

Opportunities for Combining Small Scale and Sustainability in Farming

Karl North

Owner/Operator of Northland Sheep Dairy
Marathon, New York

In agriculture, small scale and sustainability are good bedfellows - arguably essential ones. My objective is to explore some of the opportunities that affinity affords, particularly in regard to the role of livestock. The rationale is the urgency of progressing toward an alternative to an agriculture that - driven by an economic system that values life only for its contribution to making money - relentlessly depletes agroecosystems of what farming ultimately needs for survival: soil, contaminant-free water, forests, climatic stability, and - above all - species.

Current fashion is for an "alternative agriculture" focused on value-added, direct-marketing, and exotic products. Inasmuch as its goal is to exploit niches, this alternative promises little economic relief to the majority of farmers selling into commodity markets now increasingly under monopoly control, for niches are by definition but a small part of the system.

And this alternative fails to directly address many issues of ecological sustainability. Given the ever-increasing concentration of market power in the economy, there appears little chance of major change until accumulating negative social and environmental impacts generate the requisite political will to manage the economy according to different priorities. Meanwhile, however, niche exploitation does offer a breathing space, sheltered from

the predatory market forces shaping commodity farming to test, refine, and slowly propagate sustainable practices until such time as the political will emerges.

Possibly the most effective first step in the restoration of sustainability is the re-integration of ruminant livestock with grain, vegetable, and fruit farming. Self-fed from permanent hay/pasture as they were originally designed, grazers like sheep and cattle are the fastest solar-powered soil-building tool farmers have. The savings possible with such management versus input-heavy systems permit small scale and the product diversity (rather than quantity) that is most effective in direct marketing. Small scale in turn allows time for processing and retailing, which in turn raises profits per product unit, which allows smaller scale, which frees up time for the intensive focus on holistic agroecosystem design and management need in sustainable systems.

Integrating animals and plants opens opportunities for pest control in both, via system design rather than purchased inputs. Further increasing animal and plant diversity increases the potential for adopting sustainable practices, and it is more feasible the smaller the scale.