

COUNTRYSIDE MAKES YOU WELL

Care farms are a novel approach to health and well-being, and show that farmers can provide the nation with more than just food

While studying in Newcastle for the past year, I lived in a terraced house with a view out of my downstairs bedroom window of a concrete back yard surrounded by a brick wall.

There hasn't been much in the way of wildlife, apart from the odd inquisitive slug and a couple of magpies. The only green things were the wheely bin and a thin film of moss which followed the route of a constant trickle of water from a leaky drain pipe. Our backyard wasn't quite the countryside.

I have longed for a bit of open green space. So throughout the year I have headed off around Northumberland to give myself an airing in a pleasant part of the world. Every so often I have also visited a friend of mine on his sheep farm in Lancashire, which is a lot more enjoyable than being in a city all the time. Then when I'm stood at the top of a hill in the middle of nowhere, I take in the surroundings and a deep breath and break into a smile which says "well, isn't this good?"

So it is with interest that I hear about the notion of "care farms". This idea is a relatively new one to the UK, although it seems to have a wider reach in Europe. The academic definition of care farming is "using agricultural landscapes and processes to provide health and well-being benefits". In other

words, and from my perspective at least, it's clear. The bottom line is this: The countryside makes you feel better.

The National Care Farming Initiative (NCFI) aims to provide information and support and says that there are over 40 care farms in the UK. These range from 0.4ha to 360ha and are generally mixed farms. Apparently, 3500 people are using care farms every week and that figure is set to grow as the idea becomes more popular

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and increasing numbers of farms become involved.

This is not to say that farms become some sort of day care centre and the farming bit of the farm stops. Quite the contrary; the whole idea of care farming is using the day-to-day activities of practical farming and conservation to help people with a range of difficulties. Not only does care

farming give a chance for farmers to offer disadvantaged groups a link with the countryside, but it's also proven to be as effective a treatment as some more conventional ones. Add to this the idea of "green gyms", which is using conservation tasks as exercise rather than the traditional gym and promoted by the conservation charity the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, and it is clear that the environment, the countryside and the health of the nation are becoming more closely linked.

Agriculture already provides environmental public goods. This trend will continue as farmers and land managers are seen as a part of the solution to many of the environmental problems we are facing.

There is surely no reason why farmers can't provide social goods for the public, too, and be rewarded for this. Care farming may begin to provide an extra income for some farms, and while this shouldn't be the primary motivation, it may be a useful dangling carrot to win over some of the more sceptical farmers.

Some farmers are care farming with great success already. This may not be for everybody, but it's clear that if a slightly different way of thinking can show the public that farms and farmers can provide more than just food, then there are benefits for everybody.

Adam Bedford, aged 23, is studying an MSc in Rural Development and Resource Management in the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University.



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