

# Think Sustainability Is Simple? This Sheep Farmer Would Like a Word.

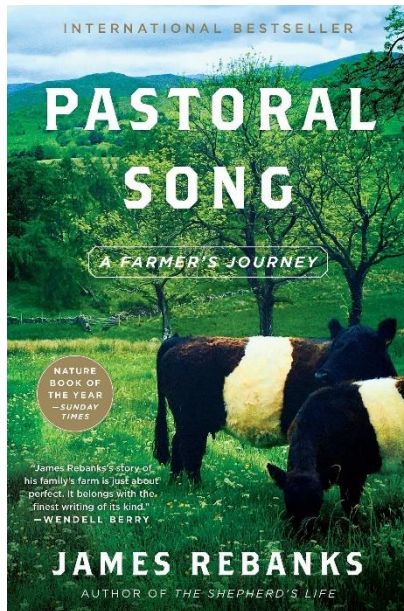
By Kristin Kimball for the New Times Book Review

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## PASTORAL SONG

A Farmer's Journey

By James Rebanks



Far too little of the ink spilled on the ethics of food production has come from those who are closest to the subject: farmers themselves. Thank the gods of agriculture for [James Rebanks](#), whose new book, “Pastoral Song: A Farmer’s Journey,” tackles the confounding problem of how to make money from land without wrecking it.

Rebanks’s 2015 memoir, “[The Shepherd’s Life](#),” told the story of how he, a dropout kid from a hardscrabble farm in England’s Lake District, fell into Oxford, got a posh education, became wildly homesick for his land and sheep, and returned home to figure out how to make a life there for himself and his family. It became a best seller, and since then, Rebanks has used his platform to address the complex issues of sustainable agriculture.

His ideas are couched in a lyrical narrative of experience, tracing 40 years and three generations of farming on his family’s land as it is buffeted by the incredible shifts in scale, market, methods and trade rules that have changed farming all over the world. His grandfather, who taught him the craft of farming, worked the land as the era of small-scale mixed farming that had been the traditional standard for centuries was coming to an end. We experience that esoteric life through Rebanks’s evocative storytelling, learning with him to appreciate not only the sheep and crops he’s learning to tend, but the wild plants and animals that live among and around them. As global changes reach their village, his father takes over the farm and becomes pinched between tradition and the weight of debt; he tries to scale up and intensify his methods, in order to meet the downward pressure of market prices, and loses much of the joy and beauty of his work in the process. As Rebanks himself becomes aware of the consequences of the new, ruthless efficiency, he notes how these changes threaten the habitats and ecosystems that the farm had nurtured for centuries, and fray the bonds of his rural community. Rebanks’s difficult job in the third generation is to reinvent the farm in a way that balances the ecological, social and economic accounts.

Rebanks is generous with his descriptions, and patient in explaining the choices farmers make every day that will decide the fate of rural communities and the planet itself, choices “rarely spoken of, shared or understood outside of the closed world of farming.” He addresses what sustainability really means, challenging the myth that simple solutions, like raising all plants and no livestock, or using yet more intensive farming methods, will solve our environmental problems.



The answer he gives to the question posed up front — how to make money from land without wrecking it — is an honest and difficult one: You can’t, and he doesn’t. Not in his corner of the world, under the current system. “I knew that if we farmed in more sustainable ways — and no one wanted to pay us to do that — then we would just go bankrupt.” Rebanks farms that way anyway, freeing the beck that flows through his land from the man-

made banks meant to make fields more productive, creating habitat for a wide range of plant and animal life, building the soil, planting trees. Meanwhile, he and his family graze his beloved Herdwick sheep plus a new herd of Belted Galloway cattle, without forcing them to produce beyond their reasonable limits, and leaving room at the margins of the farm for nature. As a result, the birds come back to his fields, wild animals fill their old niches and a botanical census counts nearly 200 species of flora on his 185 acres, where an intensively farmed field of the same size might hold three or four. (Image: Oli Scarff/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images)

Rebanks gets plenty of accolades for this less profitable style of work, but, as he says, applause doesn’t pay the bills. Large-scale farms using intensive methods in different places around the globe will always beat a small farm like his on price. Shiploads of sheep from New Zealand, with its vast scale and huge machines, sink the market price of lamb in England. The farm makes almost no money, and devours it all. Instead, he chooses to make a living for his family off the farm, so as not to betray the land he loves so much, until a better system emerges.

What would that better system look like, for his farm and others like it? He believes it would require consumers to favor food grown nearby, so they can understand and engage with it, see it, participate in it, question and challenge it when needed. It would need protections to keep unsustainably produced cheap food out of shops and markets. And it would phase out fossil fuel-based chemicals, over time. These ideas could use more development, but Rebanks shows clearly that hope hinges on who exactly is willing to pay the real price of food and good farming. Creating space for a farm like his, in a world like ours — space for nature, animal welfare, craft and skill — requires buy-in from governments and their taxpayers, philanthropists and enlightened consumers who

are willing and able to foot a bigger bill. The stakes couldn't be higher for the planet, and for agricultural communities worldwide.

Kristin Kimball is the author, most recently, of "Good Husbandry: Growing Food, Love and Family on Essex Farm."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/01/books/review/pastoral-song-james-rebanks.html>