

# Cattle and Conservationists on the Same Side of the Fence



The conversation around red meat in our diets is often singled out in environmental discussions. But there are many little-known facts and benefits about raising beef that don’t make the headlines. Animal agriculture continues to be singled out as a significant contributor to climate change related to resource use and greenhouse gas emissions; however, there’s no simple black and white answer as to whether plant-based diets are more

sustainable or better for the health of the planet. In Canada, raising cattle accounts for only 2.4 percent of Canada’s total greenhouse gas emissions, whereas transportation accounts for a 28 percent.<sup>1</sup> Although they might seem at odds, agriculture, environmental, and conservation efforts have overlapping interests and collaborative benefits. In fact, when it comes to protecting habitat for wildlife, cattle play a key role. Just as bison kept

grasslands viable and healthy for centuries, grazing cattle contributes to healthy soils and natural nutrient cycling in the grasslands and wetlands. In maintaining these natural habitats, cattle help preserve the unique ecosystem that many wild birds and other species call home. Cattle play a unique role in mitigating food waste by consuming crops and crop byproducts that humans aren’t able to eat. As cattle are primarily raised on grass-based

pasture and native grasslands, the majority of their food comes from these natural forages. More than 86 percent of cattle feed isn’t suitable for human consumption.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, cattle are raised on lands that are not suitable for growing vegetables or crops – land that is too rocky or hilly to cultivate – so ranching actually gives Canadians the benefit of gaining a powerful protein food from that land. And because only nine percent of cropland in Canada is used for growing cattle feed crops — including barley, oats, corn, and wheat — raising

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cattle is oftentimes the best and most environmentally-beneficial use these lands.<sup>1</sup>

**Advances in sustainability**  
For the last few decades, gains have been made in the reduction of the environmental footprint of raising cattle. Feed efficiencies and other

technologies have resulted in a 14 percent decline in greenhouse gas emissions per kg of beef produced since the early 1980s. There is continued investment funding in research to find further improvements. The Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (CRSB) was formed in 2014 to promote beef sustainability in Canada. The multi-stakeholder organization (including cattle ranchers, government and environmental groups) is focused on continuous improvement and best practices in raising cattle from environmental, social and economic perspectives, achieved through collaboration, benchmarking and recognizing sustainable practices on Canadian farms and ranches right through to the consumer via a third-party certification program. The CRSB has developed collaborative working relationships with conservation groups like Ducks Unlimited Canada and Bird Studies Canada.

Melissa Vekil

**Source:**  
<sup>1</sup> Legesse, G., Beauchemin, K. A., Ominski, K. H., McGeough, E. J., Kroebel, R., MacDonald, D., McAllister, T. A. (2015, December 23). Greenhouse gas emissions of Canadian beef production in 1981 as compared to 2011. *Animal Production Science. Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef.* (2016). *National Beef Sustainability Assessment and Summary Report.* Calgary: [https://crsb.ca/assets/Uploads/About-Us/Our-Work/NBSA/290ae9c611/NBSA\\_and\\_Strategy\\_summary\\_report\\_web1.pdf](https://crsb.ca/assets/Uploads/About-Us/Our-Work/NBSA/290ae9c611/NBSA_and_Strategy_summary_report_web1.pdf)

## Ducks and Cattle Are Better Together



**Kristine Tapley**  
Beef Specialist,  
Ducks Unlimited Canada

Ducks Unlimited Canada is a charity that aims to conserve, restore and manage wetlands and other habitats critical to North America’s wildlife. Partnering with government and industry, as well as individual farmers and ranchers, Ducks Unlimited Canada has been working hard to safeguard habitats for more than 80 years. The organization believes that the role of raising cattle in preserving the grassland and wetland habitats for wildlife is crucial. Just as hedges require trimming to stay vibrant, grass needs mowing to promote plant and animal species diversity – and cattle are the ultimate lawn-mower. “Ducks and cattle both need two things to survive: grass and water,” explains Kristine Tapley, Beef Specialist at Ducks Unlimited Canada. “Because of this, grasslands and wetlands found on landscapes managed by beef farmers and ranchers are more often protected, because they understand the value these important areas bring to their land and to all Canadians.” Tapley notes that without proper land management by beef farmers and ranchers, valuable grasslands and wetlands would be lost to cultivation and drainage. “There are long-term financial pressures resulting in the conversion of grasslands to cropland, urban sprawl and other development,” she says. The environmental benefits of preserving grasslands and wetlands include water filtration, mitigating floods and droughts, and promoting biodiversity. “The preservation of these agricultural lands is also key to meeting changing food demands by consumers,” says Tapley. “That’s why raising less cattle, or no cattle at all, would have negative impacts across communities, infrastructure, and the environment.” The partnership between Ducks Unlimited Canada and beef farmers and ranchers is beneficial for all parties, according to Tapley. “A sustainable future for Canadian beef coincides with our habitat goals, as both require a landscape consisting of grasslands and wetland areas.” Because of this, Tapley says the organization is in a unique position to tell a positive story about beef farming in Canada and how it directly benefits the environment. “Most Canadian beef farmers are doing everything within their power to leave their land and the natural areas under their care better than when they received them,” she says. To help cattle farmers and ranchers meet and exceed their sustainability goals, Ducks Unlimited Canada has collaborative partnerships with Canadian agricultural leaders to help change the narrative on agriculture and the environment.

## Let Them Eat Grass



**Dr. Christian Artuso**  
Director, Manitoba,  
Bird Studies Canada

Similar to Ducks Unlimited Canada, cattle ranchers and farmers also have a unique and innovative partnership with Bird Studies Canada, a national bird conservation organization. Through public engagement, collaborative partnerships, and science-based advocacy, Bird Studies Canada directs conservation planning across the country with a mission to preserve wild birds. Dr. Christian Artuso is the Manitoba Director for Bird Studies Canada and says that the prairie ecosystems are rapidly disappearing. “Unfortunately, we’ve already lost three-quarters of Canada’s native grasslands to land cultivation and development, because the soil quality is so appealing,” he says. “There’s a reason we call the prairies ‘Canada’s bread-basket.’” But eliminating grasslands means eliminating precious wildlife. Extinction is a real possibility for many of Canada’s treasured bird species, explains Dr. Artuso. “Once considered Manitoba’s most abundant bird, the Chestnut-colored Longspur has lost thousands of square kilometres of its former range in Manitoba and more than 80 percent of its global population since the 1970s.” That’s just one example that makes conservationists like Dr. Artuso nervous about the future. “Many wild bird species rely on grassland habitat, and a lot of the habitat they have left is in the hands of cattle farmers and ranchers who take care of the land,” he says. Indeed, the prairies are a dynamic landscape that require ecological processes to keep them healthy. Cattle grazing brings balance to the ecosystem by ensuring that thickets don’t develop, which can cause invasive wildlife species to enter, disrupting the ecosystem and the wildlife living in it. “Without active management like grazing, the grasslands change. If we put up fences and leave them static, they get encroached and can no longer sustain wildlife,” says Dr. Artuso. Bird Studies Canada views cattle as a true ally in its mission to conserve the native prairies. “As conservationists, if we want to save wild species, we have to collaborate with the agricultural to discover ways — such as cattle grazing — to allow biodiversity to thrive,” Dr. Artuso says. He recently became involved in the Keep Grazing project, which stewards Manitoba’s remaining grasslands. “Keep Grazing actually became our slogan because we need to keep cattle pastures or risk losing them,” he says. “The idea was to find an incentive to reward beef farmers and ranchers for the habitat they’re [already] doing a good job of managing.” The project, backed by the Environment and Climate Change Canada fund, a Species at Risk on Agricultural Lands (SARPAL) program, which helps support farmers and ranchers by providing incentives for good practices that protect native ranges. Dr. Artuso recognizes that the partnerships between environmentalists, conservationists, and farmers may seem unusual, but insists that in southern Canada where native grasslands occur, there is an opportunity to use beef as a tool for conservation. “When you consider the habitat being saved by raising beef, the environmental benefits of perennial cover in the form of native grasslands, and the ecosystem services they provide, cattle ranching comes up as a champion.”

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