REFOREST

Living Lab 4: Hungary

Wood pasture farming in the hilly region of Bakony with Antal Varga

Olaszfalu, Veszprém county, Hungary

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Living Lab 4

Zöldág Lovasudvar

Antal Varga

The farm

I bought this area some years ago. At that time it was abandoned land. I rejuvenated and renovated it into the wood pasture it is today.
The steepness of the terrain made the initial groundwork difficult. When the agroforestry system was in place, after cutting the trees and bushes, the suppression of offshoots was difficult because the wildrose, blackthorn and hawthorn sprouted after cutting back. These species need to be cut all the time to control them effectively, making management challenging.

I gradually developed the system, and today it has become one of the most beautiful wooded pastures of the Bakony. It is 20 hectares (ha) in size. 30% of the area is occupied by tree species such as hornbeam, beech, ash, maple, wild cherry, wild pear and linden. It consists of wood pasture, grazed forest and a small orchard, but other activities are also carried out in the area, for example horse riding, and a riding camp, as well as research, education and training activities. The farm provides a place for local, regional and international rural festivals.

My farming system is pasture-based animal husbandry. I currently have 6 horses, 25 ewes and their offspring, and 3 goats. The area is suitable for grazing for an average of 8 months a year but due to the stoney ground and tree cover, it makes the farm unsuitable for hay making. As a result, winter fodder is bought in. I get some income from the sale of lambs and the riding school. A petting zoo programme is also run on the farm, so we have many young visitors.

The area consists of two parts, one of which is fenced with a game net, and the other with an electric fence. The area with an electric fence borders a 30 ha forest allowing sheep to graze in the forest (as they move freely under the electric fence). The horses graze alternately in the two parts of the area. There are many trees providing shade in both parts, so they benefit from this particularly in the summer heat.

The way to agroforestry

The landscape of the area is currently the same as it was 40 years ago, when nearly 200 cattle (part of an agricultural cooperative) grazed the area. My guiding principle at that time was to restore the conditions, which determined the required tasks; cutting down unwanted trees, clearing bushes, mowing unwanted weeds and cleaning the area. My motivation was not for a profitable business, because even with state subsidies, only a very modest profit can be achieved with this type of farming. This area was my birthplace, and primarily I wanted to make it the way it is now because of the emotional connections I have with it.

My ancestors worked as animal caretakers, which gave me a lot of practical experience when I was a child. As an adult, my degree in agricultural engineering and being a member of the AFINET Hungarian Agroforestry network provided me with the additional theoretical knowledge I needed for the work I do today. I am also a member of EURAF (European Agroforestry Association).

My knowledge of plants is very incomplete, I should improve this, because there are countless medicinal plants in the area which we could benefit from, for both the visitors and the family. Knowledge of weed species and life cycles is also incomplete. Almost every year I discover weeds unknown to me in the area and sometimes they cause problems due to their spread and my lack of experience with them.

Agroforestry in practice

A typical problem is the intensive growth of shrubs in this area, and the suppression of unwanted invasive shrub and weed species is a constant task. Integrating the value of the ecosystem services provided by the restored woody pasture into the value chain is also a major challenge.

Grazing for 8 months of the year makes feeding livestock very cheap, and animal manure improves soil quality and increases biodiversity. The animals like to eat fallen ash and maple tree leaves in the autumn. They also eat all the fruit of the wild pear trees and the acorns of Turkey oaks.

A detailed knowledge of the lay of the land, conditions in the area and the quality of the soil is essential, because large areas of the land require machine work and manual labour is hardly available anymore. The quality of the soil is also a determining factor because spring drainage water and summer droughts must be taken into account. In order to keep the animals in good condition, continuous inspection of the pastured areas is essential - what looks green from afar, does not necessarily equate to good, nutritious feed for the animals.

What is ahead?

I plan to maintain the area and the livestock at the same level, but I also want to move in the direction of a demonstration area and farm for educational purposes. The area is open karst and rocky, and a geological educational trail leads through part of it. For guests and visitors walking along the educational trail, geological knowledge, and knowledge of medicinal plants and weeds, as well as animal life, could be transferred through my farm being more of a demonstration farm. In addition to the agroforestry system, the area also includes another 30 ha of untouched shrubland, with a very rich birdlife. This area provides an opportunity for quiet tourism and those who want to relax. The starting point of the area is our horse-riding yard with parking and complete infrastructure.

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