



Alton Sustainable Eating

Healthy Food, Healthy Planet



Regenerative Farming – fact or fiction, the jury’s out!

By Dee Panes, ACAN’s consultant on Sustainable Eating

What we do know is that emissions from food and farming – in particular livestock farming, are the 3rd highest source of [greenhouse gas emissions in East Hampshire](#)

Everyone agrees that our soils have become seriously depleted of nutrients. Back in 2017 Michael Gove warned “[The UK is 30 to 40 years away from the fundamental eradication of soil fertility](#)”.

The controversy lies in what to do about it. Regenerative farming, or Holistic Management, as promoted in the film “[Kiss the Ground](#)” suggests that the way to revitalise our soils should include planned grazing by livestock, but there are many who disagree.

So what is Holistic Management?

It’s a method designed to re-enact the movements of the prehistoric herds that once nurtured global grasslands with their manure deposits and hoof action. It is an idea popularised by a chap named Allan Savory. His views of which have been touted by many as the saving grace for dealing with the world’s problems with carbon capture. Savory is a Zimbabwean born livestock farmer and he popularised the idea of Holistic management. An idea that by mimicking the rotational patterns of wild grazers and intensively grazing large numbers of animals we can reverse desertification, increase the health of soils, and sequester carbon. Savory boldly claims that if we took half of the world’s grasslands, we could absorb enough carbon to return the world’s atmosphere to pre-industrial levels. Such claims have been popular, and the concept still excites some people today.

So, what does the science say?

Well, what is agreed is that grazing animals can sequester carbon back into the soil however, the science contradicts the claims made by Allan Savory.

An extensive and detailed two-year review by the Food Climate Research Network (FCRN) looking at over 300 sources and conducted by an international team of researchers, including those from some highly respected agricultural institutions in the world, evaluated the claims made by advocates of holistic management. The piece of research entitled “[Grazed and Confused](#)” discovered that although certain grazing managements can sequester carbon, at best, this can only offset 20% - 60% of the emissions that will be produced by grazing animals. Meaning that there will still be a significant surplus making it impossible for Savory’s claims to be true.

And Savory does not consider the far more damaging methane gas emitted by ruminants, especially cattle, which cannot be sequestered in the soil at all.

Not to mention that it is estimated that only 1g of protein, per person, per day, comes from solely grass-fed animals - compared to 26g of protein, per person, per day that comes from all other systems of land animal farming. And yet 26% of the earth's terrestrial land surface is already taken up by livestock grazing systems meaning that it is simply not possible for people to consume animal products at the same rate we are now, with the resources we have available.

Furthermore, after a few decades the soil reaches soil carbon equilibrium, and the soil cannot sequester any more carbon. At which point, none of the emissions from the animals would be offset. Then what?

1. Farmers would either have to start grazing on more land and increase the land used for animal farming or,
2. Stop the farming.

This would therefore mean the claims by Savory are not only untrue, but they are also not an effective short term or long-term strategy for dealing with the problem either.

The Project Drawdown Report:

The "Kiss the Ground" documentary cited the "Managed grazing" solution in the [Project Drawdown](#), but failed to mention that shifting to a [diet that favours calories from plants](#) is 4 times as powerful in its carbon capture management potential, compared to shifting to managed livestock grazing.

The Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences & Their Perspective of Holistic Management

The above university analysed the 11 studies that Allan Savory displayed on his website at the time of publication many of which did not hold up to scrutiny and were at best anecdotal and the reported effects outlined in others were reported to be small. Somewhat of a stark contrast in comparison to the grandiose claims made by Savory.

Several years later no review study has established that holistic management can achieve the claims made by Savory let alone come close to matching the significant environmental benefits of rewilding and regenerative veganic agriculture. Both of which not only improve biodiversity but can effectively reduce atmospheric carbon levels.

The International Journal of Biodiversity also have refuted the claims made by the Savory Institute and stated, "Leading range scientists have refuted the system and have indicated that its adoption by land management agencies is based on these anecdotes and unproven principles rather than scientific evidence."

What can we conclude?

If the intention of the holistic management approach is about mimicking nature, then the best thing to do would be to return the land, as much as possible to nature?

References:

1. Documentary - Kiss The Ground: Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/81321999>
2. Allan Savory - <https://savory.global/>
3. FCRN Report - Grazed & Confused - <http://tinyurl.com/3zrhx4n9>
Holistic management – a critical review of Allan Savory's grazing method
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4. Drawdown The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming - www.drawdown.org/the-book
5. Holistic Management: Misinformation on the Science of Grazed Ecosystems - hindawi.com/journals/ijbd/2014/163431/