# Opinion: Rewilding Farms is Extraordinarily Shortsighted

I recently heard of an organization that buys cattle ranges to convert them back to natural prairies, and it got me thinking; That is extremely shortsighted in terms of global biodiversity and ecological function. In theory it is an amazing idea, take the non-native cattle out of the prairie and return the Bison. More wildlife will follow, and just like that you are helping to restore nature. However, whether you support cattle farming or not, beef consumption is not going down anytime soon. So now in order to make up for the loss of cattle production on those former ranches one of two things need to happen. #1 being we will clear more natural lands in the U.S to either directly graze cattle on, or to use those now cleared lands to grow feed and forage to feed extra cattle now in a feedlot. Or #2, being we need to import more beef from another country, where the increase in demand will inevitably have the same environmental consequences. Whilst restoring the Great Plains to a “completely original” state that organization is  now causing more of the Amazon Rainforest to be cut down for cattle production, because at the end of the day Americans still eat tonnes and tonnes of beef. So that’s where I introduce the second opinion of this article; When it comes to rewilding agricultural lands, we need to settle for as close to “original” as possible without losing production. If we completely kick the agriculture off the land we are simply moving the clearing of nature to somewhere else, much like the solution some politicians suggest for handling homelessness. Simply move them to another town. It does not actually fix the problem of homelessness, rather just puts it out of view for the currently affected town. Yet the ripple effect of the homelessness, or in our case the loss of agricultural/ecological, can be felt in that original town.

It is not just cattle ranches. I also read an article of an old farm being re-forested in NJ, and the idea of how shortsighted this is continues. ***If*** this was an old Tomato farm, now as a result of losing 100 acres of tomatoe production, NJ needs to import that many tomatoes to satisfy its market. Now 100 acres are cleared somewhere else to grow the tomatoes NJ stopped growing, and although that is probably not perfectly accurate I think it gets the idea across. They simply move the loss of wild lands somewhere else.

Rewilding farms is simply not the solution to restoring global biodiversity to its former glory, as we are consuming more food every year as a global population.

We need to not only make our farms more ecologically friendly and conducive to biodiversity, but also produce more food per acre. That way we can not only slow down, or even stop, the clearing of natural lands everywhere, but also feed our growing population without sacrificing biodiversity.

How do you do that? I am sure everyone has different opinions, but here are my ideas and opinions on how to do this

- Make grazing more conducive for biodiversity. Over 650 million acres of land are grazed primarily by cattle in the U.S. Cattle grazing can be incredibly beneficial for the land (as our great historically adapted with disturbance via Bison and fire), or incredibly detrimental (catttle for graze the same as bison and need to be managed). Different grazing methods such as AMP grazing and certification of “Bird Friendly” grazing by organizations such as The Audobon Society are also very interesting solutions in my opinion. Many ranchers are already great stewards of the land, and should be appreciated as such!
- More Hedgerows! Hedgerows take up very little space, often on field edges, but can harbor tons of biodiversity! As opposed to leaving unprotected field edges bare, and more prone to erosion, plantingings of hedgerows could be a key part of increasing agricultural biodiversity without losing production.
- Tillage reduction. In a solely agricultural sense tillage can be either very beneficial or very detrimental, it all depends on the conditions and frequency upon which it is done. I wrote an article on that! However environmentally it gets a lot more dicey. In terms of wildlife, tillage is almost always detrimental. I am sure there are exceptions and examples of species that benefit from the aftermath of tillage, but most do not. I can personally attest to the fact that at least some frog species hibernate underground, as I almost chopped one up preparing a garden bed in spring one year. The little fellow survived the initial bed tillage, but I admittedly don’t know what happened to him as a result of getting kicked out of hibernation early. Thankfully  if we delay tillage until these non-permanent residents of the soil are done hibernating it will solve that issue. About 70% of the world's Bees are ground nesters however, and tillage completely destroys their habitat.  Then there is the CO2 released from the soil as a result of tillage, it is  hard to find an exact answer, but nonetheless it is a lot. Tonnes upon tonnes upon tonnes, in the millions without a doubt.  I recommend researching that one more on your own if

you are interested because I don't want to give out the wrong precise information on accident. It is also worth noting the Rodale Institute has proved you can increase the soil carbon level with tillage, but you have to be intentional about it as that is usually not what happens.

To sum it up, we need to eat. Simply getting rid of whole farms in the name of ecosystem conservation does nothing in the grand scheme of things, because now the Amazon Rainforest is being cut down to supply our beef and soybeans. If we completely replant all the areas lost in the Amazon the deforestation will simply move somewhere else, because we still need food. We need to stop further deforestation, and maximize production on the lands we do use whilst figuring out how to make them as ecologically friendly as possible. Because if we lose production on our agricultural lands to please environmentalists we will simply just need to clear more land to make up for it. I recommend the Rodale Institute and their many free, and paid for, classes for learning more on how this is possible! Below are some other organizations I recommend checking out as well. Thank you for reading, and if you have comments or questions please let me know!

Mason Cain