

How Regeneration and Rewilding Can Tackle Disease and Save Our Children's Future

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Opinion

Out of recent Covid times, one thing we have learned is that the wellbeing of people, animals and the planet are interconnected. A concept that has been increasingly recognised in enlightened policy circles is that there is 'One health, one welfare'. That the health of people relies on the wellbeing of animals and a thriving environment. At its core is the realization that protecting people means protecting animals too. Whilst Covid-19 has been widely linked to the ill-treatment of wildlife, a source of past and future pandemics is industrial animal agriculture, or factory farming. For Millennia, farming worked in harmony with nature. However, one human lifetime ago, things changed dramatically: farming became dominated by industrial agriculture-factory farming. Farmed animals were separated from the land, put into darkened sheds, where they were caged, crammed and confined. Crops started to be grown in monocultures using artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides. Nature was swept away. Half a century on and we are starting to realize how that shift has serious unintended consequences. How the future depends on us making peace with nature. Soils are now ebbing away so fast that they could be useless or gone in a lifetime. According to the UN, if we carry on as we are, there could be just sixty harvests left in the world's soils. And then what? No soil, no food, game over.

In summary, industrial agriculture is a major driver of soil degradation, of deforestation and wildlife declines. It is the biggest

cause of animal cruelty on the planet. And more recently, it has become recognised as a serious pandemic risk too: factory farms creating the perfect breeding ground for new and dangerous strains of disease. Think of Swine flu and now the highly pathogenic strain of bird flu that is decimating wildlife, whether with feathers, flippers or four legs. Even humans have succumbed. And scientists warn that we are just mutations away from Avian Influenza becoming as infectious amongst humans as seasonal flu. Yet despite the massive impact, the intensification of agriculture goes on. Sustainable intensification is a myth. And a dangerous one. If I had to pick fault with the latest, most urgent and most brilliant IPCC warning, it would be the suggestion that anything good can come from 'sustainable intensification' of agriculture. By intensifying animal agriculture, we have made it anything but sustainable. Far from sparing land for nature, the reality of intensive farming is that farmland continues to expand, encroaching on the world's last remaining wild lands.

Vast acreages of precious arable land have to be devoted to growing feed for confined farmed animals. Globally, 40 per cent of our entire grain harvest is fed to industrially reared animals. If fed directly to people, it could sustain an extra four billion of us. Yet, as animal 'feed', much of the food value is lost, in terms of both calories and protein. How to change is increasingly seen as reconnecting food production and nature through restorative, regenerative, agroecological farming combined with more balanced diets. Eating more plants and less and better meat from nature-friendly farms where, as sentient beings,

animals can move freely and experience the joy of life. Where they can be mixed in rotation with crops grown using natural predators and disease control instead of chemicals and drugs. Manure fertilizes the ground, turning dirt into soil. The big question is, how do we get there, and fast? The answer lies in us all playing our part: governments and the EU, business, finance, the UN and civil society working in partnership to transform the food system.

It lies in governments creating policy environments for change, using directives, incentives and subsidies to steer food and farming away from cages and confinement toward this new animal and nature-friendly era. The opportunities for greening food production are enormous - take subsidies: globally, governments provide \$700 billion a year in farm subsidies, more than \$1m per minute, much of which currently drives industrial farming, the climate crisis and destruction of wildlife. That money could be far better spent redirecting it toward regenerative farming and reducing demand for meat. It lies in food companies setting measurable targets for the reduction of animal-sourced foods, shunning those from the factory

farm altogether. Cage-free commitments are a key prerequisite to humane and sustainable food. It lies in the financial sector ensuring that funding is only available to support the transition toward welfare-friendly and nature-positive practices. Greening food production and managing demand for animal-sourced foods are crucial for meeting the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda. Leadership is therefore needed at the highest level through an overarching UN Global Agreement to transform food systems.

Such an agreement should recognize food's central role in the success of existing conventions, not least on climate and biodiversity. One that moves agriculture away from factory farming and sees animal welfare as an essential element of sustainable food systems and thereby a future for all. In short, we need to seize the moment to move urgently toward a Global Agreement to end factory farming. To reset our food system toward farming with nature, not against her. For all our sakes, for millennia to come. Of one thing we can be certain: the future for our children depends on it.

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