

Review: Regenesi by George Monbiot

Feeding the world without devouring the planet

Agricultural greenhouse gas emissions make up 11% of the UK total, as well as 58% of total methane emissions, according to government figures: two good reasons for reading this thorough and very readable challenge to 'business as usual'.

We all need to eat and we like what we eat, so changing food and farming is not an easy sell but, as ever, Monbiot's robust research and fearless approach makes us think differently. Farming is, after all, where the climate and biodiversity crises come together, so it's a key arena for change.

In the first three chapters, Monbiot describes the status quo around agriculture. He investigates the neglected area of soil health; who knew that healthy soils suppress pathogenic bacteria, for example?

He goes on to talk about the insecurity of the global food system, its lack of resilience to climate change, injustice and the amount of land given over to growing food for livestock. Without livestock, his research suggests, there would be enough land to feed 10-14 billion people, not to mention cleaner rivers, unpolluted by run-off.

The rest of the book is devoted to searching for solutions. The good news is that there are people out there working progressively to do farming differently.

Monbiot introduces us to a range of farmers who are passionate about food, farming and nature, all experimenting with regenerative agriculture in various ways. I really warmed to Tolly, the 'stock free organic' vegetable grower with a farm in the Chilterns. He had leased his land for over thirty years, although it was so stony that he quipped you could 'make music with this soil'. Despite such low-grade land, he steadily increased soil fertility as well as attracting an abundance of wildflowers and wildlife. Working with nature rather than against it, demonstrably improves soil and biodiversity. However, Monbiot criticises the farmers he studied for their yields: the future needs high yields and low environmental impacts, he asserts.

I have to say, I was stunned by what came next: his vision of farm free food production. Microbial flour made by what he calls 'precision fermentation' of bacteria, (yes really!) seemed like something the world may not yet be ready for! But he does explain that proteins, fats and flour can be made this way, and it's highly nutritious. He sang the praises of an omelette made with microbial flour and no eggs! Shame he didn't try out Yorkshire Puddings for us; it could just work if people can continue to eat good versions of food they know and love.

Monbiot finishes off by talking about how such a revolutionary change to people's lifestyles might happen. He also suggests some of government farming subsidies could be repurposed to changing food sector jobs.

George Monbiot has presented a radical but engaging vision for food and farming, highlighted with interesting examples and hard-hitting facts. Everything you thought you knew about farming may turn out to be untrue, but if we can learn anything from this book, maybe it's the scale of the changes needed in this area.

Veganuary is all but over now, but how about trying Vefebbruary?

(Mm not quite as catchy..)

Janet Wood