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Reverting to grazing: farmers' conceptions

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Abstract

The Niort plain (Poitou-Charentes, France) presents several environmental challenges due to the presence of: (i) the protected bird species, Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*), which needs different types of grassland for its optimal development (nesting and growth), and (ii) droughts which reduce the water available for maize irrigation. This shortage of irrigation water for maize means that cattle tend to be grazed rather than being fed silage. Both these factors make for a renewed interest in grassland. In this context, socio-anthropological interviews were carried out with eleven farmers to ascertain their views about grazing for dairy cows, and whether or not they practise it. Results of interviews are presented in terms of farmers' general ideas on grazing; its implications for product (butter) labelling; their conceptions in terms of labour requirements and herd management; and the security and simplicity of diets (erratic milk production associated with transition from maize silage to grazing in spring, and implications of effects on rumen flora). Labour specialization, linked to farm enlargement, is seen to lead to greater complexity, and grazing management is seen by farmers as complex, compared with the stability and simplicity of a maize diet.

Keywords: grassland, grazing, conception of grazing by farmers, obstacles to the grazing reintroduction

Introduction

In the Niort plain (Poitou-Charentes, France), several environmental factors (e.g. the presence of a protected bird, the Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) and drought, which reduces the scope for maize irrigation), are leading researchers and farmers to try to replace the maize crop with grassland, and a maize silage diet for dairy cows with grazing. In a research programme we have studied, using socio-anthropological methods, what farmers think of grazing and whether their cows graze or not. In this way we can learn about local conceptions of grazing, although grazing has quite disappeared in the region since 20 years.

Materials and methods

The approach is linked to Weber's comprehensive sociology (Weber, 1971). Putnam (1984) states that a social group creates a system of thinking which is the result of breaking down reality due to its own experience. The linguist Prieto (1975) shows that a social group creates categories within the reality, gives a word for each category and puts objects into them. Through individual interviews performed in a locality (2-3 villages), and an analysis of these discussions, we can find out how the farmers of this locality conceive dairy cow grazing (Darré *et al.*, 2004).

Here, we worked on two localities of three villages. As the results were similar for both, we will not distinguish between them. Eleven individual interviews were performed with different farmers (farm area, age, grazing or not). Interviewed farmers are encouraged to respond to three questions: Can you talk about (i) the way you and your neighbours produce milk, (ii) the recent changes in the way you and your neighbours feed animals, (iii) advantages and difficulties of dairy cow grazing? Farmers have the choice of the content of the discourse.

The analysis of the discussions consists in identifying the different issues within each interview. For each issue, we study how farmers are talking about things or actions, by studying the words associated and opposed, and how things or actions are qualified. A summary of each interview is made. A global summary lists the most important points of the debate.

Results

General ideas on grazing

Farmers think that grazing is good for animals. They like to see cows grazing in pastures, and think cows feel better there than indoors. Out of doors, cows have fewer problems with lameness and are more contented.

However grazing is associated with the past, and their forefathers, so reverting to grazing is regarded as a retrograde step.

Grazing is considered to be economically profitable by the farmers who practise it; the others ask whether the benefits are significant and would like to have local studies on this topic.

Importance of the label of origin of the product (Echiré butter)

The position of farmers is paradoxical: they think that grazing would add to the value of the labelled product: it provides a good image for the consumer. But they consider that, as few farmers graze, grazing should not be specified on the label. Moreover, butter prices are higher from July to Christmas, whereas the grazing period is during spring.

Farm structures and farm functioning

For farmers, grazing is possible only if the cowshed is close to the pastures. They do not like to drive their cattle along roads, especially close to towns. Big herds are difficult to lead, and cattle are liable to escape. Moreover, the management of such herds by several associates raises new problems: are all the associates able to manage the grazing when their turn comes? Farmers think that the labour requirement is much the same for grazing and for maize silage feeding, but that the tasks are different. Grazing requires more flexibility in herd management and in work distribution. Farmers who practise grazing enjoy being out of doors, keeping an eye on the grass and the animals.

Security and simplicity of diets

A basic diet of maize silage is regarded as reliable and results in regular milk production. It is simple and easy to manage.

By comparison, grazing cows have erratic milk production and management is not so easy because of the variations in grass quality. During the beginning of the season (March), grass grows quickly but 'by the 15th of May there is no more grass'. The grazing period is short. Farmers are worried about the change of diet. They say that 'the transition from maize silage to grazing need to be gradual: the rumen flora has to get used to it'. Dietary changes lead to a modification of the entire organism: perturbations provoke a decrease of milk production, and may be the cause of other problems, e.g. with fecundity. For these reasons, farmers don't want to close the maize silo during grazing period.

Some farmers who are getting a high production per cow do not want production to fall, and are afraid to try grazing.

Grazing needs particular techniques and anticipation: determination of the paddock size and of the rhythm of the grazing rotation. An indicator of the need to change the paddock is the extent to which animals leave maize silage in the rack. Learning grazing management is difficult for farmers. They say that it is not a practice they learned at school or in books, so if their father did not practise it, they have to learn from neighbours.

Discussion

In this section, we put farmers' conceptions into perspective with advisers' and researchers' opinions. For the dairy industry, grazing provides a good image for the product. But the price of butter is higher towards the winter festive season than during the grazing season. Furthermore, butter from grazing cows is yellow, but for the label's reputation it should be white, so the industry doesn't want to promote grazing.

A huge disadvantage for grazing is that farmers want all the pastures to be near the cowshed. With this constraint, to promote grazing would need spatial reorganization of the fields.

The fear of dietary changes seems to be exaggerated by farmers. Delaby and Peyraud (2002) showed there are no effects on milk production when ration transitions are well managed. But to graze, farmers would have to accept irregular production. Our economic study of farms which have just introduced grazing, or are thinking of introducing it, shows that the changeover to grazing benefits the farm.

An adviser remarks that when the diet consists of both grazing and silage it is not balanced, and knowing how much silage to give is not easy. This twin-component diet seems to provide security, but is perhaps very expensive.

Farmers lack knowledge about grazing management: new research is needed to provide this knowledge.

Conclusions

A challenge is to show that grazing is not just a practice from the past, but one worth reinventing. However, we have seen that its promotion needs to greatly modify farm structures, farmers' thinking and even, through knowledge, tasks of advisers and researchers.

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