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Uk Red Meat Production: How to win the battle for environmental sustainability in the mind of the consumer.

Written by:

James MacCartney NSch

November 2024

A NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS REPORT

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Date of report: May 2025

*"Leading positive change in agriculture.
Inspiring passion and potential in people."*

Title	UK red meat production: How to win the battle for environmental sustainability in the mind of the consumer.
Scholar	James MacCartney
Sponsor	Worshipful Company of Butchers
Objectives of Study Tour	• Investigate UK red meat production and examine its environmental credentials • Explore a variety of global production systems to find positive livestock stories • Find ways UK businesses can change their business to have a positive impact. • Divise ways of communicating this to the customer.
Countries Visited	United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Zimbabwe, Zambia, USA
Messages	1. Create social media champions. 2. Know Your Stuff. Be able to answer queries in a positive way. 3. Participate in industry meetings and support positive voices 4. Inform the public 5. Be a positive force in your community

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Nuffield Farming Scholarship report explores the future of red meat production in the context of increasing environmental scrutiny, shifting consumer priorities, and the evolving role of the farmer. Driven by a personal commitment to small family farms and a passion for sustainable agriculture, the author set out to investigate how red meat producers can remain environmentally responsible, economically viable, and socially relevant.

Through a wide-ranging study tour across the UK, Europe, Africa, and the USA, the author initially sought technical solutions—such as soil health, genetics, pasture management, and carbon sequestration—but ultimately discovered that the most transformative insights were rooted in people and community. From the integration of food and education in Italy to regenerative farming in Zimbabwe, and wildfire grazing in California, the report highlights examples of farmers using livestock not just to produce food, but to solve ecological, social, and economic challenges.

The report sets out to challenge the narrative around red meat, noting that while its environmental impact must be acknowledged, the sector also delivers crucial environmental services and social benefits—often overlooked in mainstream debate.

The conclusion calls for livestock producers to reframe their identity—not as isolated technicians but as vital contributors to community, ecology, and culture. Recommendations include: empowering effective communicators on social media, rigorously measuring environmental performance, and fostering collaborative local networks.

Ultimately, the report argues that the future of red meat production lies not solely in better technology, but in building trust, pride, and connection between farmers, consumers, and the land. By embracing this broader purpose, red meat producers can secure both their relevance and resilience in the decades ahead.

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DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author alone and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, of the author's sponsor, or of any other sponsoring body.

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Nuffield Farming Scholars are available to speak to NFU Branches, agricultural discussion groups and similar organisations.

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CHAPTER 1: PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

A career in agriculture has always been inevitable for me. At school I was encouraged to study law at University, but I didn't like the idea of wearing a wig, so I applied for Land Management at the Royal Agricultural College. At Cirencester I was encouraged to pursue a career in Land Agency, but I didn't like the idea of wearing red trousers so I went home to our mixed family farm.

Whilst farming is in my blood from both parents for as many generations as we can find, that doesn't make you a good farmer. Sometimes quite the opposite in fact, lots of mistakes have been made in what has been very much a two steps forward, one step back progression of the business.

A passion for the survival of the smaller family farms has always been at the heart of my thinking. Like many businesses of this size we have diversified in order to survive. In 2011 we began direct to consumer retail. By 2016 we were operating at 12 farmers markets a week in London. I was customer facing three to four days a week, listening to the opinions of the consumer on red meat. At the beginning of this, the main concern that customers had was surrounding animal welfare, but by the time the COVID pandemic struck in 2020, and all of our trading outlets ceased overnight, this had completely shifted to concerns around the environment.

Michael Blanche NSch started his podcast the 'Pasture Pod' in 2017. It was the positivity around beef and sheep farming that I found infectious about these interviews. The guests were all inspiring, and there seemed to be a recurring theme: many of them were Nuffield Scholars.

I spent more and more time considering the future of red meat, and the implications that a potential fall in sales might have on family farms like mine.

This seemed like the perfect time to apply for a Nuffield Scholarship.





CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO MY STUDY SUBJECT

UK Agriculture and more specifically the ruminant sector has come under increasing scrutiny regarding its environmental credentials over the last decade. Whilst governments scramble to appear to be 'net neutral', and personal purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by media messaging, red meat has been portrayed as a low hanging fruit that can be removed from the menu in the name of environmental improvement.

First of all it is important to acknowledge that Red Meat production, like all industry, is polluting. Cattle and sheep account for 5.7%ⁱ of UK emissions. Agriculture as a whole in the UK is responsible for 10-12% of annual emissions. There are concerns about the amount of clean water used to produce 1kg of protein from red meat when compared to alternative protein sources. Effluent from the red meat and dairy sector is often the cause of poor water quality in some of our rural watercourses. It is naïve to think that the red meat sector does not have to play a part in reducing emissions.

Having said that, 91%ⁱⁱ of households consume red meat regularly, and 65% of consumers feel that farmers care about the planet. These are market penetration figures of which nearly all other industries would be envious.

The feeling 'on the ground' amongst farmers does not reflect this in many cases. Increasingly farmers, and specifically those in the red meat and dairy sectors have felt like their way of life and businesses are under attack. At a time when input prices have inflated at unprecedented levels and government subsidy for agriculture has seen the biggest reform in a generation, the threat of losing our licence to do business due to pressure from the environmental lobby looms large in the thoughts of many farmers.



CHAPTER 3: STUDY TRAVEL

Date	Host
August 2021	Alex Brewster, Rotmell Farming, UK
	Neil McGowan, Incheoch, Perthshire, UK
	Michael Blanche, Perthshire UK
September 2021	Germinal, Wiltshire, UK
September 2021	Italy: Cascina Santa Brera, Milan Cascina Bagaggera, Lombardy Cascina Caremma, Vigevano Cascina Lagoscuro, Cremona
February 2022	Spain / Portugal: Freixo Do Meio, Portugal
December 2022	Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa
July 2023	California, USA



CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

4.1 The Carbon Balance Sheet

The COVID pandemic restricted international travel for a lot of 2021, so I used the opportunity to travel around the UK seeking technical solutions for what I felt was a technical question around balancing our carbon balance sheet in order to continue trading with the major retailers, and continue receiving public subsidy for providing environmental improvements.



Figure 1- Neil McGowan Nsch

I visited Incheoch in Perthshire home to Neil McGowan Nsch and his wife Debbie who are two of the leading sheep and beef experts in the country, if not the world, to discuss the improvements that can be gained in sheep and beef productivity through genetics. Neil believes that 'ruminants have an unfair advantage' in that they are capable of converting feed from unproductive areas into nutrient dense food. I also wanted to see how his thoughts on feed efficiency in cattle could have any influence on our own business. Lamb production is a much easier system to see a clear path forward; with far greater potential for arable integration and less of a reliance on cereal based diets.

Germinal UK, are one of the leading plant breeders in the world, specialising in grass breeding for the UK environment. Visiting their breeding farm in Wiltshire and discussing with their Agriculture Director the improvements that can be made to both productivity and carbon sequestration through choosing the right grasses and herbal ley mixtures showed that there is not necessarily a compromise to be made between providing environmental improvements and productivity gains. Germinal are breeding deeper



Figure 2 - Alex Brewster Nsch

rooting grass varieties with the intention of both being more drought resistant and sequestering more carbon.

Alex Brewster Nsch and winner of Soil Farmer of the Year is making huge strides in improving soil health at Rotmell, Perthshire. I have been on many farm walks with a spade over the years and always been rather underwhelmed when looking into the holes we have dug. At Rotmell this was not the case. Alex showed me one paddock that he had split in half with an electric fence. On one side he had grazed conventionally, with animals grazing on a 30 day rotation or similar. On the other side he had rested the paddock for 6 months and grazed it intensively with an ultra high stocking



density for 24 hours, then rested again for 6 months. The difference in soil in a distance of about 10 feet either side of the electric fence was staggering. It really highlighted the importance of rest periods in building fertility and improving soil health.

4.2 A Passion For Produce

Like many Brits, I have frequently travelled to southern Europe seeking sunshine and cuisine. I took the opportunity to travel through Spain, Portugal and Italy with the help of the National Sheep Association, who were involved in an EU funded programme looking into the future of organic food production. Whilst Organic farming has never been my focus I felt that my own business would learn a lot from investigating how both the organic and regenerative movements mitigate any environmental damage caused during the production of red meat and dairy products.

Mediterranean countries are proud of their cuisine, and synonymous with fantastic, healthy food. This is stating the obvious, but until I took the opportunity to formally reflect on the things that I have always seen on holidays I didn't really consider the extent to which this is engrained in culture in these countries, in contrast to the UK where there seems to be much more of a disconnect between farming, food and national pride/identity.

Of the 6 or 7 farms that I visited in Italy : 2 of them had pre school nurseries integrated into the farm, and one was providing care for disabled children and adults by involving them in food production. I considered how the ongoing positive connections between consumers and their food in Italy is further strengthened and being driven by food production being integrated into society on many different levels. Customers are given the opportunity to interact with farms away from their core product offering, but this importantly strengthens the bond that they then have with the farm and builds loyalty.

Admittedly I was visiting producers that were towards the artisanal end of the production spectrum, but their passion for quality of product above else was tangible. It was almost as though the item that they were producing was an extension of their self. Each decision



Figure 3 - Luca (Cascina Lago Scuro)

that was made on farm was all centred around improving the quality and consistency of product. It made me reflect on the relationship that we have as producers in the UK with the product that we are producing and how it can sometimes be reduced to numbers on a spreadsheet and very rarely becomes about feelings. There was a distinct pride felt by these farmers; firstly for the individual item they were producing but more widely for the sense of being part of a much greater food collective and culture all trying to produce something of worth.

This was no more obvious than at Cascina Lago Scuro, a dairy farm with a difference, just south of Milan. Luca the farm owner and manager made the decision to stop milking 'conventionally' and reduce cow numbers from



120 to 30, and cross his Brown Swiss cows with the local traditional Bianca Vapladana with the aim of producing a high quality mozzarella. The second part of the plan was to sell cheese, amongst a variety of other products grown on the farm at an on site restaurant, and in catering for weddings on farm. The menu quite deliberately did not offer choice. There were 3 or 4 set dishes and if you didn't want to eat those then you didn't eat at the restaurant. Luca was comfortable doing this because he had built up an incredible reputation for quality of produce. Its almost as though he could serve anything and the customers would trust it to be good.

4.3 Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?



Figure 4 - Alfredo (Freixo do Meio)

In Portugal, the standout visit was to Freixo do Meio, about a 90 minute drive inland from Lisbon. The farm is owned and managed by Alfredo Cunhal Sendim, although a cooperative model has been implemented to allow both workers and customers to feel included in the business. Alfredo is a capable farmer dedicated to regenerative principles and the Integrated Holistic Management school of Alan Savory. He has dedicated his life to building a fully cooperative farming model. All 38 members of staff have varying degrees of ownership within the business which produces meat, vegetables, fruit, bread, honey, eggs, wine and a multitude of acorn products (although I must admit that acorn coffee will not be replacing Columbian ground in my larder). These products are bought by subscribers who pay in a tiered system depending on how many people are in their household. This fee does not change if one particular crop fails. Having a diverse range of products allows

protection against any single one being limited. Similar to Italy, I found that across the Dehesa / Montado ecosystem of Spain and Portugal the farmers, and importantly the customers, had a huge sense of pride to either belong to or buy from a culture of food.

Alfredo is also clearly a deep thinker and It was his words of wisdom on farming and cooperation that impressed me as much as the multitude of products that his farm produces.

'Our economies value the only things we know how to value. There is no value placed upon the photosyntheses that a plant carries out, it only gains a value when the plant is cut down'.

'We all want to be millionaires. Its not possible to cooperate in a cooperative with people like this, We have to change our culture and relearn how to build trust to do it properly . We must create a community vision instead of an individual one.'



4.4 Into Africa

In Zimbabwe I was fortunate enough to visit the Savory Institutes' Africa Centre for Holistic Management at Dimbangombe. This was the one visit that I was determined I was going to make when I applied for my Nuffield scholarship. The work done by the Savory Institute and the way in which it communicates a positive message about how pastoral red meat production can have enormous ecological benefits plays an important role in ensuring customers view farming positively.

The ecological outcomes on this 3200ha ranch are in stark contrast to much of the land in the surrounding countryside. It is something of a green oasis in a largely arid region. Driven by the 'mob grazing' effect of large numbers of cattle moved quickly and grazing small areas intensively before moving on.

I was impressed by the improvements that had been made in reversing desertification at Dimbangombe, however I struggled to find where the practical application of these techniques was relevant for businesses like mine. They were undoubtedly outstanding ecologists but I couldn't help but feel a more defined link between food production and environmental benefits could be made.



Figure 5 - Viyani

The day after I visited the Africa centre I travelled several hours into the bush to meet Viyani a man who had received training in regenerative principles at Dimbangombe. This was a powerful visit that I think about almost daily, and has changed the way I think about farming and food production. It also showed me the true value of the work that the Savory Institute carry out.

Viyani farmed about 1.5 acres with his wife, and two children. Historically in this area farmers would plant a monoculture of maize hoping that it gives them enough to eat and also if it is a good year a small surplus to sell. This carries the very real risk of crop failure, which leads to a year of struggling to feed the family. After spending time with the instructors at Dimbangombe Viyani quickly implemented a variety of regenerative farming principles. He integrated a sow and her piglets

in a moveable pen to both graze weeds and build soil fertility, followed them with chickens and then grew Maize, Sorghum and Millet. Like at the Savory Centre this was not a case of improving already fertile soil, it was very much a 'dirt to soil' scenario where fertility was being created in a barren atmosphere.

His neighbouring farmers looked at him with scepticism as he shifted from their accepted norm and didn't just grow maize. After just one year, when Viyani had plentiful food for his family and a surplus to sell, another member of the farming community came to him to ask how to do it. After 4 years there are now 12 farmers using the same regenerative methods to both build soil fertility and ensure their future and also feed their families.



In the centre of Zimbabwe about an hour east of Bulawayo is the 90,000ha Shangani Ranch, whose Operations Manager is Dr Ranga Huruba Nsch. Shangani is the largest cattle operation in Zimbabwe, with around 8500 head at any one time. In stark contrast to my previous stay with Viyani.



Figure 6 - Dr Huruba (2nd from left) and the team at Shangani

Ranga has an inspirational attitude towards the people within his business. Whilst he is managing a multi million dollar business, he came from very humble beginnings and this shows in the way he manages his staff. Shangani is fairly unique for a farm of that scale in Africa in that it has an all Black African management team. Ranga is passionate about returning to his home community regularly to pass on knowledge. He ensures that his opportunity does not stop with him, during the interview process he asks potential members of staff how they would use their new position to influence positive change in their home communities.

He said that it was no good for the individual to get a good job at Shangani and just look after themselves. In a country where social mobility is increasingly difficult, Dr Huruba was inspirational in the way that he used his knowledge to lift a much wider community network.



4.5 USA

After travelling across Africa and Europe I wanted to visit somewhere with stronger cultural similarities to the UK. California offered a diversity of production systems similar to the UK, with a more liberal end customer than much of the rest of the USA, more aligned with the UK consumer.

There were two farms with positive stories to tell about livestock that I had been keen to visit. Tomkat Ranch, in the San Francisco Bay area, is a farm whose purpose is to educate both farmers and consumers with the goal of transforming five million acres to regenerative land management and eaters to regeneratively grown food.



Figure 7 - Mark Biaggi (Tomkat Ranch)

I spent a couple of days enjoying the company of the team here. It was a very different atmosphere from visiting a typical 'production centre' type farm where operations are very productivity focussed. Because the focus of the business is not profit (it is owned by philanthropist and former presidential candidate Tom Steyer), it feels as though the decision making process is actually more clearly defined.

My fellow Nuffield Scholar Edward Towers said something when we first met in 2020 that stayed with me; that farmers are stuck with the dilemma of 'what they want to do not being the same as what they have to do'.

It's a luxury that is only afforded to non profit organisations but it was interesting to see these shackles removed. Tomkat Ranch was able to focus solely on using their Angus Cattle, and regenerative methods to educate both farmers and consumers. This was both what they wanted to do and what they had to do!

What particularly interested me was the reversal of the common mantra from 'farm to fork' to 'fork to farm'. Where most businesses that run a farm to fork operation are interested in showcasing the farms methods in order to attract customers, Tomkat Ranch is focussed on changing the way people eat (towards regeneratively farmed produce) to then influence more farmers to adopt regenerative practices.



Kaos Sheep Outift is a 5000 ewe business operating as a flying flock in Mendocino County in Northern California run by Jaime and Robert Irwin. Whilst gaining income conventionally from the sale of lambs and wool, they also have a significant income from homeowner organisations for wildfire control. The sheep are mob grazed intensively in the areas surrounding houses to eliminate the grasses that cause a significant amount of the fuel for the wildfires that ravage this area in late summer each year.

The business is also integrated into some of the famous wine houses of the Napa and Sonoma area, grazing between the vines in order to reduce their reliance on chemical weed control and also to build fertility in the soil around the vines. They are very proud of their part in what is a circular economy in this area: 'Eat Lamb, Drink Wine, Wear Wool'. It was a valuable lesson to see that livestock grazing can have positive impacts beyond building soil fertility and producing nutritious food.

Ferndale Farms, in Humboldt County, Northern California provided another of the most memorable visits of my study tour, for very personal reasons. My wife, son and I did our travelling around California in a rented campervan. A visit to Jill Hackett at Ferndale had been recommended to us by a number of people, we weren't sure why, and as it was a 3 hour drive off our route, and we initially thought we would give the visit a miss. We travelled an hour in the wrong direction before for some reason not known to either of us we pulled over and both said simultaneously that we needed to turn around and make this visit.



This was another of the stand out visits of my Nuffield travels. Like my visit to Viyani, this put me in the right place, at the right time and with the right people to have a real effect on my on several levels. Jill was a near clone of my late mother, and this put me in an emotional state to really absorb information. Jills son Conner, turned out to be the same age as me, and speaking to him was like listening to my own thoughts. We both had a real sense of obligation for and pride in our local farming communities, wanting to

look for ways that we could lift up those around us and help to build profitable farming businesses. It was so fitting that this was the last visit of my Nuffield study, as it reaffirmed to me what a universal language farming is. On the other side of the planet, here was this family that was just like mine, facing the same problems as me and looking for similar solutions to me. Combined with Viyani, these two visits completely shifted my paradigm from looking at farming as a technical business that employed people to seeing it as a people business that solved technical problems.



CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

I set out on this journey seeking technical answers to what I believed was a technical problem. Farming, after all, is a technical business. If growth rates drop or a pest emerges, we apply a technical solution and await a result. But it's something of a Nuffield cliché—because it's true—that farming is overwhelmingly a people business. The real lever we're pulling when we solve problems is relationships: building them, nurturing them, and using community as the means to share knowledge and create change.

My travels, coupled with a pivotal period in my personal life, have led me to completely reevaluate my part of the industry and its path forward. The concerns I had about red meat and its place in our diets have, in large part, been eased. Global red meat consumption is projected to rise, and the UK's reputation for quality positions us well in a growing export market. The “vegan bubble” appears to be deflating, with participation in initiatives like ‘Veganuary’ declining year on year. Meanwhile, both beef and lamb prices have strengthened. Red meat, like any commodity, responds to supply and demand—and demand is growing.

The livestock farming community is rich in passion and unity, but much of that energy remains unharnessed. I encountered many forward-thinking individuals, but there's a blurry line between resilience and stubbornness—between genuine optimism and blind faith. Continuing with the status quo in hope of a better outcome can, at times, become belligerent delusion. Having the courage to scrutinise your business with open eyes is rare but vital. Inviting external perspectives—whether from peers or outsiders—can spark powerful conversations, even without opening your accounts.

I now regularly ask: what can I do for my farming community, and what can it do for me?

With regenerative agriculture gaining traction and social media amplifying new voices, a new generation of ‘on-brand’ red meat producers is emerging. These farmers combine environmental care, social responsibility, and nutritional value—and crucially, they know how to communicate. This is the future: producers who not only farm well, but tell their story powerfully.



CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

As the agricultural landscape shifts, it's clear that livestock farmers must adapt, not just in the way they produce, but in the way they communicate their role in society. The following recommendations focus on elevating the voice of the farming community and showcasing the positive impact of livestock farming in the modern world:

1. Create Social Media Champions

Social media is a powerful tool that can amplify the voices of livestock farmers. While not everyone may feel comfortable engaging online, encourage someone within your network to step forward and take on this role. Many farmers feel “under attack” or isolated in their narratives because there aren't enough people actively sharing the true story of their work. Find those who are already passionate about sharing their experiences and support them in becoming champions for the industry.

2. Know Your Stuff

The path to carbon neutrality may be complex, but every farmer is contributing positively in ways that may go unnoticed. Focus on measurable environmental improvements:

- Has organic matter and carbon sequestration increased on your land?
 - Is the water leaving your farm clean and healthy for local ecosystems?
 - Have you created new habitats for biodiversity?
- These are the kinds of positive contributions that often go unspoken. Understanding and documenting these gains gives you the evidence to tell a compelling story and combat misconceptions about the environmental impact of livestock farming.

3. Participate in Industry Meetings and Support Positive Voices

Farming organizations, such as the NFU and AHDB, are pivotal in shaping policy and advocating for farmers. Just as you would vote for political representatives, actively engage in these organizations, and vote for those who represent your interests. Look for leaders who can amplify your voice and represent the sector positively.

4. Inform the Public

Inviting members of your non farming community or taking part in initiatives like Farmer Time are valuable and rewarding ways of communicating positive messages. Most consumers are genuinely curious about where their food comes from and how it is produced. Take the opportunity to engage and share your knowledge. Informing the public fosters trust and a deeper connection between them and the agricultural community.

5. Be a Positive Force in Your Community

The agricultural sector is not an isolated industry. It exists within a broader community, and farmers should see themselves as part of that. Actively contribute to positive change not only for your own business but also for others. Share knowledge, support initiatives, and encourage collaboration to create a movement that lifts the entire industry.



Together, these steps can begin to shift the narrative, foster a stronger sense of unity, and ensure that livestock farming is recognized for its true value—not just in terms of food production, but in its broader environmental, social, and economic contributions.

It is said that a rising tide lifts all ships. Be the tide and let the other businesses in your community be the ships that you lift.



CHAPTER 7: AFTER MY STUDY TOUR

My Nuffield study has provided a new beginning in my career. One where I am focussed more on community (both local and more widely) and industry participation.

I have recently been appointed onto the AHDB sector council for Beef and Lamb. I will aim to use my role here to steer the work of the AHDB towards building the community and network strengths that I feel to be so vital for the success of the industry.

I am leading my immediate farming network into a profitability based benchmarking group where we share financial information and pool our labour resources to ensure that our businesses make money and are fun places to work.

I have taken great pleasure in hosting school children on farm, to try and educate them about the positive work that grazing ruminants can do in building soil health and producing really nutritious food.



CHAPTER 8: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND THANKS

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Worshipful Company of Butchers, in particular Bob Bansback, for sponsoring my scholarship. They were helpful throughout with providing me with points of contact within the industry across the globe.

My fellow Nuffield scholars from the 2021 cohort, who have made this such a wonderful experience. I am pleased to have made a fantastic group of friends.

I must also thank my family. My wife Peta who has done more than her share of parenting while I have travelled. My sister Abigail and brother in law Anthony, who have helped a huge amount with looking after my work while I was away.

My mother, who tragically passed away quite suddenly in the middle of this study. She was my biggest motivator and supporter, and the reason I am so passionate about the farming community. She was involved in the lives of so many farmers, as a bookkeeper and confidant, and was so passionate about the industry. I hope that I can have a positive impact on the industry that would make her proud.

¹ Final UK greenhouse gas emissions national statistics: 1990 -2019, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy/National Statistics, February 2021

¹ Share the facts about red meat and health, AHDB, 2019



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