

Hudson-Mohawk Grass Masters throw darts at Hu-Hill Farm



by Elizabeth A. Tomlin, Country Folks correspondent

Although playing darts hardly seems like an activity one would participate in during an educational pasture walk, that is exactly what occurred recently at the Hudson-Mohawk Grass Masters “Reading the Land” Workshop, instructed by Natural Resources Specialist Phil Metzger, and ‘the Grass Whisperer’ Troy Bishopp.

Natural Resource Specialist Phil Metzger (left) records information on a Pasture Monitoring form, while ‘reading the land’ with the Hudyncias, (from left) Julia, Rob, and Shirley.

The workshop took place at Rob and Shirley Hudyncia’s Hu-Hill Organic Dairy Farm, where Holistic Management Educator Metzger and Bishopp led a pasture walk for approximately 40 participants, while assessing the health and productivity of the land, and discussing, providing, and demonstrating ways — including throwing darts — to monitor the land for the future.

Photos by Elizabeth A. Tomlin

“We’re looking at soil life,” Bishopp stated, noting that it was “probably one of the few times we’ve ever done this, especially with such a large group of people. There’s a pile of darts there and a grazing chart, and after we eat, we’re going to break into groups and monitor what we saw.”

Metzger encouraged the participants to take an active part during the walk. He reminded them that one objective of the workshop was for them to go back to their own farms and apply what they learned there. “We’re going to walk the land and identify some clues as to how you can read the land yourself,” Metzger stated. “It’s really key that you are an active participant. One of the things I like about Reading the Land is it gets us out of the ‘agency people are the experts model’ where farmers are to hear the knowledge from these experts and farm better. In fact, I think what really happens is that the true innovation happens on the farm. We’re all participants in this.”

Metzger said Holistic management includes indicators of soil health, community dynamics, signs of erosion, mineral cycle effectiveness, energy flow effectiveness, signs of overgrazing, signs of over rest, influences of plant habitat, things that affect soil permeability, and capped soil indicators. “The holistic management idea is essentially improved decision making in agriculture,” Metzger stated.

Metzger discussed “tools” available to land users and landowners, using the holistic management terms of “tools.”

“Animals are a tool,” he stated. Living organisms are tools.” Shovels and plows would be technology.

When monitoring the land's health, the soil surface holds important clues.

"You can really get a look at how healthy the land is by looking at the soil surface," Metzger explained. "

Looking at whatever's growing is the first step in evaluating the pasture's health, and Metzger encouraged the group to examine and identify what plants they observed growing in the different pastures throughout the walk.

"Get down and part the grass," Bishopp advised. "We want to know why that spot is bare. Everything here is practical, everything is by eye and feeling. I saw some nice lively cow pies I want you to really look at these cow pies and see what's actually going on inside of them."

Look at cow pies and the condition of them for dung beetle activity, the dung beetles are breaking down the manure and taking it down into the soil.

"My experience is that increasing the cows increases the dung beetles, it's more material for them, it becomes a richer environment, it increases bio diversity, and there's more organic matter in the soil," Metzger said.

Metzger stressed setting and recognizing goals in analyzing your pasture systems. "You may be managing towards maximum milk production or maximum grass growth," he said. "You're managing towards these broader objectives. I think it's really critical when you think about how you're going to manage land to remember that it's not just towards narrow goals." A broader objective is better for the land.

Looking at signs of earthworms, root layers, taproots, soil density, soil permeability, and diversity of plants growing in the pastures are a few indicators that will give you insight on the health of the pastures.

Community dynamics, water cycles, mineral cycles, and energy flow, ideally working hand in hand will promote healthy ecosystem processes, improving forage production in pastures. Using a monitoring analysis system for pasture health is a simple and easily understood diagnostic tool. One way to assess the health of the pasture is by throwing a dart — that has been well marked with surveyor tape — in many areas on your pasture walk. Each spot that the dart lands is examined and analyzed within a 6-inch circumference. Information on each spot is documented on a pasture monitoring form, which lists items, such as; whether the dart hit a plant, rock, litter, or bare soil. Evidence of insects, worms, erosion, manure, or animal is noted. The type, age, and condition, of plants found within the range are noted. The soil habitat is also examined and noted on the form. This evaluation should take place on a yearly basis to see if your pasture management has improved your pastures meeting your individual goals.

"You're going to get a base line of what's happening today," Bishopp said. "So if you go home and have learned anything here today, take some charts. It's totally going to change the dynamics of the sward out there just from management tips; where to put water and other things that are happening."

Interested in holding a Reading the Land workshop or attending one? Contact Donna Murray, Chair
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