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Don't ignore dietary shifts

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Talking about farming and conservation without discussing dietary shifts is to ignore the elephant (or your megaherbivore of choice) in the room.

The BES's new report *Regenerative Agriculture in the UK: An Ecological Perspective* is a valuable assessment of regenerative agriculture's environmental and production consequences. Yet, we feel that to explicitly avoid discussion of dietary change is to present an incomplete perspective. While the report highlights ecological gains when regenerative practices are compared with conventional approaches, the biodiversity crisis requires more radical action concerning agriculture and the food system. Broader changes, including shifts in human diets, are central to achieving meaningful nature recovery.

The 2021 *National Food Strategy*¹ report, commissioned but largely ignored by the previous Government, suggested that reducing meat consumption could free up large areas of land, making it available for ecosystem restoration and biodiversity protection. Dietary shifts are already in play, whether designed by policy (Denmark has developed an action plan for plant-based food innovation) or otherwise (UK consumption of sheep meat declined by ~30% between 2007 and 2022). If we are to make land available for nature recovery, while minimising impacts on food security and on other nations – i.e., avoiding the offshoring of food production –

it follows that we must consider reducing the consumption of foods which have the most negative environmental footprint. This point is more salient for regenerative agriculture if it constrains the amount of food produced in the UK (although, as the BES report points out, the evidence for yield penalties is mixed and limited).

Fundamentally, regenerative agriculture, while aiming to minimise impacts on the environment, is still agriculture. Even the most nature-friendly farming systems only support a subset of species; many others, including some of the most threatened, depend on habitats that can't easily be created or restored on land managed for agriculture. We must make space where nature recovery is the primary purpose of land use, not merely a cherry-on-top of otherwise extractive systems. Dietary shifts are key here: free up land in a move away from agriculture to focus on nature. If we're serious about reversing biodiversity loss, such land cannot be the exception; it must be a deliberate part of land use planning. This context is particularly important given DEFRA's current development of a Land Use Framework, albeit only for England. The consultation document for this framework also avoids mention

of dietary change and instead focuses on maintaining a large percentage of currently farmed land for agriculture. Regenerative agriculture could have a valuable role to play in this case, and the BES report provides a strong foundation for a better understanding and adoption into agricultural policy. But, explicitly incorporating the role of dietary change in freeing up land primarily for nature would provide a more joined-up, evidence-based, and likely effective, approach to food, farming, climate, and nature recovery in the UK.

¹Dimbleby, H., 2021. National Food Strategy: The Plan.

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