

MEAT ON TRIAL: DEFAULT HUNTING

FEDERICO FILIPPI makes a provocative case.

As someone who works on a vegetarian organic farm, I have had first hand exposure to the challenges of a meat free system. While I respect and adhere to the slaughter free ethos of my hosts, renouncing meat from “default livestock”¹ is not the most efficient way to make the most of the land, nor is it the most environmentally friendly.

It is not the purpose of this short contribution to the debate to go over the virtues of default livestock. Rather, as my thoughts turn to the hundreds of wood pigeons who threaten my organic brassica, spinach and pea crops, I suggest that, as well as meat from default livestock, an ecologically sound agricultural system should also produce default meat from the wild. This is a topic rarely discussed in alternative agriculture circles. Despite widespread interest in foraging, there is a distinct lack of interest in, or even acknowledgment of, pest control, shooting and hunting. This is perhaps because many perceive hunting as cruel and elitist. Be that as it may, pest control is an inescapable issue that, as the pigeons descend on my crops, needs to be addressed by anyone wishing to live off the land.

The Biodiversity Paradox

Readers of *The Land*, and those involved in alternative agriculture, be it organic, biodynamic, permaculture or veganic, presumably share a desire to move away from industrial agriculture and towards ecological and sustainable land management, with thriving biodiversity at its heart. A motivation to move away from the cruelty of the factory farm, and from the indiscriminate agrochemical extermination of insects and the creatures depending on them is universal in our broad movement.

However, the push towards stockless agriculture, meat free diets and veganism is inherently problematic and, arguably, a step in the wrong direction. This is because it leads to a paradox: the more self-sustaining, organic (or equivalent) and biodiverse an agricultural system is, the greater the need to manage pests and the greater the opportunities to shoot and hunt. A system driven by biology and living systems, rather than by agrochemicals and factories, will involve complex inevitable relationships with wild plants and animals, which thrive when chemicals and monocultures are abandoned. More life means more death too. A thriving, biodiverse farm will have more living, and dying, creatures, from insects to birds and mammals. Human intervention, whether in the form of mouse traps, crop netting, shotguns or the introduction of predators (e.g. ducks introduced to fields to eat slugs), will involve exclusion, predation and, at times, killing.

Apart from the inevitable impact of any kind of cultivation, which in biologically (as opposed to chemically) fertile soils will involve killing masses of insects and other soil life, including mice and moles, pest control becomes particularly challenging as biodiversity increases and land management diversifies. The threats from grey squirrels, parakeets and deer to agroforestry and orchards, or from foxes to free ranging poultry, present real

issues for both the veganic and the mixed farmer. The move away from industrial monoculture creates opportunities and habitats for wild animals that thrive in hedges, copses, meadows and mixed cropping systems.

Default Wild Meat

The defining feature of “default meat” is the fact that it is a byproduct of an agricultural system, rather than its primary goal. It is meat from animals raised for other purposes, such as traction, dairy and eggs, from animals that are fed from plants inedible for humans, such as grass; and from waste products of agriculture, food manufacturing and human consumption. There is no logical reason not to include meat from wild animals, pest or otherwise, into the default meat mix.

Meat from the edible pests of agriculture, such as pigeons, rabbits and deer, requires no extra land, feed or resources. It is a free byproduct of agriculture. Incorporating this meat into the human diet is inherently sustainable, and is a prudent way of maximising available resources. The vegan or vegetarian may justify eschewing the potential addition to their diet a rabbit might provide on personal ethical grounds. They may not, however, do so on environmental or sustainability grounds.

Vegans and animal rights activists have advocated contraceptive control, rather than culling, to manage UK deer populations and the introduction of wolves to control wild boar populations in Spain.^{2,3} The examples show that their key concern is not sustainable food production but a taboo against humans engaging in hunting. Animal welfare cannot be the main concern either, as it is hard to imagine a deer benefiting from infertility, or a wild boar from being killed by a pack of wolves rather than by a human hunter.

The overall contribution of wild meat to the British diet, even in a hypothetical post agrochemical future, would be limited: an addition and enrichment, rather than a crucial component. Nonetheless, the further we move towards such a future, the greater the opportunity for such enrichment. There is a distinct lack of predators in Britain and an abundance of introduced non-native species, like edible grey squirrels and muntjacs. The dietary opportunities presented by non-native pest control is even more evident in countries like Australia, where rabbits and feral pigs, goats and other former European domesticates have spread across the country. In Britain, it would be very difficult to estimate what that dietary contribution per capita would look like, especially in our hypothetical post agrochemical future. What is clear is that the amount of wild default meat available would be significant. There are currently an estimated 5.4 million breeding pairs of wood pigeon, 37.5m rabbits, and 2.5m grey squirrels in the UK.^{4,5,6} An estimated 350,000 deer are culled annually to keep the 2.0m population stable.⁷

Gamekeeping, on the other hand, relies on very different conditions and its products cannot be considered “default meat”. Based on inefficient grain fed rearing of birds like pheasants and partridges, it is effectively a seasonal luxury that

can only take place in a context of grain abundance and high productivity. Nonetheless gamekeeping in the right conditions can arguably be sustainable, albeit with grey areas and caveats. Avoidable problems with British shoots include the prevalence of large, commercial shoots with bird days exceeding 100; intensive chick and poul rearing; industrial bird feed and overmedication, and the reckless elimination of predators by gamekeepers.

to advocates of ecological approaches to land management. Unpalatable parts of hunted carcasses, such as venison entrails, were traditionally fed to hunting dogs, as were fallen stock. Far from absurdity of “vegan dog food” and urban dog grooming, hunting can allow those fortunate enough to live in the countryside to connect with their canine companion by sharing in its favourite activity.



Agnes Miller Parker

Default Hunting

Like farming and shepherding, shooting and hunting can be done well or badly. It can be sustainable or unsustainable. The wild boar was hunted to extinction in the UK in the 16th century. Recently reintroduced, it is thriving and can be hunted in the Forest of Dean. A clear boundary is needed between protecting crops and maximising wild meat harvests on one hand, and over-culling or extermination on the other. Clear and fair regulation of hunting seasons and pest control, based on ecological facts and field surveys, rather than sentimentality, is essential.

Hunting ought to differentiate between the species, which needs to be protected, and the individual animal, which can be killed and eaten. In many ‘hunter gatherer’ cultures, while the species is sacred and revered, the individual animal is sacrificed. The Inuit, who traditionally depended entirely on their Arctic prey, used to ritually put a little fresh water in the mouth of a killed seal or whale, so that “it, and all other seals and whales, would know that the hunter respected the willingness of the hunted to be killed and eaten”.⁸ There is a clear ecological function underpinning this belief, as “by pursuing the individual and worshipping the species, the hunter guarantees the eternal recurrence of his prey”.⁹

There is a reason for the human alliance and friendship with the dog, our oldest domesticated animal, at least in Europe.¹⁰ The two have long worked together for the purpose of hunting. After the advent of agriculture, the dog also took on the role of protecting human settlements and their livestock. Pest control and hunting with the aid of the dog, as opposed to the use of poison, fencing and indiscriminate trapping, should appeal

Vegan Utopias

“Liberating” animals from human intervention could increase industrial monoculture. Growing chemically dependent arable crops involves annual obliteration of insects, but requires neither animal husbandry nor any direct interactions with the few remaining bird and mammal ‘pest’ species. Lovelock’s vision of rigid separation between intensively farmed land and land abandoned to Gaia may be the logical consequence of veganism.¹¹ “Vegan Organic”, whilst clearly workable on individual farms such as Iain Tolhurst’s¹², makes little overall sense were organic farming to be the global norm. Apart from difficulties with organic waste and fertility management, and the abandonment of farmland unsuited to arable farming, pest control issues could be addressed only by separation, rather than by integration and coexistence. Even if upscaling vegan organic were feasible, it would not be as ecologically efficient as a system that embraced default meat, both livestock and wild. As with default domesticated meat, the argument against default wild meat can only be one of ethics, culture or taste: there is no environmental or sustainability argument against it.

1 S. Fairlie 2010 *Meat – A Benign Extravagance*

2 www.veganlifemag.com/deer-under-attack/

3 <https://tinyurl.com/indy-boar>

4 <https://tinyurl.com/rspb-pigeon>

5 <https://tinyurl.com/gwct-rabbit>

6 <https://tinyurl.com/gwct-squirrel>

7 <https://tinyurl.com/cfile-deer>

8 H. Brody 2000 *The Other Side of Eden* p.256.

9 R. Scruton 1996 *Animal Rights and Wrongs* p.152.

10 M. Mazoyer & L. Roudart 2006 *A History of World Agriculture* p.78

11 J. Lovelock 2006 *The Revenge of Gaia*

12 www.tolhurstorganic.co.uk