

Animal Rights Activism's Blind Spot

As part of my interest in ethical and sustainable food systems, I have spent a bit of time around animal rights groups on Facebook recently. Usually driven by the quite extreme vegan agenda, there are groups of people out there who genuinely believe that they need to “rescue” animals from human slavery.

I believe these are all nice, mainly middle class folk who are genuinely passionate and motivated to do what's best for animals... but I'd like to explain why I also think they're also misguided. There are several arguments, which I'll address in turn.

Ultimately, I hope to show that the idea of “rescuing” large animals from the food chain has practically zero benefit, and distracts us from a far bigger crime against the animal kingdom being perpetrated by humanity. If animal rights activists are genuinely concerned with protecting animal lives, I believe the meat industry is the wrong area to focus their efforts.

The Fundamentalists' Hard Line

Of course there's one area where we'll probably never agree, which is unfortunate. Militant vegans will say, “There's no such thing as... humane animal husbandry / humane slaughter / ethical meat, etc.” Their belief system dictates that any raising, eating, or using of animals is wrong *per se*.

I disagree fundamentally with them on that point. On one hand, I know many farmers who genuinely love and care for the animals in their care. I personally believe there *is* such as thing as caring, responsible, and ethical meat industry, and I totally agree with

the ARA movement that industrial-scale raising and slaughter of animals for food is a blight on humanity.

To lump small-scale, family farms in with faceless, industrial systems is tragic, but it lets activists pick soft targets for their direct action (family farms are much easier to break into than massive economically-driven facilities).

Also, as I'll explore below, **there is no such thing as agriculture without animals**, and large animals are *supposed to* be part of pretty much every ecosystem on the planet. They occupy a key niche, whether your ecosystems is wild or under human management (as much of the world's surface is now, unavoidably). Remove them, and you break Nature's beautifully balanced system, which brings a new set of problems.

Lives Saved: 0

Let's just get another simple argument out of the way early on. Direct action – rescuing or stealing livestock from the human food chain – **saves zero animal lives**. If you release a hundred chickens into the wild, or take a goat or calf away to live out its days in a sanctuary, those animals will still eventually die.

You haven't prevented death, because that's impossible. All you have done is remove one animal from a farm, which will be imminently replaced with another animal, with zero net impact on the husbandry industry. So the only real achievement is to make the activists feel good for a while.

Does It Scale?

When considering any proposed solution to the problems our civilisation and planet face, we have to explore whether they would scale up.

So we have to ask the question about what happens if this type of action were extended globally. Let's say the world's population rose up and decided to release **all** the animals from farms. This would seem to be like a return to a more natural system, with the sheep and pigs and cattle free to roam where they like, but the effect would surely be catastrophic for croplands and for the animals themselves.

Couldn't we set up large sanctuaries where the animals could live free, natural lives? Not if what's happening at Oostvaarders Plassen, a 56-square-kilometre nature reserve in the Netherlands, is anything to go by, as described by a local resident:

“This piece of land holds, amongst others, thousands of Red deer, Polish feral horses called Koniks and feral cattle. These populations aren't managed and there are no large predators. Every winter thousands of these animals die slowly of starvation. The stench of the carcasses even makes people gag in the cities down wind. Every well thinking person wants these populations managed, in other words, limit the population to a level the land can sustain. However, the green mafia objects to shooting the surplus and thus the gruesome torment continues year after year.”



We're back to the same problem. A so-called “nature reserve” without predators is not natural. Without predation or culling the animals are left to breed themselves to starvation – the only way that Nature can balance the equation. If we simply released all

the animals to roam free, or put them in enclosed reserves, it probably wouldn't work out too well for them.

Let's be clear: large grazing animals *have a place* in Nature's model, and one way or another it involves being killed and eaten, whether by predators, by humans, or to die by natural causes be consumed by biological decomposers. It all comes back to the fact that there's a life-and-death cycle.

And we keep coming back to the question: Is it better for an animal...

1. to have a good life and death on a farm,
2. to take their own chances in the wild (assuming we reintroduced wolves and other natural predators),
3. or to have no life at all?

Personally, I choose life – and death. But option 1 or option 2?

Eating Without Animals?

Let's say we went with option 2 and set aside the world's forests and grasslands, which cannot feasibly be used to grow crops for human consumption, to create massive nature reserves populated with all the large grazing animals we release from the farms. (Hopefully the remaining old and native breeds that farmers have carefully protected for generations would continue to survive, and should do better than modern breeds.)

Now we are left with systems of growing plant-based foods without large animals. That means trying to feed as much of the population as possible without manure (the best fertiliser there is). Only two options remain: petrochemically-derived fertilisers, and green manure/compost. Of those, only one is sustainable. We can discount anything

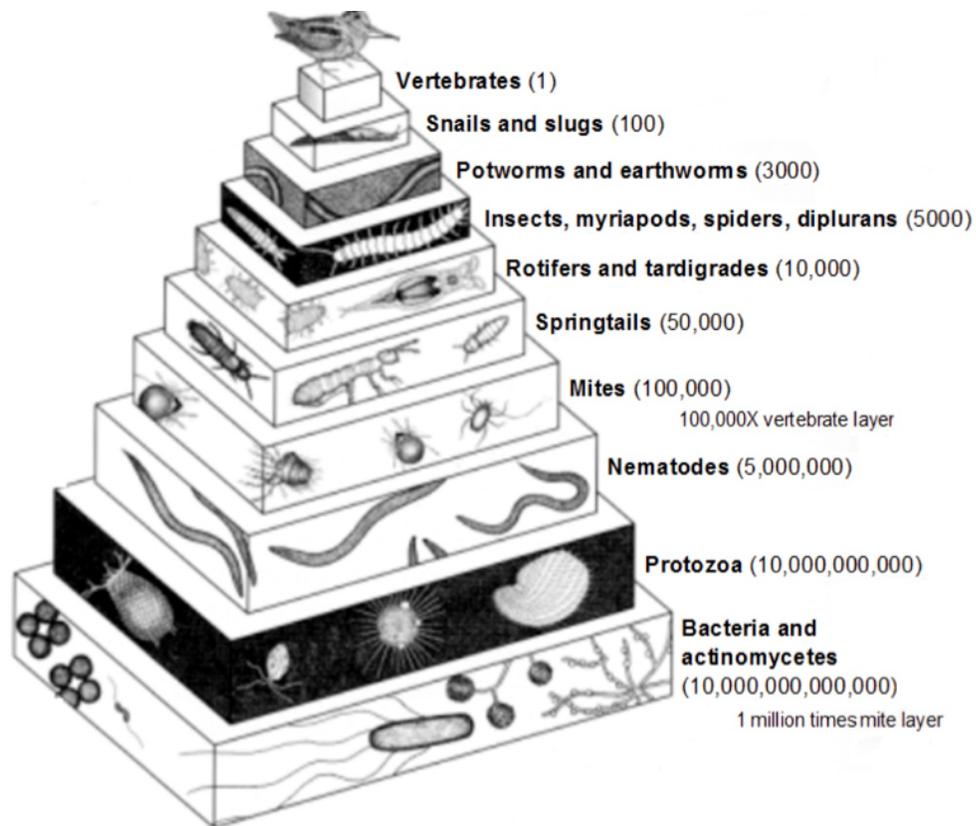
that relies on oil supplies, because the oil a) is not a natural ecosystem element and b) must run out at some point.

The problem with growing plants without manure is that the vegetable matter alternative is far less space-efficient. It is possible but, because we've manipulated and broken Nature's plan, we're left paddling against the flow.

The *veganic* model requires farmers actually to *grow their own manure*: either green manure (plants grown as a cover crop then ploughed back into the soil) or compost (crops destined to be cut down and then composted to replace essential organic matter and nutrients into the soil). Aside from the fact that this all means more work for the farmer, there are two significant problems with this approach.

First, real-world veganic growing typically necessitates that around two thirds of the land be dedicated to these supporting crops, equivalent to a three-year rotation where two out of three plots are left fallow. (I'm actually experimenting with this on my own one-acre test plot.) That means we must sacrifice two thirds of available arable land at any point in time, making it much harder to support a large population.

My second problem with veganic growing is more fundamental: that is is NOT animal-free! This graphic below shows the typical life supported by a square metre of healthy land.



If everything from the nematodes upwards are animals, the soil in our fields or pastures can support millions of times more animal life than whatever roams on its surface. And any study of recent soil science will reveal that all this life has a part to play in soil health and thereby our ability to grow food crops in it.

So a “veganic” farmer indirectly employs a multitude of billions of small animals. Without those animals to build soil, to pollinate plants, and to take out pests, we would have no crops. So by removing the ruminants and hogs, all they are achieving is slashing their ability to produce food on any given area of land by over 50%.

But with an integrated system, where large animals occupy their natural place, a huge amount more work is provided just by the beasts going about their daily lives. They will prune, weed, support irrigation, and of course fertilise and build soil with their urine and

manure, even help [sequester atmospheric carbon](#), all the while creating vital, delicious, and nutritious meat that can help feed us when the animal has lived out its life.

The Real Crime

So I don't see removing large animals from the food chain as in any way natural, helpful, or even ethical. Yes, we can hide them away in their own areas of semi-wilderness, but they and we will all be the poorer from it. And we could inadvertently be supporting a worse crime against Nature in the process.

The worst crime inflicted against the animal kingdom by man is not the meat industry. *It is industrial agriculture.*

According to [this article](#), "*Ordering the vegetarian meal? There's more animal blood on your hands*"

Published figures suggest that, in Australia, producing wheat and other grains results in:

- at least 25 times more sentient animals being killed per kilogram of useable protein
- more environmental damage, and
- a great deal more animal cruelty than does farming red meat.

How did we get into this mess? We applied Enlightenment thinking to the natural world and thought we could feed ourselves by simplifying, standardising, and mechanising production. Instead of complex, unfathomably interconnected systems, humans thought they saw an opportunity to get more and more yield with less and less effort, using our machines and industrial processes. (In reality, though, large monocultures *yield less* in terms of nutrition and profit than smaller-scale, biologically-rich, organic polycultures.)

So we burned the forests, tore down the hedgerows and ripped up the trees to make large fields that giant machines could work. We took the factories that had made

explosives in wartime and saw an opportunity to create artificial nitrogen-based fertilisers at low cost. We have not been farming, we've just been mining the soil that Nature had spent thousands of years building up. [The soil is nearly gone](#), and when it goes, so will we.

Every hedgerow that is torn down means the destruction of habitat for birds, small mammals, and insects (all of which have a place in Nature's great scheme, and many of which qualify as "sentient beings").

Every pass of the plough or farrow can destroy the [earthworms](#), moles, mice, fungal networks, and host of small organisms that generate healthy, living soil.

Every application of herbicide, fungicide, or insecticide can kill a host of other life forms, who all have roles in the great web of life, leaving a local environment less resilient and more susceptible to pests or diseases.

And can we begin to imagine how many mice, voles, and rats are poisoned each year to protect grain harvests?

So industrial-scale agriculture directly kills huge numbers of animals and creates bio-deserts that are incapable of supporting much life at all. Comparing an average crop field to a meadow grazed by cattle or sheep is like the difference between night and day. (Go out into the countryside and see for yourself how many animals you can spot in each environment.)

But it isn't an either-or choice. We no longer have to be tied to the reductionist approach that says *this field is a corn field*, or *that farm is a dairy farm*.

The reality we are waking up to is that the more complex a growing system is, the more *productive* it is, the more *resilient* it is, and the more *profitable* it is!

Combining crops *with* animal grazing, following as closely as possible to Nature's model, take more full advantage of the winning cycle of Nature, where every element is

connected to countless others through bonds we can only begin to understand. And these more natural agriculture models support countless more lives than the industrial field bio-deserts!

So if you are somebody who *really cares about all animals*, forget about breaking into small farms. We all need to work together to rid the world of industrial-scale agriculture.

Even buying organic vegetables from your local supermarket or farmer's market *could* be causing significantly more loss of life than eating meat! Industrial crops are massively violent! Of course, just like those of us who eat meat, we're insulated from seeing how our organic cauliflower kills animals by so many layers of logistics.

What should we do? Ideally, buy our food from sustainable small farms that practice permaculture. Even better, grow what you can yourself. Consider getting hold of whatever land you can, and make that piece of land a productive biological paradise.

I can't see governments and trans-global corporations voluntarily changing the system that currently favours the biggest producers anytime soon. This is something we have to do.