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Green and Greener Got Your Goat?

By Dave Rochlin and Katy Foreman

Dave: So I was running along the trail behind Moraga Country Club last week, and ran into a herd of goats by the creek. What's the deal with them?

Katy: I have been wondering about them for years, so I did some research. The goats you saw were probably from Orinda-based Goats-R-Us. Their goats have a pretty cool story.

Dave: Does it involve a troll and a bridge? Pagan rituals?

Katy: Thankfully, no! Turns out, the goats are really good at eating pesky plants like star thistle and blackberry vines. Even poison oak! Private landholders can hire them to graze on their land and keep those plants under control. Some of their goats were brought here from Catalina Island, where they were having a feral goat problem. The Orinda folks went down there, caught the goats one by one, and integrated them into the herd. Now they're chowing down with some new goat friends.

Dave: They're doing a pretty good job of it, but don't they have a problem chewing up all that spiky weedy stuff?

Katy: My question, too. I couldn't reach an actual goat expert, but this is a pretty busy time of year for them. The goats are in high demand as a way of eating down dead grasses in the summer, for fire abatement. I did find out, though, that the "poison" in poison oak doesn't aggravate goats like it does us, and their little mouths are incredibly tough. The skin can withstand thorns. In fact, I think blackberry vines are actually a preferred food of theirs. Goats are a great natural system for removing unwanted vegetation.

Dave: Well the kids sure think they are cute. There were several toddlers lined up along the fence watching. I guess in Moraga a goat counts as exotic wildlife! But how is it green? Don't goats process all that roughage, and create methane issues like cows? As you regularly remind me, methane has 20 times the impact on the environment as carbon does, and cattle manure and belching is actually a fairly large source of greenhouse gasses.

Katy: They do emit methane. I hate to break it to you, but most humans do, too, though neither goats nor humans produce as much as cows. However it's still far better than the diesel tractors and herbicides that might be used for mowing or killing weeds otherwise. Little goat hoofprints also do less damage to the landscape, versus tire tracks. Google has even started using goats to keep the grasses around its campus safe from fire. A single goat can eat up to 8 lbs of foliage in a day.

Dave: Since the creek runs into San Leandro reservoir, eliminating the chemicals makes a lot of sense. But most of us don't have the property to warrant a goat

rental. What do you have for the rest of us?

Katy: Around Lamorinda, most run off drains to the creeks, reservoirs, or to the bay, so chemicals should be an absolute last resort. Even in the small area around your house, salamanders, reptiles, and beneficial bugs can get a fatal dose of poison just from minor applications of pesticides. Some old-fashioned hand-weeding and digging, followed by a hefty layer of mulch, is a good approach. Plus, the mulch conserves a ton of water in the summer.

Dave: So you are suggesting I work like a goat?

Katy: Har har. One of the best ways to discourage weeds is simply to give them less water. If you design a low-water landscape, and/or water plants directly with drip emitters instead of watering your whole property, fewer weeds can sprout. With EBMUD raising rates, you'll save money, too.

Dave: And then I can buy a goat!

Katy: Well there's an old proverb that "a prudent man does not make the goat his gardener." You can go to www.bayfriendly.org for more tips, but leave the goats to the experts.

Katy Foreman is a committed environmentalist who lives in Lafayette, and Dave Rochlin is a lazy environmentalist who lives in Moraga. Together they operate ClimatePath. Individuals and businesses can measure and then reduce their carbon footprints through tax deductible donations that support carbon reduction activities, renewable energy project, and forestry initiatives around the world at www.climatepath.org.

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