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Lots of cows = lots of problems

INTERVIEW: ALICE BAUMANN

If cows are allowed to live in harmony with nature, man benefits. The WWF Switzerland is campaigning for the sustainable production of milk and beef.

We eat the flesh of the cow, drink its milk and process its hide to make leather. The cow eats grass. Can it do this without damaging our landscape?

Walter Vetterli: There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the fact that cows graze. The problem lies in the intensification of agriculture. In the attempt to garner even more from Nature, Man fertilises fields, breeds cattle to produce high-yield cows, sometimes even sprays herbicide and feeds cattle additives for strength. The result is too many animals for the available land, and husbandry that is no longer in tune with natural conditions. This so-called over-grazing of arable land is causing problems. Cows evacuate what they have eaten, and their manure and dung can result in water pollution.

So does the cow graze too often and ingest too much grass in one spot?

Partly. If the number of cows per unit of land is too high, meadows are over-grazed. The vegetation changes, and instead of being extensive and rich in variety, the meadow becomes intensive and poor in variety. If farmers spread manure from the



Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti

Without cows our diet would be much less varied. The preparation of cheese calls for brawn as well as brains.

byre on the meadows, the same thing happens. Since Nature exists in a dynamic equilibrium, every action has an ecological impact.

What other damage does the cow cause?

High-yield cows, i.e. animals which have been specially bred and "optimised" for yield, are larger, heavier and hungrier than the norm. They eat more, cause damage through their tread, and produce a great deal of excrement. Indigenous breeds like the black Fribourg cow were well-adapted to their terrain; unfortunately their productivity was regarded as too low and they have been replaced by high-yield cows.

Does the WWF believe there are too many cows here?


Yes, but our criticism is directed at livestock in general rather than just cows. The current number of animals is impeding sustainable production. This is because agriculture must perform another function besides food production. It must, for example, give Nature some breathing space. The worst

example is the so-called pig belt in Eastern and Central Switzerland, which benefits neither Nature nor Man.

How much land does a cow need?

The rule of thumb is: 2.5 cows per hectare of grazing land in the best situation in the valley. This rule is also followed by bio-farmers. But in the foothills and the Alps the area of land per cow must be significantly larger. For anywhere above 900 meters, only 1.5 cows are recommended.

What would happen if there were no more grazing cows?

Under-use would not be a viable solution. If a meadow is not grazed, the land is taken over by forest. From a conservationist viewpoint this is undesirable, since it would lead to the disappearance of meadows and pasturelands rich in flora. So what we need to aim for is a reasonable level of use. For cultural and historical reasons it would be a disaster if the cow were to disappear. It is part of the national landscape of Switzerland. 

Walter Vetterli lives in Geneva, is 37 years old and has a degree in agricultural engineering from the Swiss Federal College of Technology, Zurich. He works for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) as a project manager for agriculture and land development.