

Is there a better future for UK agriculture



Cate Le Grice-Mack MBE MA

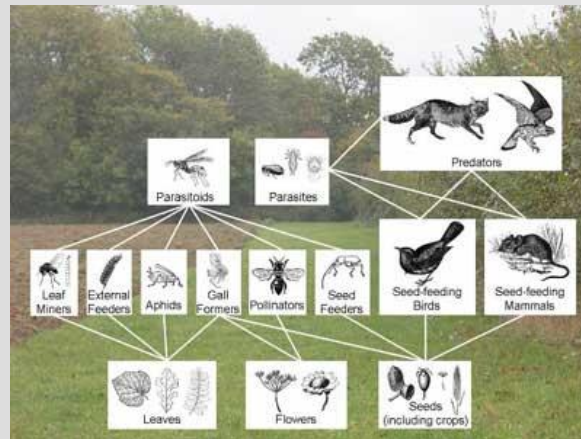
In brief

There is more to farming than a narrow industrial inputs – outputs model:

Farming is intimately bound up with landscape, biodiversity and quality of life

We need to think not only about how we produce enough food, but also at how we do it in a way that supports communities, improves fertility and biodiversity and therefore produces a secure future for all

Why I am here talking about farming: Norwood



My learning process 1

Field boundaries

Drainage issues and the importance of soil structure and use of so-called wastes

Yields

Breeds

Feeding systems

Multiple income streams for resilience when faced by FMD, bad weather conditions for cereal growing, cash flow issues

The learning process 2

The importance of husbandry skills in stock management

The effectiveness of many natural systems for health and disease control

Effect of commercial “economies of scale” on the food chain from farmer to consumer

- Reducing value of end product paid to the farmer
- Change from large number of small abattoirs to a few large scale ones
- Reducing power of farmers over prices paid for their products

Where UK farming is now

- Great divide in income levels between landowner farmers and tenants
 - Some appearing very affluent
- Falling farm returns “Just over half of cereal farms failed to make a positive income from farming...in 2013” Defra Farm business income report 2013/14

We are producing a shrinking proportion of our indigenous foodstuffs; over £2.2bn of dairy products (source Customs & Excise) imported each year including more than 100,000 tonnes of butter

Reality beneath the surface

Many farmers on low incomes working long hours, especially tenant and hill farmers

- Average age of farmers now 59 years
- Money lent for machinery but not for labour
- Farmers often under pressure of large debts for machinery
- Farmers required to use systems devised by those with very different management experience
- Lacking opportunities to up-skill, and usually without and good access to IT

National approach to land value

Land is largely valued for its development or long term investment value

Great pressure on many farmers to sell parcels of land to release working cash

The returns on working land as a tenant are nothing like the capital growth in value over the years.

- horticulture at 5-10 times the value of farm land
- housing at over 100 times the value

Post war changes in farming

Post war farming structure: drive towards cheaper food,

Until the late 1990s there were marked increases in crop yields per acre in parallel with increased specialisation

Pressure for monocultural systems

Pressure towards larger farm units

Emphasis on mechanised systems, whether feed for dairy cattle, silage making, pig feeding

Characterised by larger fields, loss of natural habitats and in-field trees, considerable woodland clearance until 1990s

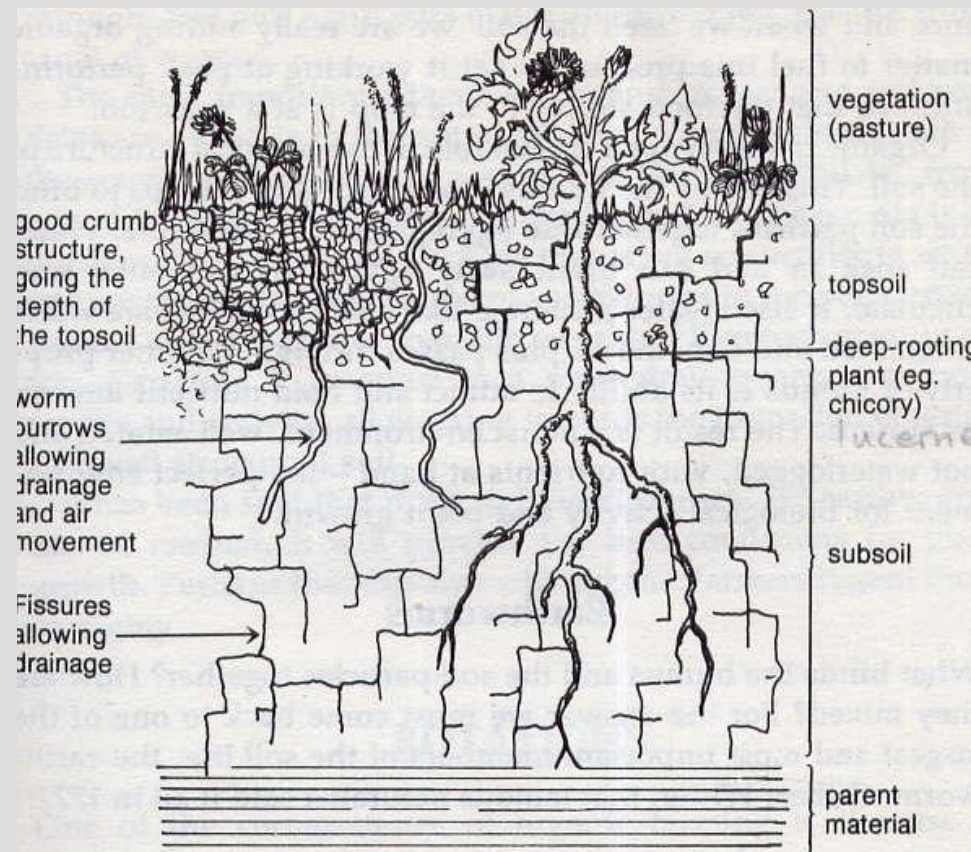
UK Soil degradation

“Around 18% of the organic matter present in arable topsoils in 1980 had been lost by 1995. One of the reasons for this was that grasslands were ploughed for arable use. Some experts consider that the amount of organic matter in some soils may now be reaching such low levels that crop production may not be sustainable in the long term.”

Parliamentary Postnote **July 2006** Number 265

“ Farmers are far more aware of the nutrient levels (N P and K) in their soils than they are about organic matter or soil structure”

Soil: the neglected basis of farming productivity and landscape enhancement



Profile of a living soil, showing good structure, root growth unrestricted by compaction or pans, and earthworm activity.

Our awareness of soils

We still are not learning from experience:

Archaeology in the Amazon basin reveals black earths of great productivity created and strengthened by communities

Historic desiccation from ancient Egypt and the Yemen to the American dust bowl is well recorded

Despite evidence of soil decline in the UK, we still rely on voluntary compliance and understanding on the part of farmers while pressure is still on to use soil-damaging systems

Government approach to farming: Where we are now

- Government focus on market forces, competitiveness and the growth agenda
- “Improving the productivity and competitiveness of food and farming businesses, while improving the environment is a priority for Defra. **Domestically a more competitive, profitable and resilient farming and food industry is needed.** As the UK economy recovers, this sector, like all others, needs to maximise its potential for sustainable **growth**, maintain and increase its chance of securing European and global trading opportunities, and meet society’s needs.” (Defra 2014)

Conflicting issues within the Defra/government approach

1. Defra focuses mainly upon using market mechanisms to stimulate farming resilience, and when they fail, occasional regulatory interventions (such as the Groceries Trade regulator)
2. Despite acknowledging the requirement to “improve the environment” they are still struggling to identify how to do it within a voluntary system for compliance
3. BUT also expecting greater sustainability:
“We also need a basic level of resilience against changing environmental conditions, price fluctuations, financial uncertainty and food availability”

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Within the market-led approach there are some beginnings of awareness of the need for a wider view of the products and impacts of farming:

Payments for Ecosystems Services Pilot

**CCRI (Countryside and Community Research Institute)
funded by Defra 2014**

“The aim of this project is the development of a PES scheme in the Cotswolds catchment area, engaging landowners and multiple beneficiaries around water quality and quantity, land management, energy production and landscape.”

In other words – putting a commercial value on some of the other outputs – positive and negative - of farming and land management

Weakness of the market led system

1. There is no true market for the wider products of farming such as:

Natural pest control through management of wildlife

Reduction in flood risk

Enhancement of soils

2. The importance of diverse farming skills in the wider enjoyment, appreciation and liveability of the countryside cannot be quantified:

Biodiversity enhancement

Environmental management

Rural community support and involvement

Health and leisure/tourism

Difficult conclusions...

Reliance upon the various markets, whether for food, land or fuel, will not deliver farming security and sustainable innovation

Our present approach to policy areas within government creates its own conflicts between different needs and expectations rather than reconciling them.

Some of the happiest and most sustainable farm businesses are those that add value to their products on farm, market directly to known customers, responding directly to customer expectations of farm management systems.