

On Henry Mall

News from around the college

Kids at Work

Can grazing goats help restore Wisconsin's landscapes?

The slopes in the Yellowstone Wildlife Area are an impenetrable tangle of brambles, prickly ash, dogwood and honeysuckle. They need a thorough de-brushing. But the craggy hillsides are too steep to mow, and they're a nasty place to wield a chainsaw.

But it's terrific terrain for goats. That's why a land management firm was hired last summer to bring 85 Boer goats to this 4,000-acre DNR-managed property in Lafayette County. The goal is to restore the woodlands to oak savanna. This open mix of trees, sedges, wildflowers and grass dominated southern Wisconsin until settlers began controlling the wildfires that kept savannas free of brush.

"Oak savannas are of prime interest to both state and federal wildlife managers. That includes endangered species that require savanna habitat—red-headed woodpecker, vesper sparrow, brown thrasher—as well as game birds such as turkey and grouse," says CALS landscape architecture professor John Harrington. Harrington leads a team that is evaluating the goats' impact with support from a state program funding grazing research.

Goats love to browse on woody plants. They are used widely out West to get rid of such noxious weeds as leafy spurge and to clear brush from fire-prone hillsides.

But the idea doesn't sit well with some conservationists. Free-ranging livestock have done major damage to wild areas through overgrazing, spreading weed seed and causing soil compaction leading to erosion. Harrington hopes the project at Yellowstone, in which the goats are carefully managed by landscape restoration experts, will change some minds.

"Environmentalists have been really gun-shy—or goat-shy," says Harrington. "This study aims to see if we can use goats as a management tool without the problems grazing has caused in the past." Harrington hopes to conduct further research this summer.



PHOTO BY JULIA ELA

Graduate students Julia Ela and Katie Baumann, who monitored the animals, report that so far the damage has been negligible. There's no evidence of soil compaction—and if there's any problem with plant damage, it's that there hasn't been enough of it.

"The goats defoliate the shrubs, and they break and bend a lot of branches, but they don't necessarily kill them," Ela says. "It's clear that repeated grazing cycles will be necessary."

But just getting rid of the foliage opens up new management options, including reintroducing fire. "By opening up the cover, if we can get more grassy savanna plants growing back in, we can start applying both fire and grazing and achieve greater biodiversity," Harrington says.

Getting goats to eat more has a benefit beyond brush clearance. The firms that provide the goats supplement their management fees by selling mature animals for slaughter, taking advantage of a Midwest market for goat meat that has been rising along with the presence of ethnic groups that prefer it. The plumper the animals are when they come out of the woods, the more they'll fetch at market—and the more affordable this management practice can be.

—BOB MITCHELL BS'76

Workers you can eat:
Goats do a great job clearing weeds and brush from hillsides.