

Beyond Regeneration

Guy Singh-Watson on Farming, Leadership and Why the Future Depends on Diversity

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Photo credit: Riverford.

After more than four decades in farming, Guy Singh-Watson remains driven by the same question that first drew him to growing food: how do we build a better food system? Speaking candidly about Riverford, environmental responsibility, leadership and the future of British agriculture, he reflects on what has changed, what hasn't, and why the answers may lie in learning from nature rather than trying to dominate it.

A Life in the Field

Despite stepping back from the day-to-day management of Riverford, Singh-Watson still describes himself first and foremost as a farmer.

What excites him isn't business growth or media appearances, but growing vegetables, cooking for family and friends, and spending time outdoors.

That connection to the land remains essential to his wellbeing. He describes himself as an introvert who recharges either surfing or simply being alone in the fields among the crops.

Even as Riverford has grown into an employee-owned business, his happiest moments are still spent with vegetables rather than spreadsheets.

Practical Solutions, Not Grand Theories

When asked about his current projects, Singh-Watson immediately turns to practical action. He is working on a community-owned wind turbine to supply renewable electricity, improving drought resilience through water storage, and supporting younger managers as they take on increasing responsibility. Rather than spending time theorising about environmental problems, he prefers tangible solutions.

This practical mindset runs throughout his farming philosophy Whether exploring renewable energy or redesigning irrigation systems, his instinct is always to ask, "What can we actually do?"

Forty Years of Learning

While many of his core beliefs remain unchanged, Singh-Watson says two things have evolved significantly.

Understanding ecology, he believes, ultimately makes farmers both better environmental stewards and better commercial farmers because they begin working with nature rather than attempting to overpower it.

First, he has become even more committed to environmental protection.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, he has become less driven by ego.

Earlier in his career, proving himself was a powerful motivator. Over time he has become increasingly aware of the impact leaders have on the people around them.

He reflects openly on becoming a better employer, husband and father, recognising that relentless ambition without self-awareness can leave considerable damage in its wake. Leadership, he believes, isn't simply about achieving goals, it is about understanding how you affect others while pursuing them.

Ecology: Farming's Missing Skill

One of the interview's strongest themes is Singh-Watson's belief that modern farming has become increasingly specialised and, in many ways, increasingly de-skilled. Mixed farming systems have largely disappeared, replaced by farms focused on single enterprises supported by external advisers and inputs.

His solution is surprisingly simple. Every farmer, he argues, should spend time with an ecologist.

Walking his own farm alongside specialists fundamentally changed how he saw the landscape. Suddenly he noticed relationships, species and patterns that had been invisible before.

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Lessons from Uganda

Asked which farm he would most like to revisit, Singh-Watson doesn't mention an internationally renowned regenerative enterprise or cutting-edge research centre.

Instead, he recalls a two-acre mixed farm in southern Uganda.

The complexity of its cropping system, the relationships between plants, pests and predators, and the farmer's extraordinary ecological understanding left a lasting impression.

Perhaps most striking was one farmer's philosophy regarding natural insecticides.

Although he grew plants that could be used to control pests, he regarded their use as evidence that something else had already gone wrong within the system.

For Singh-Watson, this represents a level of ecological sophistication that many modern farming systems have lost.

Building Trust Through Honesty

Riverford's reputation has been built on trust rather than marketing.

For Singh-Watson, trust comes from resisting the temptation to exaggerate, admitting mistakes openly and following evidence even when it contradicts popular opinion.

He points to decisions such as rejecting biodiesel after independent research suggested it created greater environmental harm than many realised and refusing to grow heated greenhouse peppers in Britain despite their obvious marketing appeal.

His philosophy is straightforward: intuitive beliefs are useful starting points, but they must always be tested against evidence.

Long-term trust dependson being prepared to challenge fashionable narratives when the facts point elsewhere.

Ethics and Compromise

Environmental farming, Singh Watson argues, is rarely about absolutes.

Packaging, transport, renewable energy and pricing all involve difficult compromises.

Rather than pretending perfect solutions exist, he believes businesses should identify compromises honestly, explain why they have been made and revisit them regularly as circumstances change.

This willingness to acknowledge complexity, rather than claiming perfection, is central to maintaining credibility.

Leadership Means Listening

Perhaps the most important leadership lesson he learned came from a colleague who reminded him that "not everyone is like you."

For years Singh-Watson expected everyone to share his intensity and relentless drive.
Only later did he appreciate that cautious, systems-oriented people contribute strengths that entrepreneurs often lack.

Employee ownership has reinforced this belief.

Photo credit: Riverford.



Innovation remains essential, but consultation, communication and broader participation produce stronger organisations than leadership driven solely by individual personalities.

The Future of British Farming

Singh-Watson is not optimistic about the current direction of British agriculture.

He sees continuing trends towards larger farms, increasing specialisation and concentration of power among supermarkets and agricultural suppliers.

The casualties, he argues, are mixed farms, independent producers and local food economies.

Yet he also identifies reasons for hope.

Growing numbers of consumers want food produced differently.

Chefs increasingly seek diversity.

Events such as Groundswell demonstrate a growing appetite for alternative approaches.

The challenge is ensuring these alternatives survive rather than being squeezed out by industrial systems.

Biodynamics: More Common Ground Than Difference

The interview concludes with an open discussion about biodynamics. Singh-Watson readily admits he knows relatively little about the approach and is cautious about aspects such as lunar planting calendars. However, he is equally clear that he would never dismiss biodynamic farming simply because he doesn't yet understand every aspect of it.



Photo credit: Ripple Effect.



Photo credit: Riverford.

In fact, much of what he describes throughout the interview resonates strongly with biodynamic thinking.

His admiration for complex mixed farming systems, compost, ecological literacy, biodiversity, resilient farm organisms, reduced external inputs and learning directly from experienced farmers all reflect principles that sit at the heart of biodynamic agriculture.

When asked how the Biodynamic Association should engage conventional farmers, his answer is revealing.

Don't begin with theory. Begin with successful farmers.

Open farms where practitioners speak honestly about what works, demonstrate commercially viable systems and allow neighbours to see the results for themselves.

That philosophy mirrors biodynamics at its best – not as an abstract ideology, but as practical farming situated in observation, experience and living relationships. Whether or not Singh-Watson ultimately adopts biodynamics himself remains to be seen. Yet the conversation suggests there is far more common ground than many might expect.

At a time when agriculture faces mounting challenges - from declining biodiversity and degraded soils to climate instability and economic pressure - the biodynamic approach offers one possible framework for bringing these threads together. By viewing the farm as a living organism, integrating crops and livestock, building soil fertility through compost and biodiversity, and strengthening resilience through ecological understanding, biodynamics seeks to address many of the very issues Singh-Watson identifies throughout the interview.

Perhaps the future of farming will not be shaped by choosing between conventional, organic, regenerative or biodynamic agriculture, but by remaining open enough to learn from approaches that have been quietly developing practical solutions for decades.

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