

INTENSIVE GRAZING

IS IT WORKING FOR YOU?

By Av Singh

Over thirty years ago, University of Vermont professor Bill Murphy wrote a book, *Greener Pastures on Your Side of the Fence: Better Farming with Voisin Grazing Management*, which served as the grazier's Bible as they journeyed through grass-based livestock production.

For many, the results were unexpected—healthier animals, healthier pastures, more productivity, and lower costs. In the farming world, intensive rotational grazing is what we call a “no-brainer”—it's pretty close to a real free lunch.

Now thirty years later, especially in these tough economic times, one might expect intensive rotational grazing to be the norm and the model by which all other farming systems might be compared to. Unfortunately, intensive rotational grazing is the exception rather than the rule. In this article, we explore some of the possible reasons behind its lack of adoption by farmers, as well as some insight for those who may want to explore grass-based livestock production.

What's in a name...

Rotational grazing, Voisin grazing management, intensive rotational grazing, intensive grazing management are just some of the terms thrown around when discussing pasture management and they all have slightly different definitions depending on the user. For the purposes of this article we are defining rotational grazing using two key elements:

- 1) dividing your land into small areas, and then
- 2) rotating animals through these paddocks allowing pasture plants appropriate time to recover from being grazed.

Sound simple? As a concept, intensive grazing management is elegantly simple but extremely com-

plex in its application. To highlight the importance of management, many graziers have come to the agreement that management-intensive grazing (MIG) is a more appropriate name because emphasis is placed on *management* and not on the frequency of grazing.

So, why focus so much on what you call

something...just get out there and do it! Many readers are just thinking that this is how some “swivel-chair expert” (I resemble this) makes something simple become confusing. Well, often that may be true but, in this case, the lack

of emphasis on management may help explain why so few livestock producers have stuck with MIG. Managing such a complex system such as the soil:plant:animal interface demands humility, skill, flexibility, ingenuity, incredible powers of observation and attention to detail.

“Good judgement comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgement.”

—Fraser Stewart

Developing the “grass-eye”

Graziers have coined the phrase “developing the grass-eye” as their form of technology. A grazier's tools do not come in the form of prescriptive recipes. They come from taking the time to observe and interpret the constant flow of signals from a dynamic pasture system and knowing when to graze and when

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to rest the pasture plants. Much of this cannot be taught; it has to be learned and that is where humility comes in. Fraser Stewart, long-time forage specialist in Manitoba described the learning process in MIG using this quote, “*Good judgement comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgement.*”

Just like other farmers, graziers need to not only recognize their mistakes but also quickly alter their practice to ensure that the mistake has been remedied. For example, managing the “spring flush” (when pasture growth is rapid) requires animals to be rotated quickly to prevent pastures from maturing too quickly and the quality of the forage deteriorating. At the same time, the high-quality forage may be too rich for young animals and the grazer may need to introduce hay to ensure proper rumen function. Throw in a few other variables like weather, animal health and economics into the equation and you might be getting a clearer picture of why only the brave survive.

MIG technology is high-tensile electric fencing and a watering system—relatively simple and inexpensive tools.

Increasingly, farming has become reliant (perhaps dependent) on technological tools or external expertise in decision making. MIG technology is high-tensile electric fencing and a watering system—relatively simple and inexpensive tools. Developing the grass eye



requires new ways of seeing and thinking, and requires patience and time. In a society that equates time with money and demands immediate results, the attraction to MIG diminishes.

Putting the “grass” into grassroots

Much like the organic farming movement of the late 1960s and early '70s (and arguably right up to the 1990s), the grass-based livestock movement was for the farmers by the farmers. The livestock industry, with the help of government and academics, was going in quite the opposite direction—favouring confinement feeding of conserved feeds and using technology to develop feed rations that further removed the farmer from the equation. In striking contrast, grass-based farmers were gathering in kitchens, doing collective pasture walks, and creating grazing networks to further the principles and practice behind MIG. In essence, what was created was a social movement in which farmer-generated knowledge was transferred or exchanged to other farmers.

Much like witnessing a conventional farmer transition to an organic system, these grazing networks provided farmers a chance to gain confidence in their own observations, an opportunity to express their intuitive understanding of the dynamic system, and, probably most importantly, it gave them a forum to share the success of practical solutions. The experiential knowledge gained and shared was far more important than any scientific knowledge.

It's all about the process...

Somewhat of a mixed-blessing, MIG is essentially a non-proprietary farming system—simply put, nobody (i.e. agri-business) is going to make much money off the farmer. As such, governments and universities placed little interest in grazing and therefore few academics were ever drawn to grass-based farming. However, the few that did venture into the marginalized realms of the pasture world were committed and receptive to taking the lead from the farmers. Professor E. Ann Clark from the University of



Guelph is one Canada's most outspoken advocates for pasture-based livestock production and she too has witnessed a decline in the practice of MIG. Dr. Clark strongly believes that MIG "is not for everyone—you need to have faith in

Nature, believe that Nature knows what it's doing." You won't find that in most textbooks, but you do hear those testimonials at grazing conferences and pasture walks.

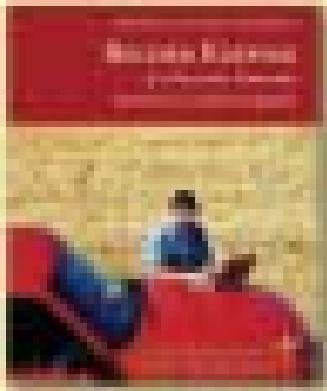
For the most part, these experiential or "hands-on" ways of

learning are more time consuming. Many new farmers wanted more quantitative ways of knowing. Academics responded using equations to calculate stocking density; rulers to determine when cattle should enter or exit a paddock; formulae to calculate how many paddocks—essentially all of the information needed so you wouldn't need to talk to another farmer. Sound familiar?


The strength of grass farming...comes from farmers coming together and sharing and gaining experiences.

The organic movement was founded on social capital—the coming together of farmers to share knowledge and experiences—to hone their collective intuition and to inspire each other. Now, new organic farmers and new graziers are often farming in isolation or getting their information from select individuals or textbooks. The results are unsurprisingly similar. Many new organic farmers and new graziers favour simpler management decisions and look for short cuts in the process; perhaps choosing an input over a practice, or following the practice poorly and therefore not realizing the potential benefits. Invariably, such choices lead to more problems. The system becomes increasingly dysfunctional, at which point many farmers decide that organic farming or MIG is not a good farming method.

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Strength in numbers

The merits of MIG are indisputable, both farmer testimonials and academic papers highlight such benefits as:

- reduction in labour requirements;
- improved animal health;
- greater per acre productivity;
- better profitability;
- greater satisfaction from their work; and
- healthier pastures and soils.

Extension specialists can talk about model farms and farmers who, through their experience, can showcase these benefits but the uptake from visiting farmers is still poor. Academics and extension agents, as well-intentioned as they may have been in trying to make the complex simple, may have undermined the necessary foundation for grass farming to prosper. The strength of grass farming does not come from numbers in a calculation or from expensive technological tools; rather it comes from farmers coming together and sharing and gaining experiences. In the words of one grass farmer, “Management inten-

sive grazing is about using your eyes and brain, rather than the power of your pocketbook.”

I conclude most of my articles with a selection of resources; pri-

marily books which I feel can help those interested in pursuing a particular practice. However, in the case of grass farming, I think it is imperative that you go out and meet other grass farmers—have kitchen meetings; conduct pasture walks; attend grazing schools; and simply share and gain knowledge and experiences about the dynamic world of the pasture.

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