

Agroecology

Agroecology is a word which is rapidly entering the farming vernacular, yet risks being misunderstood and oversimplified.

Agroecology is a whole farm approach based around incorporating nature into a farming system, but extends also to the way that farm products are marketed. The FAO actually has a superb ten point definition available on their website: www.fao.org/agroecology

The key points on farm for me are:

- plant diversity with reduced artificial inputs;
- circular farming; and
- provision of wildlife habitat close to my fields.

Plant diversity is pretty simple. I now grow a plethora of crops with different establishment and harvest times, and have introduced perennial, diverse species leys. These leys are grazed by cattle, so plant carbon is converted to dung, ensuring that a huge wave of ecology and nature can exist and thrive.

Aiming to farm in a circular fashion is the aim to remove waste from the system. This is something I am working hard on currently. But the plan is to be taking all my food products through to a semi-finished form (eg grinding wheat to make flour). This means that any of the waste produced in that process stays on farm, becoming a secondary product. An example here could be milk whey and wheat bran being used to feed pigs.

The provision of nature habitat is relatively simple to achieve. Entomologists state that insects only move approximately 20m out from the field margin. So I am making my maximum field width 36m to ensure no dead spots in the middle of the occasional monoculture crops are sown. This is am achieving with agroforestry tree belts in my fields, as well as wild margins. On top of this, I am also establishing a wild seam to interconnect all the fields on my farm. All these actions will create a farm where between 30-40% is in permanent organic cover.

So that covers off the farm side of agroecology, but is only half the picture. Food sovereignty is of vital importance. This encompasses the idea of community involvement and engagement with the growing of their food, ensuring love & care with how that community prepares the food that ends up on their plate. It is the idea of social justice and the right for every person on this earth to have access to nutritious food, and knowledge of how to prepare it.

Agroecology is what drives me in farming. It has ignited a passion in me to create not only a beautiful and thriving rural idyll, but one sparking with community involvement and enjoyment. Farms should be there to nourish the soul, not just the stomach. And that is what agroecology is to me.