Returning Grazers to the Land Seminar a Success

Land managers inspired to consider livestock as fundamental to ecological restoration.

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On October 13th 2017 the Sustainable Farming Association of MN’s Ecological Service Livestock Network hosted a symposium at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge at Bloomington, entitled “Returning the Grazers to the Land”. This session was for professional land managers and restoration ecologists to explore ideas around using livestock --goats, sheep and cattle-- to restore ecological functionality, create agro-ecological entrepreneurship and to reconnect people to the land.

After a Welcome by Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge the group of over 50 watched a presentation by Ecologist Steven Thomforde; A Brief Ecological History of the Land Around Us: Why Grazing Matters. Thomforde, raised on a farm that he still operates with his family, has taken a look at the historical record, coupled with his years of on-the-ground ecological restoration experience. He makes the case that our lands have reached an unprecedented level of ecological imbalance due to a catastrophic lack of herbivores on the landscape. “Afforestation”, he says, is the establishment of a forest or stand of trees in an area where there was no forest before. This includes much of the Midwest. The loss of biomass harvest by herbivores has short-circuited the most evolutionarily advanced vegetation on earth; grassland-savannah ecosystems.” You can see the presentation at the ESLN web page: http://www.sfa-mn.org/ecological-service-livestock-network

A roundtable discussion followed that delved into the practical matters around the use of livestock on public lands, including the ordinances, policies, contracting and public safety considerations. Panelists included Jake Langeslag of Goat Dispatch, Kyle Johnson of Diversity Landworks, Adam Robbins, Environmental Coordinator, City of St. Paul and Deb Pilger, Dir. of Environmental Mgmt., Mpls. Park & Recreation Board. Langeslag contracted with the City of St Paul on lands along Shepard Road and elsewhere while Johnson contracted with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board on two sites this past summer; the first time goats were used on MPRB land! These inner-city sites present logistical and regulatory challenges not encountered in more rural locations.

Pilger and Robbins were pleased with the results and hope to employ service livestock in the future. Pilger, who worked with Kyle to bring goats onto MPRB land said, “It was encouraging to see the interest in the use of goat as grazers in the urban environment and was very valuable to hear first-hand about the experiences land managers and goat companies have had with goats.” Participants from various municipalities peppered the panel with questions and seemed eager to figure out how to integrate livestock into their land management and ecological restoration projects. Comments from participants reflected this interest:

- Very enlightening. Large grazers have been lost from the greater landscape and I think we unfortunately overlook that in land management.
- The potential benefits are much clearer after seeing the methodology in action. It makes me more interested in pursuing this in the near future on a few of our management areas.
- I was intrigued about using goats in the past but this event really convinced me that now is the time to give it a try.
Also on the panel were Kelly Anderson, Livestock Specialist, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and Kent Solberg, Livestock & Grazing Specialist, Sustainable Farming Association. Anderson discussed how cattle and occasionally sheep and goats are employed on public lands in the prairie region of the state. Anderson noted that “By using livestock as a tool land managers are mimicking the ecological disturbance patterns that helped shape the prairie”. She also discussed how the Cropland Grazing Exchange web application helps to connect livestock producers who have grazing animals and land owners who wish to utilize livestock on their land. The Cropland Grazing Exchange can be found at www.mda.state.mn.us/cge.

Solberg reinforced Thomforde’s comments that as managers we can apply grazing as a management tool by adjusting frequency, intensity and duration. He also touched on how energized fences are the tools that make livestock integration work and that modern energized fence technology is safe for humans and livestock.

Jake Langeslag of Goat Dispatch is grazing a herd of goats on the USFWS land just below the visitor center. On this beautiful sunny fall day the entire group got to see firsthand how the goats are worked, and some of the tools of the trade that Jake along with Kyle Johnson of Diversity Landworks, employ to manage goats for ecological benefit. Management of terrestrial invasive species such as buckthorn and garlic mustard are perhaps the most immediate benefits of re-introducing browsers and grazers to the landscape. Eventually the restoration of native savannah and grassland ecosystems is the goal for many of the larger tracts of land in the Metro and indeed throughout the Midwest. Restored habitats provide invaluable ecological services, such as pollinator habitat, water and carbon capture, as well as the production of food and fiber!

Happy goats, happy land – mimicking nature’s way to restore native ecology as interested professional public land managers look on at the MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

The Ecological Service Livestock Network (ESLN) seeks to develop business models and facilitate research and pilot studies to advance the art and science of profitable livestock-based, land management businesses, with emphasis on, but not limited to urban, suburban and peri-urban landscapes. This group is tailored toward conservation professionals who promote service livestock as a way to combat invasive species, manage land and restore ecological functionality, reduce the use of pesticides and fossil fuels, and start a rewarding livestock-based business.

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