



Watching cows: associating farmer wellbeing and cows

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Overview

- Context
- Watching cows – what do dairy farmers see?
- Making sense of it – my interpretation
- Implications





ARGOS

Agricultural Research Group on Sustainability

Research programme includes:

- 12 sets of paired dairy farms from mainly traditional dairy farming areas in the North Island (Waikato, Taranaki and Manawatu)

In each pair/location:

- 1 converting to organic
- 1 following 'conventional' practices

Matched for herd size and farm area (though organic farms tend to have lower stocking rate).

Interviewed farmers/farming couples in 2006.





Watching/noticing cows

Good farmers watch and notice their cows:

“Yeah, like I mean I go past - I go, oh yeah, why is that cow over by itself? ... I believe every time you drive past your cows or whatever you should be looking at them. So as long as you don't drive into something you're alright” (conventional).

“I was watching what they were doing” (organic).

“... it is nice to see them in there, in a nice green paddock” (conventional).





Communications from cows

- Watching means being able to understand cows' communication – a way of 'knowing'.

"... the cows will tell you as well, they will always tell you when things are not right" (organic).

"The cows will tell you if they're not happy straight away. You know, if the grass is getting a little bit sort of, you know, first growth for the season and stuff like that ... probably a week ago after we'd had a lot of rain there was not as much goodness in the grass ... so you start balancing it with silage and hay or things like that ... There's certain cows that, you know, look up and say, "Well, you know, we need something more," or something like that ... So we did ... shorten the round a little bit and they sort of knew that even though they were still having silage and hay, it wasn't quite as good as what they were on now. It was sort of a longer rotation. You know, even just four or five days off what they're normally used to, and they can tell" (organic).





So what did they notice? Cow classifications





Healthy cows

“And the biggest thing for dairy farmers is the health of their cows” (organic).

“I was watching what they were doing, some of these cows were going out with mastitis and in four days time they had healed themselves and they were back in the herd. Our cows hardly ever get over 200,000 cells and some of my other mates, they’ve got cows [with high counts] and do everything and they’ve still struggling, not getting grades, like one of them jumped to 300,000 now and we’re still under 200,000 doing nothing. And same with the lame cows, just don’t do anything” (organic).

When the stocking rate is increased *“the cows start to look not so good”*.





- The stress of moving to organic methods:

“Also um, probably a stresser is there are animal health sort of issues that happen and I’m going ugh, you know, am I doing the right thing here, just treating it this way? Should I be um, going straight to antibiotics and um, you know, that can be stressful. I’ve got a cow now who’s got footrot. And it’s been sort of four or five days. She’s not limping anymore but her foot is still swollen and I’m still treating it but I’m sort of thinking, you know, you sort of think if I’d used antibiotics it probably would’ve gone by now” (organic).

“I think the difficult thing is dealing with sick animals, I hate it, um. They are hard to cure if they are really sick and they can’t talk to you and you are guessing, and in homeopathy you are guessing that much more because we’ve not that great at it. Um, and a sick cow, especially a down cow really upsets me because the chances of getting up on their feet are quite minimal” (organic).





Well fed cows

Healthy cows are well fed cows:

“It’s better to feed your cows well, than say sometimes very well then sometimes average. You know, like I’d rather be well all the time. Cows can eat a lot. New Zealand cows are pretty hungry cows, you know. There’s not too much obesity around” (organic).

“I just love, you know, trying to grow as much grass and I can. I love having healthy cows. I love being able to feed them well. Yeah and, you know, and you get a milk docket every day which tells you, hey, you’re doing a good job or otherwise” (conventional).

“Seeing the cows properly fed is always nice” (organic).





Production per cow vs number of cows:

“I am not a fan of more cows means more production by any stretch of the imagination. Um, we are milking um, probably fifty odd less cows than what somebody would on the same sized platform, and um, doing the same production ... the cows have got a lot of potential ... my farm, it has improved from what it was um, like three years ago ... as far as, how much grass they need to eat to fill up, to what they need to eat now, just because there seems to be more guts in the grass, um, yeah there is a huge difference. Same sized paddocks but I can put the cows in there and they are full within no time” (organic).





Happy, contented cows

“But when the um, when you go through a period where you’ve had reasonable growth and the cows are happy, you go to lock them a way and they don’t moo at you and there’s a few lying down” (organic).

“The cows will tell you if they’re not happy straight away” (organic).

“... people comment that the cows are contented” (conventional).





Good cows

The lease cows were naughty. They wanted to get into the creek all the time but “*all my cows were fine*” (conventional).

“*We like our cows*” (organic).

“*[We] milk good cows*” (organic).

“*... our cows are good ...*” (organic).





‘Empty’ or pregnant?

“The cows are always, if they’re not calving they are trying to get back into calf and if they’re not trying to get back into calf, you’re trying to find out if they’re pregnant or not so... (laugh)” (conventional).

A farmer’s generosity:

“Then they get a second chance of going to the AI or the bull or whatever it might be” (organic).

“So we give them another chance” (organic).





Cows will be cows

- Frisky/sexy

“There was a cow out last night on the road but she was jumping fences so you can’t help that” (conventional).

“But the neighbour had his bull out on the other side and we had about 10 cows on heat - it was just before mating season started and all these cows were frisky and they must have been around the gate and lifted the gate off and there was the bull through the fence” (conventional).

“The bulls [laughter]. That is why I have five calves to milk in January. No electric fence power” (organic).

- Contrary

One farmer had someone who takes away dead cows but not at Christmas or Easter so he said that you can guarantee that’s when a cow will die (organic).





Fussy cows

“You know, if we just gave you spud and peas for a week, the next week we chuck in carrots, you’ll probably eat the carrots as well ... But they’ll go and pick... If you watch them after they’ve been there half an hour, they’re still going to those plants, well especially chicory, but I find chicory hard to keep in the pasture. They’ll nip that all off before they go, and they’re still like that at the start, don’t get me wrong, they’re not just going [to that]. But that stuff will be first to disappear, you know - any good thing in your pasture. If they’re eating around the paddock it means the paddock is fairly balanced. If they’re all at one end then something is wrong. And when they walk into the paddock, if they straight away eat, that’s a good sign. If they walk far into the paddock and they think, “Oh, that’s the bloody lot we’ve got today” ... and they start walking back, you know. But that’s cows, that’s farming ... But, you know, it’s a good sign about your pasture. If they put their head down as soon as they get in the paddock, it’s good because they’re happy with what they’ve found. Quite fussy, cows” (organic).





‘Old’ cows, young cows

“ [we] had 14% empty, but a lot were old cows (rising 9 year olds) that we were getting rid of anyway” (organic).

- Old cows are bossy and the young stock have to be given a fair chance to get at the feed.
- Young stock are also lighter and so can be put on land more prone to erosion.
- Several organic farmers spoke about how they liked starting out with heifers.





Dry cows

- Stopped milking.
- Useful? Can be used to tidy up the pasture after the milking herd, (“run behind the herd” (conventional))
- Nuisance? Farmers have to form a separate herd - do not fit into the rotation pattern.
- Valuable? Have the potential to become pregnant and so are worth looking after (conventional).





‘Dirty’ cows (and docking)

“... but occasionally you get a cow that doesn’t know how to keep her own tail clean ... so that’s a problem ... if a cow is a dirty cow and she always had a shitty tail then she would actually get her tail on her udder and soil her teats ...” (conventional).

“... it pisses me off that I can’t chop my cows tails off, but you know because you know if we want to sell our milk overseas well you can’t do it, yeah, but they are not getting smacked in the face with a shitty tail ...” (conventional)

But:

“You can have a cow that ain’t got a tail and she’s still covered in shit” (organic).





Fat cows and skinny cows

“It’s good to see the fat cows” (organic).

“I am sure we had more problems when a cow calved and she was skinny” (conventional).

“Ah, this year we have got skinny cows and we have got to do something quickly because we have only got ah - ten weeks till calving. We have got to get some condition back on them ...” (conventional)





What does it all mean?





Linking wellbeing and cows

“I just really, really, enjoy the cows” (organic).

- The “*cows come first*” (organic)
- Aim to “*mainly improve the wellbeing of the cows*” (organic)
- Aim to “*make the cows happier*” (organic)





What disturbs wellbeing?

- Association with cows

“I think if you listened to your cows ... if they’re happy, then sure as Bob you’re happy ... you put them in the wrong grass, they might not be happy ... even the other day they were gutted or upset, but it was just the pasture. It’s a new grass paddock and it was raining and they just needed more” (organic).





- Weather → feed → cows

“The thing that gets me, it’s nothing to do with the farm, but the weather. When you get a real wet spell in the winter and all you’re looking for is a couple of fine days and then you’ll have a drought in the summer and just want a bit of rain. Sometimes I feel my emotions are tied to the weather. But when you go through a period when you’ve had reasonable growth and the cows are happy, you go to lock them away and they don’t moo at you and there’s a few lying down ... they’ve been a bit unsettled with this wet weather but the last few days they have been happy and that makes you feel a bit better” (conventional).





Instrumentalism/individuality

- All dairy farmers want to earn a living
- Extreme end of spectrum:

“... mini machines, mini factories we run. We take it from cow through to the raw milk - from the cows straight through into the vat and then you know collected by the dairy factory and processed at the factory, so just basically really we run our own little factory and we like to keep it up to scratch - hygiene is quite important in our industry...” (conventional).

“Jersey cows are great cows for organic systems. They’re more profitable” (organic).





“... [you] look after your cows because they’re the ones that, you know, produce the milk and give you your income” (organic).

“I just want cows which come in, get their milk taken out of them, and leave really. I don’t want to have to help them along” (Conventional).

- Cows with high somatic cell counts were likely to be sold. In organics, in particular, they are a problem because antibiotics cannot be used and it seems to be regarded as a genetic tendency.

“You want to have a look up and see this cow’s had mastitis three times this year, well, perhaps you should be looking at getting rid of her. So if you use your records then perhaps it’s more of a help than a hindrance” (organic).





Individuality of cows

- Pet cows
- Individuals in herd

“And I’m too soft. If I’ve got a cow that’s calving late and I like her I won’t cull her” (organic).

“M [male farmer] knows every cow in the herd, most of them are named. That’s going to change of course as we get more but um, we’ve got a real affinity with our animals now. Yeah, we’ve got the likes of Rosie the cow who will not come in until she’s had her scratch behind the ears. You know, they are just wonderful creatures in their own right” (organic).





- The ideal vs the reality?

“... to achieve your production targets with minimal fuss really. You know, without having to interfere with cows or them interfere with you I suppose, is more the thing. We sort of started ... with this idea that um, I mean a really good measure of farming was the time away from farming - when I'm not thinking about farming. But we've discovered that that's very [laughing] - well I mean that could be a very good measure ... but we're always thinking about it” (conventional).





The good dairy farmer

- Has ‘good’ cows
- Demonstrates care for them – all/as individuals
“She really loves the cows ...” (conventional).

Indications of care are:

- Healthy
- Happy
- Well fed
- Other indications – don’t’ induce etc.





Continuum of relationships

instrumental \longleftrightarrow noticing individuality of cows

productive focus

interesting animals

invisible cows

involvement

seeking simplicity

complex





Environmental issues and cows

Farmers spoke of:

- fencing off streams and waterways.
- keeping stock off hillsides in wet weather.
- monitoring paddocks when it's wet – taking stock off, keeping in the yard overnight, putting on feed pads – to reduce pugging and protect soil.
- environmental benefits of rotational grazing.





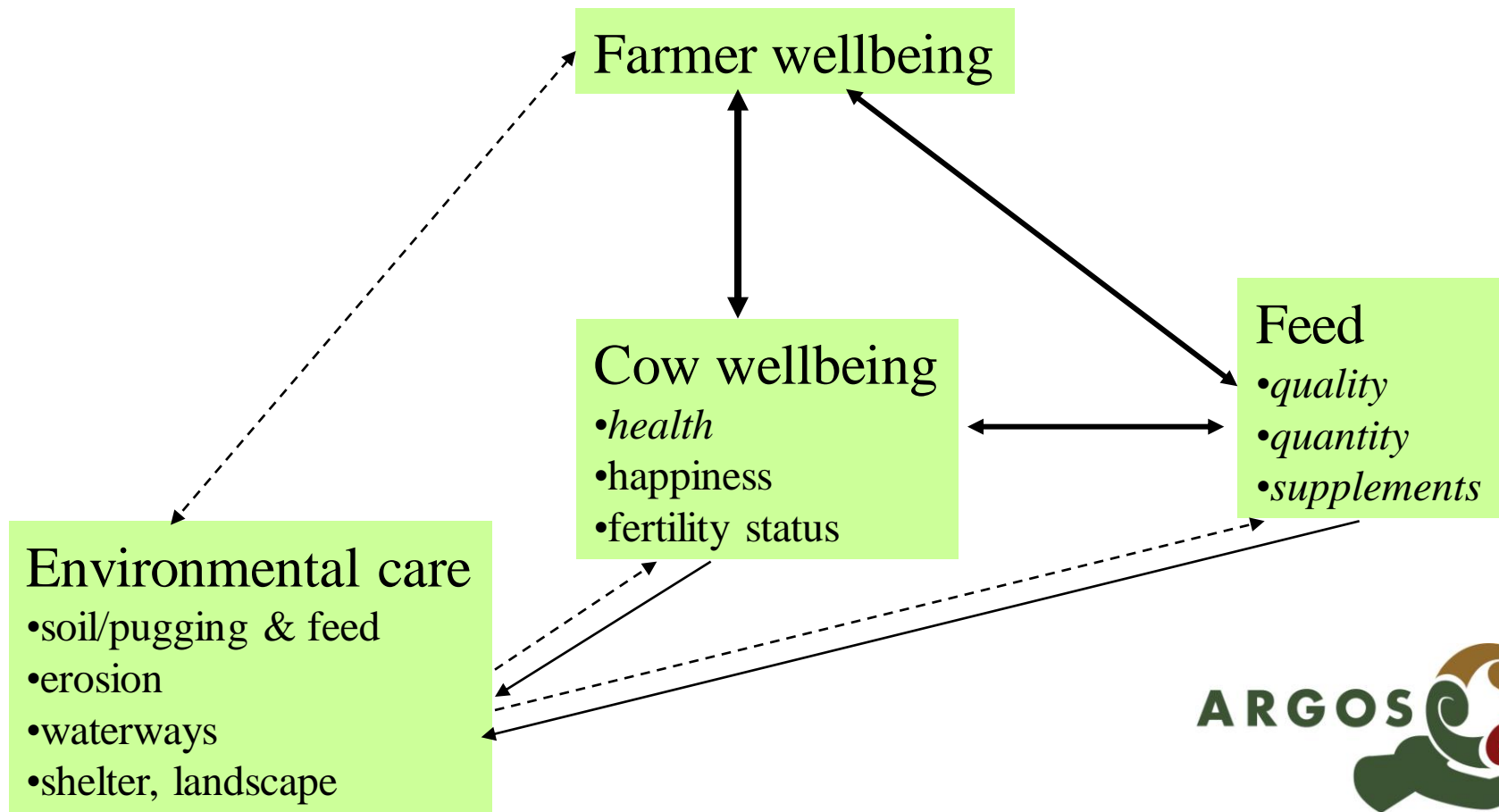
Some awareness of circularity of argument:

- Protecting pastures means more feed for cows.
- Cows get stuck in waterways so better fenced.
- Cows need shelter – so better to plant trees.





Model of relationship between farmers, cows and the environment





Implications

- Priority is on cows.
- Farmers make sure that they are happy/well fed.
- Means that less care taken of the environment.





Organic vs conventional

- More and fuller quotes from organic farmers.
- More articulate?
- Less instrumental but does not mean that there are no instrumentalists among the organic farmers and that there are no conventional farmers who do not see their cows as individuals.

“I think the biggest change has been in me. Um, you know I just used to be a farmer and milk cows and didn't really give too much. You know I've grown phenomenally. There is often a bit of alkathene close at hand, but now, even on a bad day, it's a genuine concern for the cows and the satisfaction of walking round the farm and your belief that you are doing the right thing” (organic).

- Caring for cows important to both groups but practice it on different scales?
- Other ways they differ but not related to cows.





Wellbeing - living a meaningful life

The meaningful worlds of dairy farmers: those ‘endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy’.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127)





Brave Moo

