

Sustainable Organising in Times of Crisis - Podcast

Group 15 - *There is no business on a dead planet: How regenerative agriculture can restore the land*

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Interview Transcript:

Intro (Interviewer 2)

“There's no business on a dead planet”. This is a direct quote from our guest, Jörgen Andersson, from Fjällbete in Sweden. Welcome to the podcast of the same name, where he shares what it was like when he decided to change the way he worked as a farmer, from conventional to regenerative agriculture. Present today during this discussion with Jörgen Andersson are Oona Halmi, Eeva Ketvel, Kristina Shevelkova and Karolina Tuulari. We are students in the course called Sustainable Organising in Times of Crisis, at Hanken School of Economics. So welcome Jörgen and thank you for taking the time to discuss with us. Our main topic today is how we can foster viable ecosystems and increased biodiversity above and below ground, while producing food and other necessities.

Interviewer 1

Let's start with the introduction. So please tell me in your own words, who are you and what do you do for a living?

Guest

All right. Well, I am a farmer. I was born and brought up in a very traditional conventional farming further south in Sweden, now living in the central Sweden towards the mountains. Um, so I'm just an average farming guy who happened to be very, very interested in sustainable development and those topics. So to see that the future is not, uh, things are not going to progress in a straight line as we hit many limits, physical and others as a civilisation on this planet. So that's just been a big interest of mine. And it has got so much to do with agriculture, agriculture being the way these species of humans are surviving on this planet. So it's a lot about agriculture.

Interviewer 2

Yeah, as you told, you started like a conventional farmer and then changed to regenerative agriculture. What made you do the change?

Guest

It is a very big shift of mindset. And people do ask me how come I made that one. Um, and I had to sort of come up with some kind of, you know, answers to those questions. Like, there is this thing about care like, and I like to use, to use, uh, the term caring capacity, like the actual capacity to care. And then saying that we are like, I'm just another one of those homo sapiens, and to be able to care is something that we are able to do. But it doesn't always come naturally. Or many of us within this movement have stories to tell, me included. But you can find moments where you can, maybe when you're a child or something like that, you have these experiences when you feel more connected or really connected that you could just, in my case, I can recall, specific, a specific moment feeling how exceptionally beautiful nature is and those things. Those experiences have got something to do with this caring capacity. If you dare to care, you need to take the choice to be responsible. And to me, the experience has been that there is this possibility to come closer and closer, how to be more and more related to what nature is. It's about how deeply related we are to nature. And the weird thing is that we can live as if we were disconnected, like, we have this, that thing. So, it's all about connecting or reconnecting in a natural way and to find the people who have the same feeling, to find your flock, who like to do the same. And basically, that's the only thing. That's what we've been doing, I've been doing, finding such people and then doing it. And now we are talking about regenerative agriculture as we do that.

Interviewer 1

Okay. So, can you tell us a little about Fjällbete?

Guest

So that was an initiative, intending to bridge the gap between people and nature as it is expressed in the so-called industrial agriculture. And so when I say industrial, I mean the organisations in between the land and the consumer, the end consumer, the people eating the food. Because if you go in the forest and pick some berries, you do have that connection with the land, you know, providing the food. And then you have all these middlemen that is, uh, enabling this big distance. So Fjällbete is an attempt to bridge that gap. And, so the short story behind that would be that, well, let's collaborate. And we are in the tourist area. Tourism is now expanding and thriving while agriculture is doing the opposite, especially in the mountainous areas where I live. It just became so obvious, especially when tourism needs to provide a contrast to everyday life. So, these wealthy people of Stockholm, they want to come to another place, they want to go to the mountains and feel nature and have a contrast from the ordinary life. And back then, this is some 24 years ago, there was no option of eating any food that was local, like. So Fjällbete was an initiative where we, a number of farmers, collaborated, or like we made an organisation to try to address the problems or the challenges, enabling us to follow, like to produce food and people's animals. And we started with some sheep, to make that meat find its way to the restaurant plate with keeping its identity, without becoming anonymous, which was quite difficult back then. This was in 2002. And a lot of things has happened. But that was the idea of Fjällbete. That's what we did. And we did it in multiple ways, like enabling the hotel or restaurant to become a part owner in this entity of Fjällbete, them being able to tell their, the tourists, the clients at the table that we are now going to eat, you're not going to serve meat that has been produced

in the same ski slope that you would have been skiing in today. And it is our meat, our animals, we are a part of this like that. That opened up a lot of, of, um, new ways of thinking for the, for everyone involved. So that was the initiative of Fjällbete and it's still going on. It's been like a guinea pig, tested in many ways, but it's still alive and kicking and doing things.

Interviewer 2

Fjällbete is part of a larger thing called Savoury Institute, and that's a global network of 50 hubs. You are one hub, and they are in 30 countries and on six continents. How would you describe the impact when you are part of this larger entity? What do you think about this, being a hub in Savory Institute?

Guest

Well, it was an amazing, it was such a nice experience to find, you know finding your flock. It's a lot about finding your flock. So, when I encountered this, and I call it the language, the language of holistic management. This was back in 2009. It was a coming home feeling, like that, and then meeting with these people. as Savory Institute was formed, which happened in those years, 2013 being the first year when the strategy of making hubs for enabling local hubs around the world to be locally led, independent, but a network of such hubs. And as you said, Fjällbete or like me being the hub leader for the Nordic countries, which today is individual hubs for you know Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. So it's been growing in numbers, these hubs. But every place, like the thing about, like regenerative agriculture is about enabling what we want to grow or enabling under those particular circumstances, like where we are. So the the mindset of that agriculture is to listen in to whatever local conditions there might be and to collaborate with them. So the same thing applies with this hub strategy. Like all around the globe, there are such different conditions, such different needs and challenges and cultures. So every hub needs to find its own way of how to meet this challenge. Even though we made a very communicative vision. Let's have 1 billion hectares impacted by holistic management, meaning that they are regenerating, you know, back towards more vitality. So within your question, one may say “What might Scandinavian or Nordic culture bring to a global community like this?” and I believe we have something. The Nordic countries is where ideas 100 or 150 years ago were implemented, where we call it folk high school, like “people's education”. And I know, you know what I mean. But I don't know how to translate it to English. Um, this is something unique, that kind of movement. And as we are, our mission as a global network is to enable or allow a global movement for this regenerative agriculture. So we really have something to bring to that global community with this old tradition of people's education. And one way of translating this Swedish word, for folkbildning, which is the German word Volksbildung. Like the ideas are originated from Germany. So it could be translated to English like: “formation of the people”, like how people are, you know, building, forming themselves by encountering the challenges of being responsible as human beings on this planet. And we need to figure that out together in communities. We need to find others doing that. And then we need to reconnect to the nature as such. And this is what is being done all over the planet. It is for the love of the land. And it's being expressed in many ways in different cultures. But we have our special circumstances in Scandinavia. And it's been a pleasure to develop that locally and to communicate that into the global network. So, it's just a very cool opportunity, a privilege.

Interviewer 1

Okay, so nowadays we talk about sustainability a lot. So what does sustainability, sustainable change mean to you, through your work?

Guest

Yeah. So I'm old enough to be an environmentalist in the 90s when that word "sustainable", you know, became popular and it became extremely popular back then. And it's still, we still have that word. And then as we now are adopting this concept or this framework that we call holistic management, I call it a language as well, so to compare that, sometimes when I try to explain the difference with something being sustainable or it being regenerative, you can apply it on a marriage. How much would you like a sustainable marriage, like is it enough, you know, is "non-divorce" enough? Or would you like it to be regenerative? Would you like it to be able to, you know, evolve and become something more and better all the time? So the concept of sustainable is good. It's way better than all sorts of disasters, but we need to be more than sustainable. This is really the case when it comes to the underperformance of ecosystems, like how we've been beating our ecosystems to a level. If we don't want to be sustainable on that level, we really need to allow vitality to come back to the system. And that I can say right away, the connection, like what you may do when you walk out in the nature, or nature is everywhere, like any farm, field or whatever we might say. If you find a piece of nature, a piece of landscape where life is not performing, like where the web of life is not thriving, well, then you may say, well, there must be people who are not thriving. There must be people who are not well, who are not happy, because the way people are and the way the land is, is just totally connected. So in order to make the land thrive, we need to find the people who are belonging to this land and see what we can do, how we can enable them to thrive, in order for the land itself to thrive. It's more than sustainable, and people who are working with organic, they feel a bit provoked when I say that regenerative is more than organic, you know, more than sustainable. That's how I look at it.

Interviewer 2

It's almost poetic. Can you share some specific examples of sustainable changes you have implemented or witnessed in Fjällbete or other places in your career? Some examples for us students?

Guest

Yeah. Well, there are amazing examples of land that has been really suffering and how they have become, you know, green and lush and very productive. And it has been made, is being made as we speak. And I can just give you that example. Knowing what kind of school you are at, like Danish pension funds invested in Australia in fencing and water, to supply land with fences and water so we can bring animals, grazing animals, in this case cows. So it's a very physical infrastructure of fencing and water and that you can just bring life back into that landscape and. And you can bring back wildlife in and all sorts of biodiversity with fences and water and knowledge about how you are moving around those cows. So it's very striking to see that kind of landscape, you know, go turn green simply. It is less striking when we are in our kind of water cycle in Nordic countries, it makes it very hard to make a desert. Whatever we do, it just wants to go green again, so there's a lot of vitality built in like that still. Yeah, so I was just giving the example of how striking it is to see a desert turn green. Still, in landscapes such as ours, the potential for vitality and life is even bigger. So we can see here, or I see in many of us in this network, simply by listening into the

landscape and allowing livestock to return or to play, allowing the cows or whatever grazing animals, to allow them to be the ecosystem builders. They are like a fundamental piece in the ecosystem, enabling it to thrive. So I'm seeing that in many places. And yeah, if you're out in the landscape, you may see some bird watchers. They are looking up into the sky and into the trees. And when you see our kind of people, they're looking down, they're looking at the soil, looking for what's happening on the soil. So that's what we are nerdy about, and to see how we can enable the land to thrive. That's just a very cool thing.

Interviewer 1

So, you already talked about this, but we are business students, and holistic management is quite a new concept for us. So, what does the concept mean to you in addition to the things you already said?

Guest

Yeah. So, being this amazing species, human beings, we have this capacity to, we are able to respond. Like, we have a particular awareness and we are able to respond. So we have this huge responsibility that we can choose not to, you know we can deny that responsibility or we can choose not to be or not to take it on, but it is there anyway. Like, there is no way we can not have a great impact on this planet when we are a living human being. And when I say that, I say that we can do amazing things, every one of us. Each and everyone has got this potential. And you may, like if you were to have a conversation and say "Well, what can a person do, what kind of impact could I possibly have with my life, as I live my life?". And the impact of a human being just may go on for many, many years after we are dead as well. So we have this potential of having a great impact. That impact can be a positive one and it could be a negative one, like it can help life thrive or it can destroy life. So we are like this amazing destroyer or enabler of life, everyone. So this is, we call this a holistic context, like this thing of holistic management means that, is a holistic context guiding your everyday decisions. So, every one of us are making decisions every day. Those decisions lead towards, or is providing us with the life that we get, like our own decisions are giving us the life that we get. We may be actual victims of circumstance from time to time. Maybe something falls down from the sky and kill us and we couldn't do anything about it. But overall, we are very, there's a very big connection between our own personal decision making and choices and what kind of life we get. So to me, these are the fundamentals. And since we are all eating food and drinking water, we are all totally connected to the nature, to the landscape. Like whatever we do, whatever business we are into. So farming is everybody's business in that way. So the concept of holistic management is the opportunity, or the tool for people who choose to take on more of that responsibility, that we all have to admit that we have or, like, we have it. And as human beings, we have a tendency not to admit the problems that we don't have the solution for. Like, when we are asked these tough questions, we tend to not even admitting that there is a problem anywhere, but we're happy to take on the problem as soon as we can see the solution. And this has got a lot to do with business. So you have this identity of a business person and some of those business people have said that there is no business on a dead planet. And that's one cool way of, of saying it. But those questions, when you start to say that like, okay, so "How can I be a business person and still be able to give myself and my loved ones the life that we want, without being of such a negative impact to the rest of the world?", like is there a way? And in general, there is, there are possibilities. So yeah, so the answer is that holistic management,

as it is the tool to dare, you know, to take on responsibility, is a tool, or a concept for all people, business people especially because they are impactful people.

Interviewer 1

You have talked about educating the people, sharing knowledge and working together. Why do you think those are meaningful? So why do you educate people and share your knowledge?

Guest

Yeah, and I am avoiding the word educate as well. I am enabling learning to take place. Like, people are always learning. No one ever taught anyone anything. Someone said that, because, you know, we're doing it ourselves. In order to respond, I think I would like to remind you of the the concept of seven generations, assuming that you are familiar, or if you are not, I'll tell you. Seven generations is the amount of people that you are able to meet. Like when you are a newborn, you can meet with the previous generations, the ones who were there before you, and before you die you can meet with the newborns before you die and that covers about seven generations. There is this chain of people over generations, where three generations at the time have got their feet on the land, like they are alive together and in the same way as when I'm handling livestock, cows or sheep, or something like that, I need to understand them at the flock level, at the level of a flock, and not only flock within one certain, like within the present time. It's over time as well. It's how this flock is relating to its world. And we, as a species we are one unit. Like, looking at those seven generations over time and the group of people and what we can do when we are sharing whatever knowledge and experience we have with each other effectively within the group we are and over time, across time. So accumulated experience and knowledge is why we are achieving the stuff that we are achieving. Like we are this amazing species able to accumulate knowledge over time and apply it you know, apply it with adaptation to whatever circumstances might be at hand. So we have that capacity and we have not been using the capacity fully to be responsible for all of those actions and all those skills that we do have. We are acting as if we are not aware of this, of our super powers. All the circumstances enabling new people to come into this world, meaning that there's a natural focus on the mothers, like the mothers giving birth to children. Like, if the focus of the entire community is on how we can provide the best possible conditions as new babies are brought into this world. How can we enable these new people to tap into all the experience, all the capacity or the knowledge that we have been gathering so far, like, that's how we survive. That's how we can survive. It's just weird how we seem to have forgotten those very fundamental things. This is just a normal way that Homo sapiens has been living for a long time, you know, for long periods of time. So we just need to remind ourselves that this is how it works, and it's all about sharing. We share our knowledge and experiences in all sorts of ways, helping each other to figure things out.

Interviewer 2

How do you see the future of sustainability? There's been some political setbacks right now happening in the EU and in the US. How do you see the future?

Guest

Yeah. Well, I am optimistic. I believe that we are going to survive. And I believe that we will, uh, remind ourselves how amazing we are as people. Like, human beings are more than

amazing. We are such miracles, like every one of us. When you say setbacks, when it comes to like the way we have been forming institutions, them being political or like, you know, institutional that way, or companies, we've been doing it in a way to avoid responsibility for ourselves, saying that well, I can vote for this or that person or I'll leave it to the science people. Like, this whole, you know, Greta Thunberg movement that is all about leaving it to the experts. We need to give credit to the seemingly smart people, being the experts, the intellectuals, so to speak. And that's something that we cannot do if we're going to fix this, we're going to take all the responsibility for ourselves. So, uh, stop voting for people that are claiming that they can take the responsibility for you. Vote for the people who would like to help you take responsibility for yourself, I think. I believe that is what's going to happen because it needs to happen. Otherwise it would just be too sad a story.

Interviewer 1

Thanks.

Interviewer 2

So, we thank you, Jörgen, for your time.

Outro (Interviewer 2)

And thank you to all our listeners for joining us.