SOUTHERN CONE GRASSLANDS ALLIANCE YIELDS GREEN BEEF

"BIRD-FRIENDLY" BEEF IN THE MARKET

TELLING THE STORIES

BENEFITS, NOT RISKS

DIALOGUE FOR SUSTAINABLE BEEF PRODUCTION
A large scale project across southern South America helps to protect the grasslands’ ecosystems, by promoting sustainable cattle grazing practices. The scheme could avoid the extinction of many birds that migrate to the region’s Pampas and other wildlife.

Some of these migratory species begin their odyssey in the North American Tundra ending in the wintering sites of the Pampas, an area of grassland covering 100 million hectares in Southern South America. Also called the ‘Southern Cone’, this temperate/sub-humid grassland covers the entire territory of Uruguay, and parts of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. These grasslands are of global importance for biodiversity.

Yet this region has experienced important economic developments, particularly over the last century, driven by a growing cattle industry and the development of arable land for agriculture. During the last decade land use change from natural grasslands into cropping (particularly soybean) and forestry has been substantial. These activities have already replaced more than half of the original native grasslands.

As a result, cultural and traditional heritage underpinning the region’s identity has been affected. This has brought about substantial changes in the grasslands landscape, impacting biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides. These include clean water, habitats for wildlife, some of it serving as natural farm pest controllers, seed and genetic banks, resilience to climate change, and biomass for high quality meat.

**SOUTHERN CONE GRASSLANDS ALLIANCE YIELDS ‘GREEN’ BEEF**

In an effort to secure long term conservation of the Pampas grassland biodiversity, in 2006 BirdLife International created the Southern Cone Grasslands Alliance with its national partners Aves Uruguay, Aves Argentinas, SAVE Brasil and Guyra Paraguay1. This it set out to achieve through the implementation of a “responsible production” model for beef, supported by legal and policy frameworks.

As a first step the Alliance considered it essential to involve farmers in the dialogue to find options for a sustainable pattern of beef production while ensuring a profitable business. Its team members committed to finding solutions to ‘short term thinking’ from farmers who were choosing to adopt faster and higher-profit non-sustainable practices. They also endeavoured to break the paradigm of the need to intensify production to quickly maximise profits in order to overcome effects of high government-imposed land taxes, which increased their production costs.

The group’s coordinated actions of targeting different sectors of society like the beef industry and civil society was found to be a positive approach to promote the South Cone’s sustainable development. Governments recognized the value of and welcomed the NGOs who offered technically sound tools that helped them deliver their environment-related commitments; they also saw the Alliance’s work as major encouragement for partnering.

Thankfully farmers’ motivations lay not just in profit-making: many grassland farmers were receptive to guidance on how to improve their businesses and maintain their livelihoods – this paved the way to a fruitful collaboration. The producers envisioned being seen as champions for conservation, but were also assured they would not be left to deliver conservation action on their own.

In time the Alliance managed to win over the farmers as allies of the initiative. Its success derived from communicating the importance of long term planning, the natural capital native ecosystems provided and natural systems’ resilience to climate change. It also highlighted the benefits of greater independence and how developing environmental schemes might reward farmers engaged in environment protection within their lands.

To back up these arguments, the group’s conservation experts brought to the table a combination of academic research, traditional knowledge, development of best grassland management practices, and monitoring of grasslands and bird populations. All this contributed to a robust initiative.

**DIAGLOGUE FOR SUSTAINABLE BEEF PRODUCTION**

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**Benefit, Not Risks**

As a result, biodiversity considerations in particular have been incorporated into cattle ranching activities through main areas of continuous work. These include:

*Developing of fiscal incentives*: the Alliance worked with regional governments to develop an objective Indicator of Natural Grasslands Conservation (ICP). This is used to

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1 The Grassland Alliance was funded by the Aage V Jensen Charity Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS-NMBCA), U.S. Forest Service International Programs (USFS-IP) and Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS)
assess how particular farms have adopted biodiversity-friendly practices and helps determine whether they can qualify for rewards like tax relief schemes or payment for environmental services.

Each country is finding its own way to provide these economic benefits. In Argentina the government is passing a bill to reduce tax on farms that preserve natural grasslands. Meanwhile Paraguay is providing ecosystem service certificates to grassland farmers.

Creating market value: a Certification Protocol has also been agreed and established for the region to distinguish beef meat produced through sustainable grassland management. To qualify, farmers must keep at least 50% of their grasslands ‘in good condition’ i.e. supporting wildlife. Experts from the Alliance certify their products if they qualify. To build sustainability on this project the group is also training other players to issue the certification.

Demonstrating by experience: pilot sites and individual farms throughout the region have been tested to demonstrate that good grassland management practices can produce more meat as well as preserve natural resources, including biodiversity and important environmental services. The developed Guidelines for Best Practices for Grassland Farms have thus helped farmers improve conservation outcomes and profitability on their properties.

Social recognition: a final consequence of the project is that the Alliance gives official recognition and rewards farmers for good grassland management practices.

TELLING THE STORIES

Of course the Alliance team has faced challenges with this initiative, not least low recognition from farmers and society in general on the important values and benefits of natural grassland ecosystems. To counteract this, it set out to build strong communication, education, awareness and advocacy-related activities at various levels and these have been fundamental in achieving goals.

Its communication and advocacy approach (in a broad sense) includes not just regular electronic communication but also annual traditional ranchers’ gatherings in each of the four countries involved where they exchange best practices and join capacity building activities. On the other hand, the creation of an economic reward system (the fiscal incentives) for farmers that integrate the scheme required advocacy campaigns to governments.

The Alliance also created individual farmer and institutional memberships to facilitate contact and communication between members to provide them with materials and information. Additionally, the team organised certified beef tasting events as well as campaigns to promote healthy meat for consumers and to raise consumers’ awareness on the future of natural grasslands and its dependence on their beef consumption demands.

“BIRD-FRIENDLY” BEEF IN THE MARKET

In 2014 the first exports of Southern Cone Grassland ‘bird-friendly’ certified beef was exported to European markets. The Pampas is now embracing a new model of agricultural production as a compromise has been found to preserve vast portions of grassland areas through the beef certification system.

One can argue it has been a long process from inception to the availability of “green” beef on the market. But the complexity of a project that covers a large area, involves several countries and aims to promote changes in a well-established and lucrative activity should not be underestimated.

To achieve a truly transformational change towards sustainability, it is key to build a solid foundation like in the Pampas. Perhaps such a foundation can help save endangered wildlife and important services grassland ecosystems offer to society.

More information at:
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