

# Cattle in Community – a vital part of the past, present and future

Barbara Corson

## Abstract

Cattle were the basis of civilization as we know it. Ironically, cattle are now unseen and unknown in the civilizations they initiated and helped to create. In the developed areas of the world, the connection between humans and cattle has been lost, and along with cattle, humans have increasingly lost other connections: with natural processes, with the land, with non-human species, and with other human beings in community.

There is increasing awareness of the problems that loss of connection can cause in economic, sociological and ecological systems, but there is less awareness of the roles that cattle played and still play in agrarian societies past and present. The 10,000 years that humans have been farming with cattle represent a body of knowledge and experience that should guide us into the future. Human communities formed around cattle in the past, and cattle can help us establish connections again.

## Résumé

Les bovins ont été à la base de la civilisation telle que nous la connaissons. Ironiquement, ils sont aujourd'hui invisible et inconnu dans les civilisations qu'il a initiées et contribué à créer. Dans les régions développées du monde, le lien entre l'homme et le bovin s'est rompu, et avec le bovin, l'homme a progressivement perdu d'autres liens : avec les processus naturels, avec la terre, avec les espèces non humaines et avec les autres êtres humains de la communauté.

On prend de plus en plus conscience des problèmes que cette perte de lien provoque dans les systèmes économiques, sociologiques et écologiques, mais on est moins conscient du rôle que le bétail a joué et continue à jouer dans les sociétés agraires passées et présentes. Les 10 000 années pendant lesquelles les humains ont pratiqué l'élevage avec le bétail représentent un ensemble de connaissances et d'expériences qui devraient nous guider vers l'avenir. Dans le passé, les communautés humaines se sont formées autour du bétail, et celui-ci peut nous aider à rétablir des liens.

## Kurzfassung

Rinder waren die Grundlage der Zivilisation, wie wir sie kennen. Ironischerweise sind Rinder heute in den Zivilisationen, die sie initiiert und mitgeschaffen haben, unsichtbar und unbekannt. In den entwickelten Regionen der Welt ist die Verbindung zwischen Mensch und Rind verloren gegangen, und mit den Rindern haben die Menschen zunehmend auch andere Verbindungen verloren: zu natürlichen Prozessen, zum Land, zu nichtmenschlichen Arten und zu anderen Menschen in der Gemeinschaft.

Das Bewusstsein für die Probleme, die der Verlust dieser Verbindung in wirtschaftlichen, soziologischen und ökologischen Systemen verursachen kann, wächst, aber das Bewusstsein für die Rolle, die Rinder in agrarischen Gesellschaften in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart gespielt haben und immer noch spielen, ist geringer. Die 10.000 Jahre, in denen Menschen mit Rindern Landwirtschaft betrieben haben, stellen einen Wissens- und Erfahrungsschatz dar, der uns in die Zukunft führen sollte. In der Vergangenheit bildeten sich menschliche Gemeinschaften um Rinder herum, und Rinder können uns helfen, wieder Verbindungen herzustellen.

## Resumen

El ganado fue la base de la civilización tal y como la conocemos. Irónicamente, hoy en día el ganado es invisible y desconocido en las civilizaciones que él mismo inició y ayudó a crear. En las zonas desarrolladas del mundo, se ha perdido la conexión entre los seres humanos y el ganado, y junto con el ganado, los seres humanos han perdido cada vez más otras conexiones: con los procesos naturales, con la tierra, con las especies no humanas y con otros seres humanos de la comunidad.

Cada vez hay más conciencia de los problemas que la pérdida de conexión puede causar en los sistemas económicos, sociológicos y ecológicos, pero hay menos conciencia del papel que el ganado desempeñó y sigue desempeñando en las sociedades agrarias del pasado y del presente. Los 10.000 años que los seres humanos llevan dedicándose a la ganadería representan un conjunto de conocimientos y experiencias que deberían guiarnos hacia el futuro. En el pasado, las sociedades humanas se formaban en torno al ganado, y el ganado puede ayudarnos a restablecer las conexiones.



It is a great pleasure for me to participate in a conference dedicated to draft cattle. People who are interested in draft cattle or in any other manifestation of the human-bovine bond are relatively rare today, and getting more rare. This conference is a chance to exchange ideas on how we might be able to reverse that trend, or at least slow it.

We each have our own perspective on why reversing the trend and preserving the role of cattle in community is important, and what steps we could take to accomplish that goal.

Let the exchange of ideas begin! I'll start.

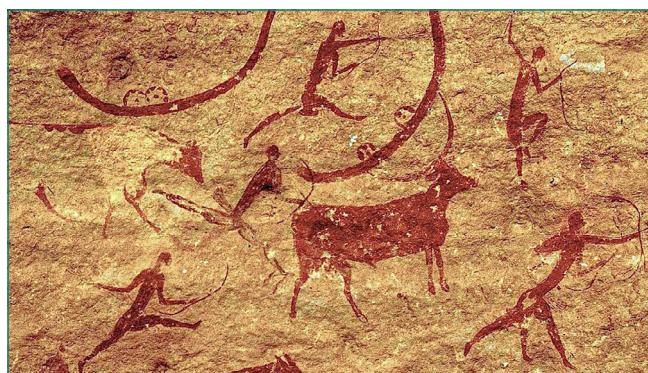
This gathering is important to me because I believe we have serious global problems that we are having trouble solving as a species. And I believe that the reason we can't solve them is: We are out of touch with who we are as human beings, and what our role in the natural world is.

It's like we have amnesia.

A man who wakes up with amnesia doesn't know who he is, or where he is, or who any of the other people in the room with him are. If he sees a fire in one corner of the room, he may *instinctively* react with fear, but instinct will not help him to assess the situation and deal with it effectively. To do that, he needs a working memory of facts like: 'A fire in a fireplace is ok, but fire climbing the curtains is not ok. A person putting logs on a fire in the fireplace is OK, but a person adding gasoline to a fire in the room is not ok.'

You get the idea.

Studying our present world will not help us cure our amnesia, and neither will looking at the past through modern eyes. For the past 75 years or so, industrial technology has allowed us to forget basic realities of the natural world, and it has also increasingly shielded humans from the consequences of that forgetting. In other words, industrialization and technology are both a cause of our current problems, and also the reason that we are unable to solve them. To correct our collective 'amnesia' we need a deeper and more timeless understanding of history and nature, and we need it fast. I believe that the participants in this conference represent an important resource for helping our species attain the deeper understanding that we need.



**Fig. 1** – A relationship with cattle has been part of being human for many thousands of years, as this cave painting from Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria attests (Wikimedia, Gruban, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Algerien\\_Desert.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Algerien_Desert.jpg), uploaded under CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>).

In spite of the importance of the cattle-human bond in shaping 'who we are, and how we got here', this bond is something that modern humans seem to be in a hurry to forget. I'm hoping that this gathering will be a step towards reversing that trend.

Like all of you, my ideas about cattle in community have been shaped by the circumstances of my life.

I was born in southeastern Pennsylvania, in the 1950s when tractors had just started to outnumber work horses on US farms. My family did not farm for a living, but it was a rural area and there were lots of small dairy farms where I loved to visit. I wanted to become a veterinarian so that I could help the farmers and their animals, but by the time I graduated from veterinary school in 1989, the area had been 'developed.' The small farms were gone and instead there were houses and highways, gas stations and shopping centers.

The industrialization of agriculture and the loss of small farms and forested areas is not unique to southeastern Pennsylvania, but it had an unique impact on me because I saw it happen and felt the loss personally. Seeing something happen is much different than reading about it. After graduating from vet school, I worked as a large animal veterinarian, but I wasn't helping small farmers; instead, I was part of the industrial agriculture that had replaced them.

To me the downsides of development were obvious and they far outweighed any gains. The people in the new houses, driving on the congested roads didn't understand what had been lost, and they didn't seem especially happy either. I wanted to understand the forces that were driving industrialization, but I didn't know anyone who had answers, or even anyone who was asking the questions. I wanted other people to join me in thinking about why things were changing so fast.

That was why I became a kind of 'volunteer bovine ambassador.'



**Fig. 2** – A live cow can help urban people connect with the more-than-human world (Photo: B. Corson).

To help make up for the lack of small farms in my life, I had cattle of my own, and I took them to local public events and historic sites, so that people who had never seen or touched a cow could have a chance to do so. And while they were seeing or touching the cow or ox, I tried to engage in conversation to find out what they thought about the questions I had.

Conversation is only possible if you start on ‘common ground,’ with a subject that is relatable. In my densely populated and urbanized area, people can’t really relate a living, breathing cow to anything in their modern life, except beef or milk. But even urban people can relate to modern equivalents of the non-food necessities that cattle provided for humans in the past: materials, power, soil fertility, and community stability. The way I typically tried to engage with people was to remind them of those non-food necessities, by saying something like this:

‘Today, we are so dependent on petroleum that we can’t imagine how anyone could live without it. But people *did* live without fossil fuels, for hundreds of thousands of years. How did they do it? A big part of the answer to that question is: Cattle. Yes, they used cattle for food, but cattle were even more important for the other things that humans need’.

I don’t know if my ‘traveling cow show’ made a lasting impression on anyone, but the process of trying to think of ways to communicate helped me form and clarify my own thoughts about what humans need to live. What follows is a summary of those thoughts...at least so far! My views are still developing, and I would value feedback from any readers.

## What humans need to live: Food

For people in industrialized nations, the list usually starts with ‘food,’ perhaps because we take air, water, space, and temperature regulation for granted, and like all animals, humans do need food. Specifically, humans are omnivores. The word means ‘devours all,’ and although that does seem apt in some ways, it’s actually not a good description of our nutritional needs. Far from being able to eat everything, omnivores are selective eaters. Omnivores require certain carbohydrates, but we can’t digest the most abundant carbohydrate of all: cellulose. We require some nutrients that are naturally present only in animal tissues, and most omnivores (e.g. bears, wolves, pigs) have specialized body parts that enable them to access animal tissues, but humans lack specialized body parts that would enable us to catch and eat most vertebrates, even small ones. Given these facts, you can see that there is something that humans need even more than food, i.e:

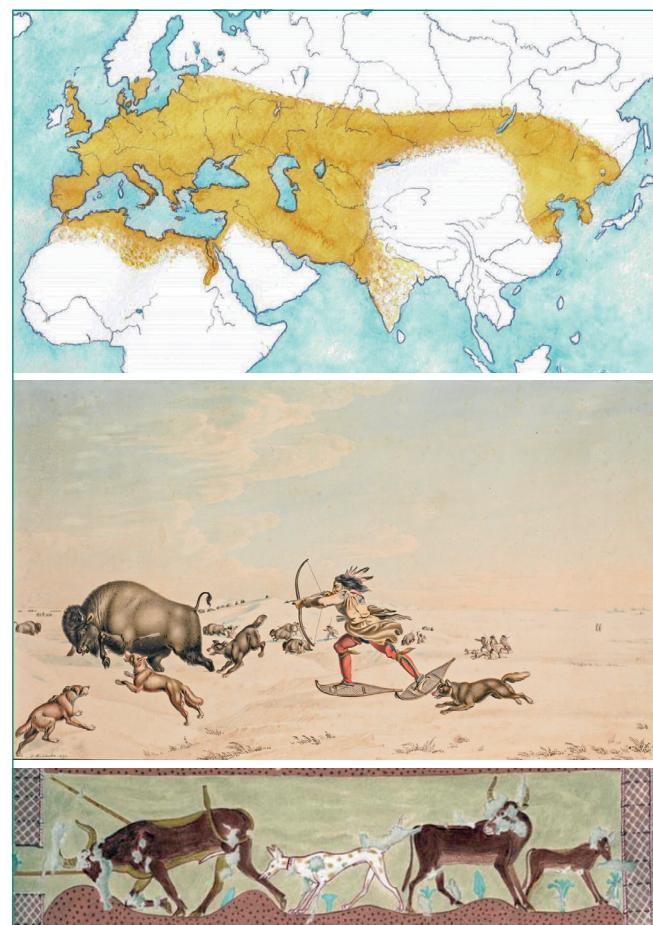
### Materials and tools

Other animals are born (or hatched) with bodily adaptations and instincts that allow them to obtain food-- and everything else they need to survive in their natural environment. But humans are not born with specialized body parts that allow us to survive in any particular environment. Instead, we make tools that allow us to alter our surroundings, or our interface with our surroundings, to increase the chances that our needs will be met.

For example, we can’t swim well enough to catch a fish, but we can make nets and hooks and fishing spears. With our teeth and fingernails alone, we can’t dismember even a young rabbit, but we can make a stone knife and use it to skin a bison. We can’t eat cassava roots raw, but we can make a fire and cook them. Correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems to me that humans are the only living thing that *needs* tools to survive. Many other animal spe-

cies use tools on occasion, but tool-making is the human hallmark because our species wouldn’t survive without them. Besides using tools to obtain food, humans need to use tools to create protection from the environment in the form of clothing, shoes, and housing. Although many animals make nests or otherwise alter their environment, only humans *need* to make and use tools to do it.

Our use of tools has allowed us to spread to different ecosystems all over the globe. Dependence on tools and technology means that human cultures are inevitably shaped by the materials that are available. The reason cultures on Papua/New Guinea differ from those in Northern Canada is not that different human cultures have different needs, but rather the difference in available materials. Cattle and their relatives the bison and buffalo overlapped developing human cultures in extensive areas of the planet in prehistory, and in those areas, cattle provided unique materials like leather, horn and tallow, as well as food.



**Fig. 3** – Long before domestication, many human cultures depended on wild bovids such as Aurochs or Bison (3.1 Maximum distribution range of the aurochs, including its subspecies, Picture M. Felius; 3.2 Bison hunting image ‘Assiniboines hunting on Snow Shoes’, painted by Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834), public domain; 3.3. Image of a North African aurochs hunt, public domain).

The relationship between early humans and resources is both practical and numinous. Humans living in contact with nature recognize the importance of resources that sustain human life. Cave art from ancient cultures (see figure 1) is evidence that cattle and other large herbivores were important and even sacred.

Besides our specific dietary needs and our dependence on materials, what else do humans need?

### Learning and community

As noted, other animals are born with specialized body parts, and the instincts to use them, but humans are born with very few instincts (e.g. gripping with our opposable thumbs, and suckling). We don't instinctively know how to make and use the tools we need to survive. All the skills a human needs to survive in a given environment have to be learned *by experience*, and since no human would live long enough to learn the necessary skills by their own experience, it is absolutely necessary for humans to live in communities, where experienced individuals can teach skills to the inexperienced and support them while they gain competence.



This helps explain why humans are 'tribal' and the most social of all social animals, and at the same time prone to irrational conflicts with other groups. Clinging to extreme beliefs in spite of contradictory evidence makes no sense until you remember that for humans, being part of a group has been a matter of life and death for thousands and thousands of years. For most of history, being part of a community has been much more important than logic for survival. In other words: 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care'.

### Energy needs

All living things need energy to do the work of staying alive. Plants can access the energy of the sun and store it, allowing it to be passed to animals as 'food energy'. But the human need for tools means that humans require more energy than other animals. This may seem counter-intuitive: People tend to think that 'tools make human life more efficient'... but it depends on what you mean by 'efficient'.

A mole, for example, uses food energy to move its body and dig underground to obtain more food. A mole's



**Fig. 4** – Humans are not born with instincts and instead need to learn necessary survival skills through mentored experience. These modern children are learning necessary skills through supervised participation (Photos: C. Kropf)

anatomy and physiology make it very efficient in turning food energy into the work of moving dirt and catching and eating invertebrates. For a human being, it's not a question of *how efficiently* she can dig underground tunnels using her arms and legs, and catch earthworms with her mouth... she simply can't do it. But a human *can* make a shovel or a digging stick. The tool makes digging possible for the woman, but it doesn't make her more efficient than the mole. Because she has to use food energy to find and make the tool, and then move the tool in addition to her own body, she is less efficient, thermodynamically, than the mole is.

It's possible to reduce human energy needs by fine-tuning tool design. As anyone who uses hand tools will know, some shovels or digging sticks or hoes are easier to work with than others. But the work of making and moving the tool is always part of the equation. This is true for all tools and technology, from stone knives to tractors and airplanes.



**Fig. 5** – Tool use enables humans to survive, but tools have energy costs („Woman with a digging stick“, von National Museum of Denmark, No known copyright restrictions).

Something else that adds to human energy needs is the prolonged period of dependency in our offspring compared to other animals. For example: Wolves are social animals, and a baby wolf is dependent on its mother and the pack for a period of weeks to months, but after that it can take care of itself as well as its mother can, and it can also contribute to the pack. Whereas a human infant is unable to do much for itself or for the group for years, because it takes time to develop the strength and skills necessary to use tools. During the period of incompetence, the child is a potential future asset for the group, but a short-term practical liability. In a stone age community, the number of non-productive members (either young or old) is limited either by human choice, or by natural consequences.

Without understanding the unique needs of humans (for materials, omnivore food, energy, and community) it is hard to grasp the significance of draft cattle.

If your source of energy for finding / producing an omnivore diet is limited to humans or other omnivores (e.g. dogs), every worker will also be a consumer and potential competitor, and it will be hard to produce a reliable surplus of food or other necessities.

But if you can incorporate an herbivore into your community, the situation is different. The herbivore can live

wherever there are plants producing cellulose, the most abundant organic molecule on Earth. If she is a tame herbivore that you can milk, you have a preservable source of high-quality protein and fat that is sustainable from year to year, as long as the climate supports plant growth.

If an herbivore is used for agricultural power, the resulting crop provides food energy for both herbivores (cellulose) and omnivores (starches, sugars, proteins and fats). Nothing is wasted because after cycling through the herbivore's digestive tract, the plant material returns to the soil in a parallel to natural cycles.

All this is well known to my current audience but for urban people like my neighbors in the United States, it's not known, and it's not enough to just hear the words or read them. The role of cattle in human history is a foreign language to urban people, and it has to be interpreted, which is what I was trying to do with my traveling cow show. It is being done today at outdoor museums and historic farm sites worldwide. An ox pulling a cart gets people's attention and can hopefully get them thinking about the impact of energy sources on human societies.



**Fig. 6** – Seeing an ox at a historic site can help urban people think about energy (Photo: B. Corson).

In industrial societies, people increasingly think physical work is drudgery at best, something to be avoided. So it's common for urban people to express concern about animal cruelty when they see a working animal. Although these concerned people generally mean well, they are often showing their ignorance of what makes for well-being in a social herbivore like an ox or a horse. I think they are also showing some misconceptions about what makes a human happy! Does happiness mean sitting on a couch all day watching TV? To me at least, happiness means learning to make useful and beautiful things, and having the chance to share the creations and experiences with others in the community. Humans naturally want to feel safe, accepted, needed and useful within our communities. That's what human nature has been for thousands of years, but modern life is not answering those needs for many. No wonder so many people in industrial societies are unsatisfied or unhappy.

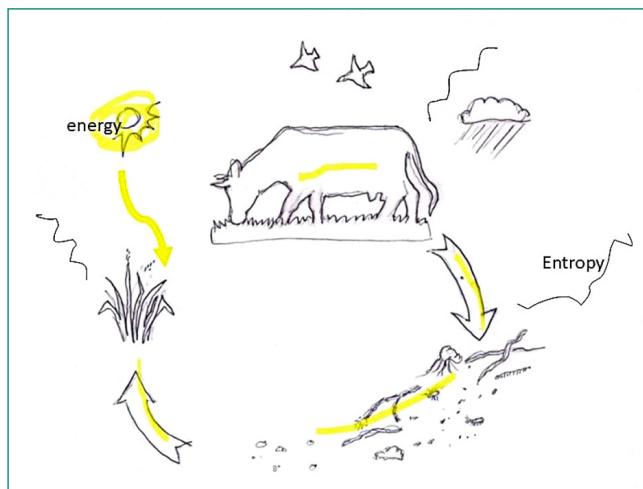
The fact that so many people have forgotten about the importance of cattle in agrarian cultures in the past and the present may seem like a trivial issue, but it is a sign of a much larger problem, i.e. the growing disconnect between humans and the natural world. As urbanization



and industrialization increase, more and more people are dependent on technology, and unaware of the effects of that technology on the natural ("real") world. Nothing illustrates this loss of contact with reality better than the use of fossil fuel.

At the time of this writing (March 2025) humans on Earth burn 100 million barrels of petroleum<sup>1</sup>, 23 million tons of coal<sup>2</sup>, and 11 billion cubic meters of natural gas<sup>3</sup> every 24 hours. These are obviously huge numbers, and especially staggering when you realize that the energy in one barrel of petroleum is equivalent to about 24,000 man-hours<sup>4</sup>. In 24,000 hours a human can do a lot of damage but they can also create and build things of lasting value if they choose to do so: planting forests, writing books, teaching children. Living things reverse entropy for a while, but a barrel of petroleum can only burn.

Contrast the idea of burning all that fossil fuel with this diagram which is meant to represent the 'real world', the not man-made world of nature.



**Fig. 7** – Life on earth depends on the cycle of elements from air, water and soil, through plants, into herbivores and other animals, and back into the air, water and soil (Figure: B. Corson).

With access to healthy soil, clean water and carbon dioxide, plants are able to capture the sun's energy in

- 1 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271823/global-crude-oil-demand/> (last accessed 21-09-2025).
- 2 <https://www.iea.org/energy-system/fossil-fuels/coal> (last accessed 21-09-2025).
- 3 <https://media.market.us/natural-gas-statistics/> (last accessed 21-09-2025).
- 4 <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010/june/our-lethal-dependence-oil#:~:text=In%20the%202006%20documentary%20A,equates%20to%2025%2C000%20man%2Dhours> (last accessed 21-09-2025).

carbohydrates and other organic molecules, which in turn provide food energy to herbivores and other animals. All living things produce organic wastes and eventually die, returning the elements to the environment, where they are available to be re-assembled into life again, as long as physical conditions permit.

Each step in the cycle is essential, and so if one step is important, they all are. Humans are used to thinking that life is the important thing, especially human life, but that is a little like thinking the brain is more important than the heart or the skin or the digestive system.

Humans are part of nature because everything we eat, drink or breathe depends on this cycle. But because we *need to use tools to alter nature*, at least a little, in order to survive, we are a little different than other life forms. Humans are so clever bending the limits of nature, that we have forgotten that there are limits, and that the limits are what has kept the system going.

We seem perilously close to finding out what happens when you push nature's limits to the tipping point. At this moment in time, we have unparalleled problems... but we also have unparalleled resources. The most important resource of all could be humans themselves. If human activities are causing our problems, the solution would be as 'simple' (and as challenging) as changing human activities. I believe that we could change our behaviours if enough of us wanted to, and I also believe most people would want to change if they understood the situation and saw some alternatives.

This gathering is a step towards developing that understanding and those alternatives, and I am happy to be a part of it.



**Fig. 8** – Imagine if everyone wanted to be part of the solution! (Photo: B. Hiltz, New Ross Freighters, Nova Scotia, Canada).



#### Author info

Barbara Corson

Retired Veterinarian, Animal Pathologist

E-Mail: [hooftales@msn.com](mailto:hooftales@msn.com)