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EU policy:
When the wolf is instrumentalised

EuroNatur Award:
The cow needs to graze!

Quail poaching in Serbia:
perfidious decoy calls from the tape

Picture: Gerold Jarausch

connecting nature and people

Dear friends of EuroNatur,

Spending days and nights in the fields, listening to the animals chewing and observing how they interact with each other: you can literally feel the happy moments when this year's EuroNatur laureate Dr Anita Idel speaks about her childhood and youth. Back then, she laid the foundations for intensive research into the co-evolution of pastureland and large herbivores - a theme that has stayed with her to this day. To emphasise the importance of grassland and the associated sustainable and animal welfare-friendly form of agriculture is a central concern in Anita's more than 40 years of work, for which she was honoured with the EuroNatur Award in October. Get to know this committed and versatile laureate in the interview on pages 18 to 21.

Every year in late summer, numerous bird conservationists in the Balkans stay up all night listening for the sound lures that quail hunters use to attract the birds in so that they can shoot them in their thousands at sunrise. The bird hunters call this 'sport', but it would be more accurate to call it a 'massacre'. Our migratory bird partners in south-east Europe are fighting back against this form of illegal bird hunting. Find out exactly how they go about it and what tricks they use to combat fatigue in an exciting report from the fields of northern Serbia (pages 4 to 9).

Back to Radolfzell: who can claim to have worked for the same organisation for more than three decades without interruption? Sabine Günther, donations officer at EuroNatur, has worked for the foundation for 34 years, during which time she has become the 'face of EuroNatur' for many donors. At the end of the year, she will be taking a well-deserved retirement - thank you very much, dear Sabine! She is leaving big shoes to fill - but they will be well filled. You can read more about the handover on pages 10 to 12.

Whether 34 years or the past twelve months: the end of the year is a good moment to look back. 2024 was not an easy year. In particular, the populist, inhumane U-turn in the US presidency, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and the increasing ignorance regarding nature conservation and climate protection worldwide have unsettled many people. 2024 was also a difficult year for nature conservation in Europe. The shift to the right in the European elections at the beginning of June has not made our work any easier. In addition, despite intensive efforts, we and numerous partner organisations were unable to prevent the wolf's protected status from being downgraded across Europe. EuroNatur project manager Mareike Brix analyses this decision and the possible consequences for nature conservation as a whole in Europe (page 13).

No one can seriously predict what 2025 will bring us. But we hope to continue to have you at our side, because now more than ever, we need to stand up for our common values and work together to protect Europe's natural heritage. I wish you and yours all the best in this endeavour.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Dr. Thomas Potthast
President of the EuroNatur Foundation

Pictures: Gerald Jarausch, Heidi Sonz

'This award, this appreciation is incredibly important for me to persevere and to continue this work'. Anita Idel accepts the EuroNatur Award from President Prof Dr Thomas Potthast and Executive Committee member Prof Dr Hubert Weiger on the island of Mainau.

'Less of the bad is not good'

EuroNatur Award sets an example for species-appropriate agriculture

It is energy-intensive agricultural industry that is the climate killer, not cows. Especially not if they are fed and kept in an appropriate way. This is the central thesis that Dr Anita Idel has been advocating for decades. On 10 October, she was awarded the EuroNatur Prize 2024 'for her unusually high level of personal commitment to animal welfare and nature-friendly agriculture'. In this interview, Anita Idel talks about the rocky journey she has experienced in her role as a critic of the 'agro-industrial mainstream', about future prospects for our planet and why giving up is not an option for her.

'Co-operation instead of just competition! Grazed grassland ecosystems are the blueprint for our survival on this planet.'
Dr. Anita Idel, EuroNatur-laureate 2024

It's impressive how much energy and dedication you have put into meadows, grazing animals and grassland ecosystems in general for so many years. How did that start?

I grew up on the outskirts of the city and spent a lot of time outdoors as a child. Back then, I saw meadows with their horses and cattle as a place of refuge. Being out of doors along the Lower Rhine gave me a sense of freedom: listening to the animals chewing and seeing the pastures for what they were – everything was still blooming and buzzing back then! In the beginning, I simply felt part of the whole and without any intellectual superstructure. Later, I became more and more enthusiastic about understanding the co-evolution of grazing animals and grassland. I also spent whole days and nights in the pastures. Watching the animals is always an amazing experience. I realised more and more how negative our interventions are. Without grazing, for example, we hinder the development of herd structures.

Today, cattle are mostly kept in the barn instead of grazing on the pastures. The belching cow is regarded as the ultimate climate killer. But you say that's not true – why not?

The climate killer has always been humankind!

Dr Anita Idel is a German veterinarian, agricultural expert, mediator and author. She is known for her work on the UN World Agriculture Report (IAASTD: 2005–2008), which emphasised the central importance of rural agriculture for the future of the world, and for her book 'Die Kuh ist kein Klima-Killer!' ('The cow is not a climate killer'). Anita Idel has for decades been considered one of the leading critics of agricultural engineering and its effects on ecological and animal health. She teaches at various universities on the greening of agriculture. She researches and campaigns worldwide for sustainable grazing management – to promote soil fertility and biodiversity as well as to alleviate climate change.

Please find impressions of the award ceremony, the speeches and a short video of the event at:
euronatur.org/preis24

I think it is the result of one of the most successful campaigns ever that, when we hear the words 'climate' and 'methane,' people on all continents have associated them for decades with cows and not with fossil energy (!).

However, research into this has been and continues to be completely one-sided as there is always money for anyone who wants to do research into methane in cows. The decisive factor, however, is the use of fossil energy; that is why it is agricultural systems – and not cows – that must be compared.

The problem is the agro-industrial mainstream:
Ruminants are virtually 'bred away' from pasture for maximum performance, whether that be litres of milk or kilograms of meat. They are then fed with soy and grains, turning these amazing grazers into food competitors to us humans.

It is also important to realise that science can distinguish fossil methane from biological methane. Biological methane is from animals that have a rumen, digest green matter and burp methane. We have known since 2008 that the increase in methane in the atmosphere is caused by fossil methane.

You even say that grazed grassland is underrated as a carbon store and argue in favour of more cows in the fields ...

Yes, the potential is huge – with sustainable grazing. Overall, the world's grassland ecosystems store more carbon than forest ecosystems with a similar total area, and grassland soils indeed store 50 per cent more. This is because perennial grasses do not primarily incorporate carbon into their own biomass like trees, but function like instantaneous storage heaters.

They channel the carbon into the soil, primarily via very energy- and nutrient-rich metabolic products, which they excrete via their fine roots. It is not part of the normal operation of a perennial grass to regularly produce flowers and seeds. Only the grasses that are neither grazed nor mown channel energy upwards to flower and seed according to the motto: If no one gives me a growth stimulus here, I'll try again at another location, where hopefully someone will graze me.

Grasses are actually the only plants that don't protect themselves from being bitten / grazed by animals. Is that fatalistic or is it just plain clever?

It's brilliant – a win-win-win-win for everyone, so to speak. We benefit from the incredible soil fertility that results from this co-evolution.

Whether prairies, pampas or the fertile soils in the Ukraine: wherever our breadbaskets are found around the world today, their soils all have their origin in steppe. Steppe means grassland and grass only remains grass in the long term if it is used.

This co-evolution with grazing animals is an incredible feature of evolution! Most other plants use up a lot of energy to defend themselves against being grazed – with thorns, spines or bitter substances. The ingenious and surprising thing is that grassland ecosystems allow their biomass to be taken away from them, yet at the same time they are the most successful ecosystem on our planet in terms of area. Not in spite of, but because of grazing! For millions of years, grasses have reacted to being grazed with a growth impulse, meaning that they ultimately benefit from it. This is the only reason why mowing is possible.

Picture: Katrin Denkewitz

Peaceful rebel: Anita Idel fights with all her heart and mind for a change of direction towards an agriculture that favours animal welfare and nature..

It sounds as if this ecosystem has the potential to contribute to solving major problems such as the climate emergency and biodiversity loss. How is it that the importance of grasslands is so overlooked by politicians, researchers, and the public?

It has a lot to do with non-perception. We're animals that rely primarily on eyesight and we tend to overestimate what we see above ground. We only think in terms of 'yield' and call it 'productivity', which is actually a net minus as long as we consume so many resources with our way of farming and continue to destroy soil, water and biodiversity.

In our low mountain ranges, for example, it used to be common practice to graze arable land for a few years when its fertility declined. Schools and universities teach that fallow land means doing nothing. This is wrong! Leaving fallow land only means not ploughing so as not to damage the root zone.

In the days of three-field farming and up until the start of the chemical age, there was still an incredible variety of seeds in the soil, which led to grasses and herbs sprouting profusely during the fallow period. These were then grazed and so the fallow always improved the soil. This empirical knowledge was still available back then. But how are today's farmers being advised? By the use of an app that prescribes that chemical-synthetic fertiliser should be applied, how much, what should be sprayed (even glyphosate) and when. I consider this to be an almost criminal hindrance to the generation of empirical knowledge.

Against this backdrop, is it still realistic to revitalise healthy land management?

There is definitely no alternative if we want to survive on this planet in the long term. We need to develop everything in the direction of sustainability by recultivating old empirical knowledge and combining it with the knowledge of the 21st century. But what is happening instead is that the use of chemicals is increasing worldwide, especially synthetic nitrogen fertilisers, and soil compaction is getting worse and worse. This is destroying the fine root system of grasses.

You have developed a special enthusiasm for soil life. Earthworms and dung beetles don't exactly have a cuddle factor, so what fascinates you so much about these creatures?

Just like I do with the grazing animals, I see them as global landscape gardeners. I find it particularly fascinating to see how everything can be utilised, transformed and reintegrated by the macro- and microbiome – it is pure recycling. Unfortunately, the interest of the agro-industrial mainstream in gaining knowledge is, as always, limited to the purpose of manipulating in order to maximise output. Meanwhile, transgenic soil microorganisms have become the focus of research.

The focus of the agricultural economists at the Institute for the World Economy, who taught at my faculty in Kiel, had since the mid-1970s been on maximising and repairing. They were fully aware that you effectively roll out the red carpet to pests if you grow more and more monocultures instead of mixed crops, but they were firmly convinced that chemistry would fix it. Resistance? No problem! By then, the chemical industry will have developed a new poison. And during my veterinary studies, I quickly realised that we were being trained to become the extended arm of the dairy and meat industry of the day after tomorrow.

Picture: blickwinkel / McPHOTO / R. Mueller - Yellow wagtail (Motacilla flava)

Picture: blickwinkel / F. Hecker - dung beetle (Geotrupes vernalis)

Picture: Katharina Grund

Free-range cows like this one in a pasture in the Bohemian Forest are rare in Europe. Yet sustainably grazed grassland is a true hotspot of biodiversity (pictures above: Yellow wagtail and dung beetle; both find plenty of food and habitat in the dung of grazing animals).

What would have to change first and foremost to turn the tide?

Everything! It's about the direction: sustainability! We need to truly realise that we can't do it this way. It's as simple as that. Less of the bad is not good! The 'we use less poison' approach may be a start for some, but it is fundamentally clear that what we need to achieve is a complete change of direction towards sustainability – suitable for our grandchildren. Cheap is only apparently cheap, because the costs are only externalised. The need to internalise these costs was therefore the clear conclusion of the World Agriculture Report (IAASTD).

What is it like to work as a woman in a scene that is still male-dominated and then to put forward provocative theories?

Where does the provocation begin? The epitome of 'provocation' was when I spoke out in favour of free-range hens during my studies, firstly in agricultural sciences and later in veterinary medicine. As part of my criticism of agricultural technology, I kept hearing people say things like 'No going back to the trees, girl!' I decided very early on that it was worth putting up with this. The defamation was bitter and even led to death threats in the 1980s and 1990s.

But you stuck with it anyway?

Despite and because of! There was no alternative for me but to continue. Every day I looked deeper into the abyss, and that's still the case today. Every day I understand more and more clearly what we're doing wrong and what the ecological and social (!) consequences of this are. I'm still learning things that I couldn't have imagined previously – and didn't want to anyway. But the potential for a change of direction is huge – and this gives me the strength to understand it better and better and to make it perceptible.

You share your knowledge with great commitment. Has the number of allies grown over time?

The answer is a clear yes. But not fast enough to keep up with what's happening in the mainstream. I am a passionate networker and the reason why I trained as a business mediator over 20 years ago was the following insight: if we want to bring about an agricultural turnaround, we have to move beyond all the economic competition between market players and get into the flow and cooperate together for the cause. Whether in research, in the associations or on the farms, the art lies in pulling together.

What does being honoured with the EuroNatur Award mean to you?

Every award is different, but what makes the EuroNatur Award so special for me is that it has been given to me by my companions. It means a lot to me, it makes me happy and I accept the award with the greatest of pleasure. This recognition is incredibly important in keeping up this work.

Interview: Katharina Grund