

Cows Eat Rabbits!

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In the Spring of 1997, while attending a class called “Plant-Herbivore Interactions” at Utah State University, my professor popped a slide onto the screen showing a Holstein steer holding the body of a small brown rabbit in its mouth. I was horrified. How could a cow chase down and catch a rabbit, let alone eat it?

The steer was part of a research project to determine the effects of mineral deficiencies on cows and it was suffering from a lack of phosphorous. In the course of the project researchers discovered it eating a dead rabbit it had found. Curious, they threw more dead rabbits into the pasture, and soon the steer and all its herd mates were eating them. The more rabbits they ate, the less phosphorous deficient they became thanks to the mineral content of the rabbits’ bones, leading scientists to discover that when necessary, even cows can become carnivores to solve their mineral deficiencies.

This picture was my introduction to a new way of looking at animal diets and behavior. For the past 9 years I’ve explored the literature on how animals choose what to eat and do and I’ve discovered that one of the biggest limitations on what they can and cannot do is the human mind. Now, I don’t advocate feeding rabbits to your cows. But by expanding our minds a bit, we can improve animal health and the sustainability of the land we manage simply by working with animal behavior to let them do what they were made to do – CHOOSE WHAT TO EAT TO MEET THEIR NEEDS!

I won’t say this is easy. Mind expansion is one of the most difficult tasks we all face on a daily basis. But it can be rewarding, and in this case, it should decrease your worries and the time you spend working for your animals. Here are some illustrations of how this might help you at home:

1. Are pesky weeds taking over your pasture in spite of your efforts to kill them? Don’t want to bring in goats or sheep? Train your cows to eat them instead! Since 2004 I have been using behavior principles to turn cows into weed managers. Weeds are often at least as nutritious as alfalfa, cows gain weight and stay healthy eating them, and usually the only reason they don’t eat them is that they don’t know they’re forage. So far I’ve taught cows how to eat Canada thistle, leafy spurge and spotted knapweed in Montana, and distaff and Italian thistle in California using steps that anyone could use at home. In fact, training can take as little as five days!
2. If you’re mixing feed for your animals and are frustrated because they pick through it and spit out the things that you think are good for them, quit mixing the feed. Both research and on-the-ground programs demonstrate that if you simply give your animals an opportunity to choose from a variety of foods with different levels of energy and protein, they’ll eat what they need, they’ll gain weight at the same rate, and it’s cheaper, takes less work, and is less frustrating for you.
3. Still looking for the perfect pasture mix? Don’t mix it, patch it. You might have noticed that when animals are grazing in a pasture, they eat some plants first, and other plants later. They are actively mixing their own diets. There is loads of research showing that they can be more efficient if forages grow in patches so that they can choose what they need more easily. In fact in one experiment, sheep were able to eat 25% more, and in another, dairy cows increased milk production by 11%.

These are just a few examples of how an understanding of animal behavior can reduce your workload and increase your bottom line, and I’ll cover them in greater depth in future columns. In the next few months I’ll start by explaining what you need to know to turn your cows into weed managers and describe the steps involved in getting going. Along the way I’ll share with you the principles behind why animals do what they do and eat what they eat, as well as the latest discoveries by scientists working in the field. I look forward to hearing from you about your questions and your own discoveries too!

