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Saving Our Heritage Livestock

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The genetic diversity of domestic livestock is dwindling at an alarming rate. This is happening wherever there is factory farming, with its reliance on hybrid stock. The old purebreds are rapidly being lost. Animals that were common twenty years ago are now hard to find.

Purebreds have been developed to suit climate and ecotone, and for enhanced instincts. Factory hybrids are selected for production only.

For example, consumers supposedly regard white-skinned meat more refined or hygienic. When factory farming is phased out (already happening in parts of the world), white pigs will be particularly unsuited to life on the free range, as they would get too badly sunburnt. (Without an ozone layer the sun has never been this fierce.)

Pig farmers of the future will need coloured outdoor pigs, which can integrate with organic market gardening systems. It's already happening. Meanwhile, the rare pure breeds must be maintained and their numbers greatly increased if the demand for free range meat is to be satisfied.

A type close to the wild breed, the Berkshire has good foraging and mothering instincts. Imelda (see Figure 1) was rescued from a piggery (bought by the kilo) at age 5 months. Arriving at her new home, a forest yard, she fainted. Twenty minutes later she was rooting about in the humus for the first time in her life – with total delight.

Animals in Permaculture

When issues of welfare, chemical residue and environmental degradation are resolved – intensive animal monocultures will inevitably be outlawed. It is already happening in Europe.

Free-range and permaculture systems should prepare to become the sustainable alternative.

Figure 1: *Imelda, the Bershire pig*

Future farms should have a healthy diversity of genetic material, sourced from ancient breeds of livestock and plants that are hardy under natural conditions.

Permaculture networks can help disseminate genetic material. It's already happening with seeds. Now we need to intensify efforts to preserve and maintain rare breeds of ancient livestock; and to incorporate more animal production into our design systems.

Breeds selected should be most suited to the climate and biome. If each permaculture farmer could maintain one appropriate breed of each type of livestock and breed it pure – then the threat of extinction will be averted.

Thinking bio-regionally – one sources animals within the region, reducing stress and fatality in transit. An exception can be made with poultry. Fertile egg settings can travel vast distances by air, courier, or ordinary post, easily and cheaply. (But suffer reduced hatchability with the longer treks, unless brought by hand on a plane.)