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Wade Graham's Walden

Grazing on a new frontier



Cattle ranch in Texas, USA



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I recently contemplated a scene lifted right out of the Old West: cowboys on horseback moving a small herd of red cows across a dry hillside dotted with oak trees. Edging their horses along the herd's flanks, the cowboys called out to the cattle, and the cattle mooed back and dutifully moved along. It evoked the mythic romance of frontier life in the wide spaces of North and South America, Australia, and Africa: unfettered independence and an elemental closeness with the land.

But the myth was always mythic, whitewashing the brutalities of colonialism, frontier capitalism, and animal cruelty. And now it crashes against the ugly reality of 21st-century global beef production: the horrific damage done by our industrialised food system to land, water, air, human communities, and the animals themselves. To produce a modern hamburger requires massive amounts of water, methane-derived fertiliser, fossil-fuelled machinery, pesticides and herbicides – just to grow the (mostly GMO) feed, plus a flood of hormones and antibiotics pumped into the animals during fattening. What seemed, in the naive, techno-optimistic

twentieth century, to be a bright new toolkit to fight world hunger was, in fact, a dark Pandora's box of deforestation, industrial-scale feedlots (CAFOs or confined animal feeding operations), slaughterhouses, and supermarkets – the whole supply chain contributing nearly one-fifth of climate changing emissions. All of it is driven by rocketing consumption, as the world rushes to emulate the meaty Anglo-American diet. Global meat production quadrupled from 1960-2010, and per capita consumption doubled. At current rates, consumption looks to double again by 2050.

Knowing even a few of these facts, one has to pause on the way to McDonald's for a Quarter Pounder. I did just that a few years ago, and stopped eating red meat entirely, as it is the worst offender, and pledged to more closely examine my other dietary choices.

Then, I began to learn more. On the margins of the mega-scale industrial meat system there remain other scales and other practices: smaller, typically older, more balanced and integrated with communities, traditions, and landscapes.

One persists near where I live: the red cows lowing on the hillside were grazing



Yarded cattle waiting to be auctioned and transported internationally

The problem is that the pressures of the industrial system have all but eliminated the old, local supply chains of small slaughterhouses

on part of what was once a 6,000-hectare *rancho* originally granted to Spanish colonists. They were being raised in a mode essentially unchanged in more than a century: pastured on lush winter grasses, then the calves sold on to market as the dry season takes hold.

The problem is that in recent decades the pressures of the industrial system have all but eliminated the old, local supply chains of small slaughterhouses, butchers, and grocers. Ranchers are forced to sell their calves – however well-raised they may be – to gigantic CAFOs often thousands of miles away, where they disappear into the maw of the “meat-guzzler”, as *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman memorably put it. The prices they receive have plummeted along with the quality of the finished meat. To survive, many overgraze their land with too many cattle, resulting in erosion and degradation, or they sell out to larger operations – or, increasingly, to developers. Now, most signs in California cow country that say something like “Rancho Los Alamos” announce new, gated subdivisions, not cattle on the range.

The owners of the red cows on the hillside bought their ranch as a retirement location. It had some cattle, but they were poorly managed, and the land was in bad shape. They did not see themselves in the cattle business. But neighbours told them that grazing wasn't optional. Without it, the grass dies, turns grey, and oxidizes, blocking sunlight from seeds below and interrupting the flow of nutrients; without the impact of hooves, a hard crust forms over the soil; rain runs off without absorbing, and the land itself begins to die.

Like most grasslands, this ecology evolved over hundreds of thousands of years, with mixed herds of grazing animals, tightly bunched and always moving to evade predators. When the Spanish came in the eighteenth century, they largely eliminated

both predators and herds, replacing them with cattle, which, under the right conditions, performed similar functions.

The trick is the right kind of grazing, mimicking pre-modern conditions: first, putting closely-bunched cattle on a limited area for a limited time to eat down the vegetation and break up crusts with their hooves. Their urine and dung stimulate the fungus and other microorganisms which make up healthy soil. In the words of one rancher, “Poop, pee, and hooves” in combination, do the hard work. When the animals are removed, the land is allowed to rest and regenerate. In this way, the red cows are bringing this ranch back to life.

But the economics remain a struggle. There are few alternatives to the meat-guzzler: the market for range-raised beef is minuscule, unstable, and for most consumers, prohibitively expensive. Add in rising land prices and taxes because of development, and ranchers are caught in a vice. Similar situations exist all over the world.

What's needed is a new way to value these grazing systems: valuing the “work” of the animals in maintaining landscapes that look stable and permanent but are, in fact, fragile and complex, and valuing the work of the people who tend those animals. The only way to do it, beyond straight subsidies to keep them on the land – the basis of EU and UK agricultural policies – is to pay them fairly for the total value of their animals, not just for pounds of abstract meat. It means rethinking our blind, slavish belief in free trade and instead defining regional grazing systems by their distinctive ecological and community needs, forming deliberate “bubbles” over them to safeguard their multiple values. It means asking not just: “is it affordable”? at the meat counter, but also, is it “good”? Good for the goose, the gander, the people, and the planet.