

HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER FARMING

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Nikki farms at Howe Mill Farm in Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

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The world we find ourselves in currently can be a scary place: climate change, health pandemics, conflict and biodiversity loss on a massive scale. It’s easy to become caught up in the fear and anxiety, and to be overcome by these issues; these threats.

To help me manage my feelings of despondency around what I often perceive to be a lack of global action, I have taken to thinking small, considering what I can do in my corner of Scotland, what changes I can make and the action I can pursue towards healing the Earth’s wounds and developing resilience for an uncertain future. My thoughts take me to the soil, to abundance and reciprocity, informed by ideas of indigeneity shared by Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, Rebecca Hosking and Robin Wall Kimmerer. *[Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin has written elsewhere in this report.]*

Running a grazier business with my husband, we graze our livestock on land owned by other people, helping them to reach their ecological goals whilst producing 100% grass- and tree-fed beef. Our farming practice could be described as agroecological, a term the FAO define as ‘an holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems.’ This means we aim to optimise the interactions between plants and animals – integrating our herd of cattle into the ecosystems we have the privilege of becoming a part of as we graze them. For us, farming isn’t something that happens in a defined space, with

nature taking precedence elsewhere, instead our cattle nudge and enable ecological processes to happen; they become part of ‘nature’. We aim to think indigenously, considering not only now, but the future for the land we farm. We don’t own this land, we have no long term investment in it – but we are connected to it emotionally, we put time and energy into this place and we recognise that its value is priceless.

Underpinning the ideas of biomimicry and ecology, both literally and figuratively, is soil. Our grazing decisions are directed by managing soil impact, recognising the role that tall grass grazing has in providing soil with an armour that protects it from heavy rain and the sun’s heat, and, to some extent, the hooves of our cattle which enables us to keep them outside all year round. We see soil not as dirt, but as the thriving and highly complex ecosystem that it is, as Nicole Masters suggests, soil is made up of ‘dynamic and vibrant communities’. It is our job, as graziers and land managers to protect that soil, to create the conditions that allow those communities to flourish. Thinking from within the ecosystem, we want to see diversity and abundance. The soil below the permanent pasture, species rich grassland and woodlands we graze are packed full of seeds and tubers, rhizomes and roots that, given space and time between managed animal impact, can provide a huge range of diversity in plant species. When we have questions about what we or our animals need nutritionally, the soil has the answers.

As a result of the ‘Green Revolution’ we are presented with farming problems or issues, which we might not have known we had, being solved by bought in solutions or prescriptions. We seem to have lost our ability to put our faith in our local ecology to provide us with all we need, instead relying on mined minerals, fossil fuels and other extractive processes to supply answers. All of which come at a cost – not only to individual farm businesses financially, but environmentally and socially, having impacts in far off places that we will likely not be aware of. Instead, we could consider the words of the American novelist and farmer, Wendell Berry, who told us, ‘The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.’ By centring our focus under our feet, we suddenly realise how connected we are with everyone and everything else in our communities; we all stand on this common ground. We all have soil in common. In realising this, we are

suddenly no longer individuals working in isolation, instead like our friends in the soil, we are part of a web; a network, and we are connected.

In fast-paced times, where social media reigns and speed is king, where immediacy feeds our insatiable hunger for stimulation, taking a breath and thinking about our connection with and through the soil is a soothing balm. Our physical health is nourished by the foods that grow in and of the soil, but our emotional wellbeing is also nourished by this dark crumbling magic we can hold in our hands.

In a recent interview, botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer said, ‘This is our work as humans in this time. To build good soil in our gardens, to build good soil culturally and socially, and to create potential for the future. What will endure through almost any kind of change? The regenerative capacity of the Earth. We can help create conditions for renewal.’

Let us take the time to heed her words and rekindle our relationship with soil.