

Fjällbete — A Landscape for Every Body

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✓ Fact Checked

May 07, 2022

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Fjällbete, a farm in Undersåker, Sweden, is a regional hub of the Savory Global Network and a learning site for holistic management
- › At Fjällbete, their mission is to “close the gap between the land and its people” — to restore “laghum,” an ancient Swedish word that means “what works for everybody”
- › Holistic planned grazing is key to regenerative agriculture and the ecological restoration of grasslands, as it mimics the natural predator/prey relationships that have existed in the environment for ages
- › Knowing that they’re making a difference to regenerate the landscape brings meaning to life and is attracting a growing number of young people to the farm in search of a greater purpose
- › From increasing food security and mitigating drought to improving poverty by turning impoverished regions into productive ones, regenerative agriculture can, indeed, save the world

Fjällbete, a farm in Undersåker, Sweden, is making waves in its community for reverting back to an age-old connection with the land — and in so doing, a new generation of youth are feeling the call to regenerative agriculture as a way to build a better world. Jörgen Andersson, who is now the driving force behind Fjällbete, came from a conventional farming background — driving tractors and relying on machinery is the way he was brought up to farm.

When he was a child, animals – particularly cows – began to disappear from the landscape and with their removal came a noticeable degradation in the soil. It wasn't until later in life that Andersson made the connection that taking animals away from agriculture was detrimental, but when he started Fjällbete about 20 years ago, he said, "People remembered the animals that used to be here. In such a short period of time, all the animals were gone."¹

Animals Shape the Landscape

As a regional hub of the Savory Global Network, Fjällbete is the learning site for Holistic Management Sverige – the Savory Hub in Sweden. Livestock integration with grazing management is just one part of regenerative agriculture practices that are allowing farmers around the globe to largely avoid chemical pesticides, fertilizers and other pitfalls of industrial farming while building carbon-rich soil that increases crop health and livestock yields.

At Fjällbete, their mission is to "close the gap between the land and its people"² – to restore "laghum," an ancient Swedish word that means "what works for everybody." "To make things laghum is to address the distance between people and the land," the film states,³ and this starts with the return of animals.

"The connection here in the tourism area, there was a knowledge that the landscape was shaped by those animals, or it was an intuitive thing that when you see them back in the landscape, you felt so good," Andersson said, and "that's even before they start to learn how beneficial the animals are in the landscape."⁴

Holistic management practices acknowledge the complexity of living systems and the fact that animals, people, plants and much more, such as fungi, all must co-exist and form interconnected relationships.

While conventional farming has attempted to simplify the natural world into monocultures where one crop exists at a time, at the expense of other plants, insects and wildlife, regenerative agriculture embraces complex ecosystems and aims to work

in concert with them. As explained by the Savory Institute, which is working to facilitate the large-scale regeneration of the world's grasslands using holistic management:⁵

“The natural world is comprised of beautifully- and infinitely-complex adaptive living systems ... and the way we manage decisions amidst complex living systems matters.

In this modern, industrial era, we have all been taught from an early age to reduce a problem down to its simplest components. This works for machines and other ‘complicated’ systems whose individual parts can be fully defined, but when biology enters the picture, so too must humility and a shift from ‘control’ to ‘cooperation.’”

Animals Serve a Greater Purpose

When Andersson started Fjällbete, there had been no animals on the land for 30 years. He described reintroducing animals to the farm as a form of coming home — a feeling that resonated with others in his community.

“The whole concept of holistic management is that we can offer a way of making use of the land that is viable and competitive that we didn’t know of before,” Andersson said. While at one time, Andersson was content to run his own farm in isolation of the community around him, now, he says, “The goal is not to be taking care of my own farm on my own.”⁶

Instead, “Fjällbete is facilitating a Nordic network for regenerative agriculture and helping people explore their ‘caring capacity’ as farmers and community builders.”⁷ The goal is for community collaboration to naturally trigger expansion that’s healing to the land and puts animals back at the center of the regeneration process.

Holistic planned grazing is key to regenerative agriculture and also the ecological restoration of grasslands, as it mimics the natural predator/prey relationships that have existed in the environment for ages.⁸ Andersson is now seeing an influx of young people

with a desire to give back to the land, even though they don't come from a farming background.

Young People Find Magic in Agriculture

Maja Bohlin, a shepherdess and community builder at Fjällbete, said she feels most at ease and happiest when she's working with the land. When people come to visit, they feel the sense that Fjällbete is more than a business or a hobby or a workplace. "It's bigger than that," she says.⁹ The animals, too, have a greater purpose, helping to regenerate the soil and thereby helping the people who live on the land.

"There's so many levels to it. It's not only helping the soil and helping the land," Bohlin said, "It's also, when you see people just coming to pay a visit, to help you move the sheep, for example, and you can see the spark in their eyes ... these animals actually change the world ... and to be a part of that, I feel proud of that."¹⁰

Knowing that they're making a difference to regenerate the landscape brings meaning to life and is attracting a growing number of young people to the farm. Adam Bergstedt is another shepherd and community builder at Fjällbete, who says he can't explain logically why he needed to come — "It was a deep calling from the forest, from the land," he said.¹¹

The connection he feels to the land guides how he eats and interacts with the land and the people around him — and the message he shares. "A landscape that is for everybody, every body ... the cow and the goat and the bird and the insect and all the bodies, having the landscape in such a way where it is best for everyone."¹²

As they bring sheep to graze on a grassy area in a ski slope, Josephine Eilso Mors, also a shepherdess and community builder at Fjällbete, explains that what they're doing doesn't feel like a job, "It feels like a purpose."¹³ After graduating high school, all of her friends went away to universities but she chose this more practical way of making a difference.

“The mixture of interacting with animals, interacting with people and moving your body – doing physical work – and having the view of the landscape,” she says, “it’s magical. Really.”¹⁴

Can Regenerative Farming Save the World?

Holistic management is one form of regenerative agriculture, which involves embracing the relationships between large herds of wild herbivores and grasslands, developing strategies to manage herds of domestic livestock to mimic wild herds. “Holistic Management is successful because it is cost-effective, highly scalable and nature-based,” the Savory Institute explains.¹⁵

Critics have brought up the fact that livestock can release excessive levels of methane into the environment, but this is only an issue with livestock raised in crowded conditions on concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), which maintain manure lagoons and convert forests and grasslands into corn and soy monocultures used for animal feed.

“It is reasonable to conclude that an intact ecosystem effectively balances ruminant methane production and breakdown,” according to the Savory Institute, which continues:¹⁶

“Healthy, well-aerated soils – a characteristic quality of grasslands under Holistic Planned Grazing – harbor bacteria called methanotrophs, which break down methane. Soil-based decomposition of methane may be equal to or greater than ruminant methane production, depending on animal density, soil type and soil health. Thus, the benefits of eco-restoration through Holistic Management far outweigh methane emissions resulting from livestock.”

It's a boon for food security as well, because it allows landowners to increase profits and yields without putting the long-term viability of the land at risk. The use of holistic management for the preparation of agricultural crop fields can increase yields more than four-fold, without the need for additional inputs, according to the Savory Institute.¹⁷

While it may seem simplistic, the movement of herds of herbivores has a complex and beneficial role in increasing land productivity by up to 400%, which it accomplishes via:¹⁸

- Hooves that break up soil and trample plants, supporting seed germination and enhancing water filtration
- Grazing, which stimulates grass growth
- Dung and urine, which act as natural fertilizers to the soil

Desertification, which occurs when vast grasslands are plowed up, exposing the soil and causing water runoff and evaporation, is a growing problem too. According to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nearly 2 million acres of federally protected grasslands and wetlands in North Dakota alone were taken out of the conservation program between 2007 and 2015.¹⁹

Holistic management and planned grazing can help here as well, as it increases organic matter in the soil, helping it to hold water. An increase in water holding capacity of 40% was demonstrated by one study on land using holistic planned grazing.²⁰ From increasing food security and mitigating drought to improving poverty by turning impoverished regions into productive ones, regenerative agriculture can, indeed, save the world. As Andersson put it:²¹

“If we want our kids to have a safe place to live in, what do we need to do to make that happen? ... With our ingenuity and our creativity, there are so many places where we can enable and support and help life on this planet.

So we can obviously make this place greener and more diverse than it has ever been before. And to me that’s just step one. Regenerative agriculture is the natural step for mankind to take, now. That is the leap in progress, and there’s basically no other way.”

Sources and References

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