for the ten cinema goers there, often teenagers, I suspect it feels more like something to do because there does not seem to be anything else to do. The idea that this replaces the pre video/DVD cinema experience of going to one's local crowded cinema to see whatever film was showing that week, and would be a topic of conversation at work or other social events, is strange. This example, and one could do the same with recorded music vs the previous generation's norm of making music in the home or local venue, throws up a potential problem with the compensation thesis. The problem is that in the current stage of capitalist driven social structures a rich selection of meaningful social events is not actually available to people. Moreover, from the perspective of a 'thinned out' self it is hard to see where the motivation would come from to seek out such enriching experiences or the imagination to be the driving force initiating them? Capitalist structures are such that, contrary to the claims made, it is not the case that people get what they want, or what they deserve, they get what they are given – or rather, what they are sold.

Tuan's notion of high-modernism as set out in *Cosmos and Hearth* (1996) sounds convincing in terms of making the best of the freedom and self-reflection that displacedness affords us, but I wonder, if, like Casey's examples of seeking out thick experiences, it isn't ignoring the real nature of the thinness for most people. It is one thing to be highly educated and financially secure in a placeless environment and able to make choices about one's life, and quite another to be the recipient of a life of diminished opportunities in such an environment. The question that presents itself even more strongly in such a situation is, 'from whence comes the inspiration to engage in anything more enriching and meaningful?' And the post-modern response that whatever is being engaged with is obviously meaningful will not do because some engagements/activities just are, to use Mill's term, 'fecund' and some are not. In defining the characteristics of the higher pleasures Mill uses the term fecund in the sense they are richly productive of further pleasures. The reason, for Mill, that we should bother with the cultivation of such pleasures, or indeed such a life - rather than stick with the easy to obtain lower pleasures - is that they, once cultivated, are more pleasurable, as evidenced by our not wishing to trade them for lower pleasures (Mill 1962: 262). Meaningful activities do not just beget more pleasure/meaning but pleasures/meaning of a kind more worth having (Firth 2008).

Through some activities we learn to demand more of ourselves rather than of the world and it is these activities that we need if we are to redeem non-places, create healthy relationships and a sustainable wider environment.

10.5 A Solution via Matter

Help is at hand - quite literally. Placelessness discourse focuses on mobility and lack of belonging, but it could also focus on the way that mobility impacts on our day-to-day engagement with the world; how we do things here and now in the spaces, places and homes we inhabit. Alongside the historical shift to placelessness there has also been a

move away from engagement with matter. This might seem a striking claim in a world we see accused of being evermore materialistic. But materialism as in wanting more gadgets or the latest technology and only being able to respond to the malfunctions of such gadgetry by discarding and relishing the opportunity to buy the latest model is not an engagement with matter and the material nature of the world, it is quite the opposite. And materialism as a position that denigrates any belief in the realm of the spiritual also casts the nature of matter in the wrong light. It helpfully rejects superstitions and dogma but can also reject any sense of wonder about the natural world and the construction of artefacts. Materialism in this form is, paradoxically, also a shift away from matter (Brook 2009). How can this observation help the placelessness issue? I think it can in a number of ways: primarily we can endorse or promote a 'new materialism' that really is about engaging with matter. Even if I live in a placeless environment if I can be encouraged to just engage with some aspect of the material realm I will be forging a new connection to where I am at the micro level of sitting here doing this and at the macro level of engaging with the material world with its attendant limits and balances.

In what follows, I look at four means of engagement encapsulated in the title: 'making things', 'doing things', 'mending things', and also 'making do'. I will regard these as environmental virtues and as the means to healthy habitation; healthy not just for the planet, but also for us through the self-transformative power of working with matter in an engaged way (Brook 2010). I focus on this latter aspect and leave as a reasonable assumption the view that environmentally good effects will follow. The relevance and applicability of a virtues approach to environmental ethics is discussed at length by Ronald Sandler (2007). He sets out how informed virtuous dispositions are action guiding and can deliver environmentally sound decisions.

10.5.1 Making Things

Although I recognise the problems set out by the nostalgia critique, the limits of space do not allow me to discuss that debate at length. As such, I will simply begin with the claim that in the developed world 'we don't make things like we used to'. Here I mean to point not just to the quality of things made but also to the way that making things has disappeared from our lives. If we do not work in a 'making things' profession then we are likely only to make things as a hobby; they are the products of leisure not the products of life. And just as many people used to make music or be able to cook from raw ingredients these are becoming lost skills now elevated to the realm of the arts or the quasi arts of cottage industries that are so separated from our daily lives they become tourist attractions.

Adam Curtis in his documentary film 'Century of the Self' (2002) discusses an interesting example of initial resistance to convenience foods. He tells us that the psychologist Ernst Dichter advised the Betty Crocker Company that the reason why their cake mix was not selling was because it was too easy to use. Although it is perfectly possible to make a cake mix where no egg is required, as it can be contained in dry form in the mix,

the use of such a cake mix was denying the cake maker the sense of having made something for their family. Dichter proposed that the mix should call for the addition of an egg. To him this meant that the housewife was symbolically offering up one of her own eggs to her husband and would thus return meaning to the cake-making enterprise. If we put to one side the Freudian overtones and a more exacting feminist analysis there does seem to be something very basic in Dichter's analysis of the situation. The cake made with the cake mix alone does seem to lack enough participation to be a satisfying experience and indeed cake mixes today still call for an egg to be added. However, why stop at the egg? If one has flour, sugar, butter, and eggs it is possible to make a cake, but not only a cake, one is then free to make any number of baked items from received recipes or those invented oneself. What is happening with the packaging of single items is the removal of both rudimentary skills and freedom. To return the requirement for an egg is merely the simulacrum of skill and engagement – it removes an instinctive disquiet about a distancing from the materials and actions of making something – without actually allowing freedom and skill development.

To look further at what is happening in the process of making something it might be best to turn to the accounts of crafts persons. Here it is possible to find very eloquent expressions that exemplify not just the production and refinement of specific skills but also a production and refinement of the self and more overarching virtues such as patience, an ability to move with the substance, the realisation of a gentle working with the grain producing more impact than forceful working against the grain. Also in developing craft skills is the meta-skill of self-reflection and evaluation without which the craftsperson can never move from apprentice to creative mastery (Kvale 2007). As Kvale points out the apprentice is traditionally working in an assessment rich environment where they see their work alongside the work of master crafts persons and more skilled peers and the response of customers – for example, does their bread sell. Here the apprentice baker learns about the customer, what goes down well in this community, as well as the materials of their trade. This kind of embedded skill acquisition is a long way from the labour of the production line. The personal creativity in honing a skill is evident in more traditional practices, although a resurgence of this can be seen in some more controlled or routinized employment, such as the practice of *la perruque* where a worker uses off cuts or wastage and the factory or office equipment and time to make something for themselves (de Certeau 1988: 25).

10.5.2 Doing Things

In my analysis of make do and mend it is in the making and the mending that the really archetypal actions are taking place but standing above that is the more general idea of action itself. This might seem to impose a false dichotomy between thinking and doing and I would not want to suggest that in 'the new materialism' there is no place for thinking or that thinking is somehow to be avoided. To really engage with the material world requires an exacting and rigorous form of thinking because old abstractions and disengaged fantasies would no longer be the easy resting place for the mind.

What kind of doing would help placelessness? I am going to pick up one example of a burgeoning movement which seems to me to encapsulate many of my ideas here. This is the action being taken to produce transition towns (Hopkins 2008). Central to the transition initiative is the idea of a socially responsible way of responding to the impending crisis of peak oil (this is the tension between increasing demands from oil meeting dwindling supplies). Recognizing that individual self-sufficiency is never going to be an appropriate response transition towns are those that have engaged in a highly public and shared discussion and debate about how their specific town is going to slowly adapt itself to a more environmentally sustainable future. Although focused on things like a carbon descent plan and ensuring environmental and community resilience this is just the kind of doing that could change what has become a placeless town into somewhere supportive of a rich interweaving of human and place relationship. It is interesting to note though that those towns that have quickly adopted this agenda, such as Totnes or Stroud, had never really made that initial transition into placelessness. This helps to underline the placelessness thesis that would expect soulless towns to lack the human movers and shakers who would have the necessary aspiration to begin the process.

10.5.3 Mending Things

It is a wonderful expression of care for objects and for the world that instead of throwing something away we mend it and give it, as the expression goes, a 'longer life' or 'a new lease of life'. Through our activity the object, which has fallen out of the realm of human use, is returned to that sphere and in that sense we do breathe life back into it. Previously a darned sock, reconditioned bike or glued together cup were a marker of poverty and perhaps they still are. However what we need to see now is the poverty of skill evident in the thrown away item that could easily be mended.

Contemporary manufacturing processes work against this with such things as designed obsolescence, repairs that are more expensive than buying a new item, modular components, sweatshop derived low prices, and upgrades that quickly out date previous equipment through lack of compatibility. These and many more of what an elderly relative used to call 'go-wrongary' built into modern products are what thwart us today in our effort to care.

However there are some areas of life where mending is still an option, and I want to take one of these as an example in order to outline what this kind of engagement with the world is like and what it can bring us. I am going to take one I am familiar with but other examples could be replacing the rotten ends of fence posts, or clearing away rust, treating, filling, rubbing down, and repainting the body work on a car wing. Many readers will have had the experience of a perfectly good and serviceable pair of jeans wearing through in just one area, if you are a gardener the knees and if an academic probably the seat. These can very easily be patched up by using a strip of some other fabric (perhaps even sacrificing one very old pair of jeans to provide fabric for this task for the next 20 years), a needle and thread. The task is not complex but does require a certain amount of dexterity and takes approximately 15 minutes. The wonderful thing about dexterity though is that it comes almost unbidden, you try to do something and in the trying you discover both how to do it and that you can do it better; it just requires a certain amount of tenacity.

But what about the fabric? In making the effort to engage with the initially recalcitrant denim and then finding ways to hold the patch and the jeans whilst manipulating the needle we develop an awareness of the nature of denim and the nature of wear and tear, we might extend the patch to cover not just the tear but to strengthen surrounding areas that are developing a soft plush of worn-ness. We might realise that jeans can be patched from the inside or from the outside depending on the type of damage and what is most comfortable to the wearer. The repair might incorporate a degree of darning (where the missing threads are replaced by stitching across the gap and weaving the replacement threads as in the warp and woof of the original fabric) as preliminary strengthening and to maintain the shape of the original prior to patching.

In hand skills there is always more that can be done with practice: more accuracy, smaller stitches, fewer visible repairs, faster execution, more creative solutions, fewer injuries, and so on. In the process of mending we put back the jeans and we develop our own skills, we join the jeans in a world of the repairable. C.K. Williams brings a number of themes together through the metaphor of mending in his poem 'Invisible Mending' (1999). Here Williams shows how the action and attendant attitude of mending does connect to some deep currents in ourselves. And with the repeated line "forgiveness and repair" (p. 70) he underlines the sense in which we practice forgiveness when we resist throwing away that which is no longer perfect but add to it our care to make it good again. Also we are better at mending something if we stand outside of ourselves and enquire 'what it needs' (Crawford 2009: 16) and, as Mathew Crawford points out, we need such breaks from our habitual self-absorption. In resisting the lure of the new and nurturing what we have, we practice a virtue that is self-transforming and exemplifies a care for the things in our orbit and a care for the wider environment.

As I said my focus is on the micro level and personal transformation but I will just mention that it takes 1,800 gallons (U.S.) of water to grow the cotton for 1 pair of jeans¹

¹ <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/06/how-many-gallons-of-water.php> Retrieved November 20, 2010.

and 73% of cotton is grown on irrigated land². Hence the rather painful irony of the fashion statement of pre stressed or ready patched new jeans.

10.5.4 Making Do

I do not intend to say much about ‘making do’ except to use it to deflect any notion of impoverishment or suffering in endorsing ‘make do and mend’, just as the driving force behind the transition towns idea is not just a panic about dwindling resources or a mean-spirited notion of thrift. It is about saying we are not mourning the loss of our current lifestyles and making do with some diminished form of living. We are, rather, saying there is a lot that doesn't work about this 21st-century lifestyle for us as humans and the environmental crisis is just the trigger to get us communicating together about more enriching ways of living. Likewise, the positive aspect of making do is the invitation and endorsement of human creativity.

I would like to conclude with a specific example which I think exemplifies the make, do and mend idea. My daughter called in to visit after various trips away and I noticed she was doing some crochet. I asked what she was making and she just lifted up her legs to show that she had only one slipper and said, ‘I lost the other out of my bag somewhere and need to make another’. She had made the initial pair and was now able to replace a missing one just with her own ingenuity, craft skill and some spare wool. They might not be a perfect match but how much better to have, at least in some area of one’s life, that degree of resourcefulness and mastery of materials such that the world comes close and we can accommodate ourselves to it.

By engaging with the material realm, not as automata, but as creative individuals we can do more with less and shape our lives and our homes and communities such that they exemplify enriching places of co-creation. In this way the seemingly intractable problem: of building or rebuilding nourishing places when the individuals there have been culturally impoverished, ‘thinned out’, by their current placeless environments, could be addressed. The answer to the question – where to begin – is right here, right now, wherever that happens to be. Therefore, my central thesis is that by endorsing make do and mend to encourage a form of immediate environmental engagement we can re-learn the skills and develop the virtues that will begin to redeem placelessness.

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² http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/freshwater/problems/thirsty_crops/cotton/index.cfm
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