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Agents of sustainability: How horses and people co-create, enact and embed the good life in rural places

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Abstract

Notions of the good life are often strongly linked to rurality. Existing conceptualisations tend towards an anthropocentric and individualised approach centred on personal wealth, status and happiness. In contrast, this article reframes the good life as an interspecies endeavur, which embeds people and animals alike by recognising their interdependent relational configurations within the wider natural-social environment. Specifically, we bring insights from the concept of *buen vivir* to bear on research among people who live alongside their horses in rural areas of the UK. We find that horses enhance, enable and mediate people's understanding and experience of the rural good life. In contrast to popular and scholarly conceptions that emphasise privilege and leisure, the interspecies iteration that emerges is characterised by hard work, collaboration and purposeful active learning. This has profound implications in turn for our understanding and experience of sustainability, as these interspecies relations lead participants into

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a more active stewardship of both the immediate and wider environment.

KEYWORDS
buen vivir, co-creation, Good life, human–animal relations, landscape, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The ‘good life’ is a potentially important concept to examine in relation to sustainability and rurality. Our starting point is that existing conceptualisations of the good life are anthropocentric, which limits their usefulness in helping us reimagine more liveable futures. This article will instead reframe the good life as an interspecies endeavour, which embeds people and animals alike within the wider natural-social environment.

There has long been a link between rurality and the good life in northwestern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world in particular. Across the centuries, an idyllic countryside was imagined as a good place to live or a repository of values (Shucksmith, 2018). For example, Williams (1973) identifies a ‘structure of feeling’ across English literature, in which rural society was understood as innocent and peaceful in contrast to the venality of the urban. This has evolved into a sense that rural spaces and their cultural symbolic representations offer possibilities for escaping the material entrapments of consumption-based capitalism (Halfacree, 2007; O’Reilly & Benson, 2009). Thus, contemporary debates about sustainability make implicit and explicit reference to ideas about the rural good life. O’Neill et al. (2018) suggest that our pursuit of a good life threatens to destabilise critical planetary processes. As the global population reaches almost 8 billion people, the environmental and social costs of capitalism necessitate that we decouple ideas of the good life from the logic of growth. That is, according to Rosa and Henning (2018, p. 26), we should effectively ‘reconfigure some of modernity’s central social imaginaries’.

Notions of rurality have tended to feature strongly within conceptions of the good life past and present. Narratives of land, nature and urban-rural distinctions have played a particularly potent role in countries with a history of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, such as the US and UK (Scott et al., 2018a). Here, tired and discouraged city dwellers developed what Thorstein Veblen called a ‘historic homesickness’ for an imagined rural past, in which unemployment was unknown and everyone had food and shelter (Shi, 1985; Tugwell, 1960). Then, and now, this understanding of the rural as idyll underpins and exacerbates a tendency to define the good life with reference to individualistic notions of prosperity and wellbeing (Scott et al., 2018a).

Contemporary individualised conceptions belie a longer tradition in which the good life is not only about the individual but their membership of the family and the wider community (Rosa & Henning, 2018). In ancient Greece, for example, Plato and especially Aristotle pointed to the connection between the good person, good life and good society (Michalos & Hatch, 2020). This collective perspective further compounds the lure of the countryside, with rural society imagined as embodying a greater sense of community (Bell, 2006; Benson & O’Reilly, 2009; Rivera, 2007). However, this community is imagined as exclusively human.

There is a growing challenge to this tendency to overlook the animals who live alongside us in rural places (e.g., Calvert, 2018; Holloway & Bear, 2017). Of particular interest to us here is

work that focuses on horses and the role they play in shaping societies, places and the human and nonhuman relationships within and between them (e.g., see Dalke, 2019; Fijn, 2011; Swart, 2010). However, this 'animal turn' has had little impact on broader thinking about sustainability (Kopnina et al., 2018; Policarpo et al., 2018; Wadham, 2020a). By taking greater account of animals in the way we understand the relationship between sustainability and the good life, this article hopes to expand our understanding of both.

Specifics of this study

Tsing (2017, p. 51) suggests that a more 'meaningful' sustainability requires that we consider other animals besides ourselves. Domestic animals—and our entangled relations with them—are particularly revealing. Our co-evolution means they help make us who we are (Haraway, 2008). Horses, for example, were fundamental to the socioeconomic development of Europe and elsewhere, helping transport people, goods and armies over long distances (Raulff, 2017). Now engaged mainly in the sport and leisure sectors, horses remain peculiarly bonded to us through the act of riding (Adelman & Thompson, 2017; Dashper, 2017) and processes of care provision (Birke et al., 2010; Schuurman & Franklin, 2016).

This article considers the significant influence that these particular interspecies relations have on our understanding and experience of the good life. Specifically, we draw on research among people who live alongside their horses in rural areas of the UK. Further, we acknowledge how embodied interspecies relations are in turn embedded within wider socioeconomic and power relations (Coulter, 2019; Wadham, 2020b). Thus, in order to understand how these people and the horses they live with co-create, enact and embed the good life in rural places, we draw on the Latin American concept of *buen vivir*. *Buen vivir* highlights that the subject of wellbeing is not the individual but the relation between that individual, the community and their specific natural-social environment (Gudynas, 2011). Taking theoretical inspiration from beyond the Anglo-American context enables us to recognise that many of the categories we employ as universal are in fact highly context specific. Human–animal relations in Latin America are especially interesting, reflecting an equally significant but very different tension between biology and culture than that found in many European societies (De la Cadena & Martínez Medina, 2020).

In summary, our aim is to reframe our understanding of the good life as an interspecies endeavour via a focus on the shared lives of horses and people in rural areas. We will explore this via three research questions, namely:

1. How might we broaden the concept of the 'good life' to include (domestic) animals?
2. How do animals shape and experience the rural good life alongside people?
3. Recognising in turn the wider embeddedness of this interspecies endeavour, what are its implications for the politics of sustainability?

As such, we heed Rosa and Henning's (2018) call for a greater critical understanding of the relationship between the good life and sustainability. However, we also respond to those who ask what this good life might look like for animals themselves (e.g., Bekoff & Pierce, 2017; Hockenhull & Furtado, 2021; Mellor, 2016; Oven, 2018; Stone, 2019). We will begin by reviewing the literature on the relationship between sustainability, rural sociality and the good life and work that focuses on how we might expand the good life concept to animals in general and horses in particular. We then briefly introduce our methodology before turning to our findings and discussion. This

highlights how horses enhance, enable and mediate people's understanding and experience of the rural good life. The interspecies story that emerges is neither romantic nor leisure-based but characterised by hard work, collaboration and purposeful learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability and the rural good life

The concepts of sustainability and the good life are mutually dependent (Di Giulio & Delfina, 2019). By definition, the aim of sustainability is to achieve, within planetary boundaries, a good life for all people now and in the future (Hickel, 2019; Hosseini, 2019; O'Neill et al., 2018). Given that this raises far-reaching questions about what kind of world we want to live in, all visions of the good life, whether explicitly or implicitly, are inherently political as well as personal (Hannis, 2015; Keitsch, 2018; Scott et al., 2018a).

Both concepts are thus highly contested. For example, critics question the very premise on which sustainability rests, namely, the balance between the so-called three pillars. They suggest that economic wellbeing tends to come first, trailed by environmental stewardship, with social equity being a distant last (Agyeman et al., 2002; Brightman & Lewis, 2017; Longo et al., 2016). Nonetheless, a good life beyond the logic of economic growth is advanced as both desirable and possible (Muraca, 2012; Rosa & Henning, 2018). Pursuing less ecologically and socially damaging ways of life will require an individual and collective shift in attitudes and practices in Europe and other rich societies (Hannis, 2015; Hickel, 2019; Richards, 2013; Wall Kimmerer, 2015). Rethinking our understanding of what constitutes a good life is thus central to discussions about sustainability.

Contemporary, consumption-based definitions of the good life—and threats to them—are 'glaring and consequential' in many rural areas (Scott et al., 2018a, p. 128). Rural spaces exercise what Cloke (2003, p. 2) calls a 'centripetal force', drawing people both physically and imaginatively, effectively converting them into consumers of rurality (Halfacree, 2007; Scott et al., 2017). Extensive research into rural lifestyles and 'amenity migration' in the US and UK suggests that middle-class people in particular are drawn to live in rural areas because they offer up an apparently simpler way of life, based on stepping back in time and returning to the land (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009; Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). The rural idyll has thus been effectively pressed into the service of individualistic understandings of the good life as centred on 'wealth, job security, personal status and success, health, and happiness' (Scott et al., 2018a, p. 127; see also Shi, 1985). This has generated significant research into, for example, the way different groups understand and experience wellbeing within rural areas (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2018b; Thiede et al., 2018).

Moving in pursuit of the good life— rather than for economic gain or work—implies a relative or structural privilege based on a range of choices and opportunities (Benson, 2011). There is thus a strong middle-class bent to existing scholarship. The rural—and the good life it embodies—is a vision conjured by a 'hegemonic middle-class culture' that is imposed on others, exacerbating many aspects of rural poverty and disadvantage in the UK and elsewhere (Shucksmith, 2018, p. 163; see also Lagerqvist, 2014; Milbourne, 2014). A key element of this visioning is an emphasis on sustainability, which has intensified differences between competing rural interests and perspectives (Hermans et al., 2010). Different groups, whether defined by class, ethnicity, race or education 'may be more or less constrained or empowered in [pursuing] their preferred understandings of the good life' (Scott et al. 2018a, p. 130; see also Kerrigan, 2018).

Ontological and ideological explanations of rural meanings by dominant social groups have the effect of preserving hegemonic narratives of rural sociality, often to the exclusion of other social actors (Hoerning, 2021). This reification of the 'rural' becomes counterproductive. That is, it ignores interdependent 'configurations' that could provide new insights into the nature of dynamic rural contexts (Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016; Elias, 1974; Little & Leyshon, 2003). It is thus perhaps not surprising that existing research into the link between the good life and sustainability leans towards anthropocentrism. Our thinking about the good life tends to exclude animals because we do not acknowledge them as social beings with rich inner lives (Meijer, 2019). Likewise, within dominant conceptualisations of both rurality and sustainability, we recognise animals primarily with regard to the instrumental benefits they provide to humans, not their intrinsic status as active co-habitants of the earth (Kopnina et al., 2018; Policarpo et al., 2018). Hodges (1999) laments an apparent 'divorce' between prevailing Western values of growth and animal- and 'nature-' centred holistic meanings of wholeness and sustainability in living a good life:

> [Unlike our ancestors,] we have lost touch with the lessons of living with animals; namely, that quality of life is not a solitary experience but flows into and from interdependence and community. (Hodges, 1999, p. 4)

Our collective survival on a damaged earth requires that we align ourselves with the dynamics of other animals (Haraway, 2016; McIntyre-Mills, 2021; Tsing, 2017). However, where and how they might be incorporated into alternative economic and wellbeing models has yet to be fully explored (Houtbeckers, 2021).

Reimagining the rural through relational ontologies and *buen vivir*

Philo (1997) suggests that the 'rural' has been undemocratically conceived and persists in those terms. Within the Global North, in particular, it reflects 'moral binaries embedded in self/other, human/nature, rural/urban' (Gorman-Murray et al., 2012, p. 7). According to Elias (1974), these definitional polarities render understandings of place unaccountable for transformation and change. In redefining rural sociality, then, a more inclusive approach is required that recognises the rural as a multiauthored, multifaceted and co-constituted space (Woods, 2011a). Such a move opens up the possibility of new understandings of space—whether symbolic, material or natural—within the local and the global (Heley & Jones, 2012).

In contrast, Lobao et al. (2007) propose that spaces deserve analysis based on their differing and complex socialities. For example, in the UK (England to be precise) Bunce (2005, p. 3) describes a 'national obsession' with the rural, as both aesthetic and social ideal. Land use, class and ideas of what should be preserved and for whom are bound up together in complicated, geographically specific ways (Matless, 2016; Williams, 1973). Countryside allotments have become increasingly aspirational and oversubscribed, while the 'plotlands' on which working-class people built makeshift holiday retreats in the years after World War I have been long-since demolished and forgotten (Hardy & Ward, 1984). In the UK and elsewhere, rural life is a messy, unfinished and often problematic co-production involving diverse groups and their configurations and the entire everyday milieu in which they move (Halfacree & Rivera, 2012).

We, therefore, align ourselves with a growing body of research based on relational ontologies. These 'eschew the divisions between nature and culture, individual and community, us and them

that are central to the modern [liberal] ontology' (Escobar 2010, p. 39). According to this perspective, every animate being is engaged in a continual process of becoming, which in turn depends upon their entanglements with 'other kinds of living selves' (Kohn, 2007, p. 4; see also Haraway, 2008; Ingold, 2013). That is, life *is* relationality. Actor-network theory is a particularly prominent iteration, with its suggestion that all human and more-than-human actors 'matter' precisely because of their relationships with others (Latour, 2007; see also Barad, 2007; Ingold, 2013; Law & Moll, 2002; Whatmore, 2002). The discovery of pasteurisation, for example, is reinterpreted as a joint enterprise of rats, bacteria, industrialists and worms (Latour, 1988).

Yet, academic discussions about sustainability have been slow to embrace relational ontologies. Rather, a combined faith in the substitutability of nature and the human capacity for ingenuity actively mitigate against such an approach (Blok, 2013; Latour, 2014; Longo et al., 2016). It is perhaps not surprising then that a particularly compelling challenge to this modernist mindset arises in Latin America. The 'original space' in which modern colonial capitalism emerged, the region now plays a key role within the debate about possible alternatives (quoted in Escobar, 2010, p. 2).

Buen vivir refers to an unprecedented biocentric ideology inspired by Indigenous beliefs and practices in Latin American societies, such as the Quechua notion of 'sumak kawsay'. In a direct challenge to the binary and anthropocentric character of modernist models of linear development, *buen vivir* emphasises the need for harmony between people and nature, subordinating economic objectives to ecological criteria and principles of human dignity and social justice (Acosta, 2009; Altmann, 2020). Co-opted into policy mechanisms in Ecuador and Bolivia, *buen vivir* potentially disrupts the ontological bifurcation of nature and society and effectively challenges neoliberal modes of governance (Gerlach, 2017).

Gerlach (2017) suggests that the perilous ecological and socioeconomic state of the contemporary world demands that we intensify our engagement with diverse 'experimental ventures', such as *buen vivir*. In contrast to the universal, top-down aspirations of sustainability, *buen vivir* embodies a set of common core principles aimed at '[achieving] social and environmental wellbeing through a bottom-up, endogenous approach' (Chassagne, 2019, p. 483). The subject of wellbeing is not the individual themselves but the individual within the social context of their community and within a unique environmental situation (Acosta, 2012, 2017; Gudynas, 2011, 2013).

Buen vivir thus holds wider relevance for global debates about sustainability (Chassagne, 2019; Gudynas, 2013). But, uncritical appropriation risks 'foisting incommensurable epistemological regimes upon one another' (Gerlach, 2017, p. 2249; see also Altmann, 2020; Escobar, 2015). We should therefore pay careful attention to 'the manner in which concepts are brought to bear upon any given topic or geography' (Gerlach, 2017, p. 2249). In using *buen vivir* to illuminate interspecies understandings and experiences of the good life in rural Britain, we engage in what Treanor (2014, p. 177) calls 'imaginative projection' to transparently acknowledge our very different context. We also lean on Katz's (2001) notion of 'countertopography'. This recognises that vastly different places are nonetheless connected *analytically* to other places, '[reproducing] themselves differently amidst the common political-economic and sociocultural processes they experience' (Katz, 2001, p. 1229).

Beyond a life worth living: Animals and the good life

As outlined above, narrowly focused European values do not appear to provide sufficient care for the environment and for animals (Hodges, 1999). In the case of the latter, this has resulted in a continuing and problematic focus on animal welfare, which prioritises the prevention or relief of

negative states (Balcombe, 2009). For example, the so-called Five Freedoms, which underpin the UK regulatory regime for livestock farming, specify that animals should be free from hunger and thirst, discomfort, pain and fear (FAWC, 2009). However, recent attempts to focus attention on what matters to animals in their own lives, rather than the instrumental value of those animals to humans, have given rise to the concept of a 'life worth living'. This brings affective states into assessing animals' quality of life through an emphasis on feelings like pleasure and pain (Green & Mellor, 2011).

Together, the concepts of animal welfare and a life worth living have highlighted the need to enable positive experiences, not just limit negative ones (Balcombe, 2009). Yet, perhaps constrained by its emergence from within the context of agribusiness, this research remains anthropocentric. In contrast, a number of critical writers have begun to take a more animal-centred approach to understanding the factors and experiences that impact the quality of their lives, both within and beyond agricultural contexts. For example, Hartigan's (2020) study of the 'shaving of the beasts' festival in northern Spain makes horse sociality the centre of analysis. Likewise, Geiger and Hovorka (2015) explore the lives of donkeys in Botswana, applying a feminist posthuman iteration of performativity to unearth the donkeys' physical and emotional states of being. The concept of a good life extends this work by recognising that animals—as biological species and social actors—deserve more than a life that is merely worth living (Edgar et al., 2013). Further, it refocuses our attention away from issues to do with how humans do or should treat animals towards a wider set of research questions that explore the relationships animals have—and want to have—with each other and with humans, and how we might collectively find new ways of co-existing within our shared moral communities (Buller, 2016; Driessen, 2014; Meijer, 2019).

Extending the concept of the good life to animals brings the possibility of fundamentally rethinking the day-to-day lives of animals and also the wider socioeconomic conditions within which we are all constrained (Bekoff & Pierce, 2017; Coulter, 2016). Our focus on the interspecies character of this endeavour is therefore useful in three ways. First, the notion of the good life offers a more ambitious way to conceptualise animals' experiences and how we might flourish together in what Porcher (2017, p. xiv) calls a utopia or 'impossible country'. That is, it takes us beyond 'negative' theories of welfare, with their focus on animals' 'natural' needs to also consider their affective state or happiness (Webb et al., 2019). Animals are valued for themselves, acknowledged as biological but also *social* actors. That is, they contribute actively to their relationships with others and 'make things happen' (Birke & Thompson, 2017). Further, insofar as they are also active members of society and active participants in its shaping, they are also *political* actors (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Driessen, 2014; Meijer, 2019). The significance of this shift is clear. For example, in their analysis of automatic milking systems, Holloway and Bear (2017) show how cows actively contribute to the design and operation of the systems that also control them. We add to this work by exploring how, through recognition and response to such animal agency, people and animals are able to co-create a potentially harmonious good life.

Second, it enables us to pay careful attention to the differences between particular individuals, even as we acknowledge the generic collective qualities of species (Haraway, 2008; Wadham, 2020a). Calvert (2018) highlights how our attempts to standardise animal bodies and experiences lead to real and problematic material consequences for the animals involved. Likewise, in her study of Mustangs in the American West, Dalke (2019) shows that attempts to categorise some horses as desirable and others as worthless within the adoption process can become a matter of life and death for the horses involved. A good life perspective enables us to ask what this individual animal needs or wants at this particular moment. As Bekoff and Pierce (2017, p. 57) remind us,

'there is a certain moral power in rallying around an identifiable animal "person" rather than an abstract mass of animals'. Our work explores how one particular group of people pays attention to the perceived wants and needs of individual horses in their care, and thus we illuminate ways in which actualised individual good lives, whether human or animal, co-create collective harmony or a 'good coexistence' (Albo, 2017).

Third, whereas a welfare perspective enables us to better care *for* animals, a good life perspective helps us care *about* them to use Donovan's (2007) distinction. This represents an ethico-political position in which 'matters of care' go beyond good intentions, enabling us to move beyond intellectual or empathetic engagement towards political advocacy and action (Bellacasa, 2011; Gruen, 2009). Our work, therefore, builds on that of Fijn (2011), for example, who explores the symbiotic relationship between Mongolian herders and 'co-domestic' animals and their interaction within the home and wider society. By extending the concept of the good life to animals, we can thus help build a 'collective consciousness' (Hribal, 2007) or a form of interspecies or more-than-human solidarity (Coulter, 2016; Rock & Degeling, 2015).

From farm to stable: Horses and the good life

To initiate broader discussions about the good life from an interspecies perspective, we suggest that horses are of particular interest and relevance because of the longevity, intensity and significance of our shared relations (Birke et al., 2010; Schuurman & Franklin, 2016). In the UK, for example, they are our 'partners' in sport- and leisure-based activities, and we, therefore, recognise horses as companions and worry about their wellbeing (Hockenhull & Furtado, 2021). Ironically, this can lead to us putting them in a 'gilded cage'. We limit their space and choice and overfeed them, inadvertently contributing to compulsive behaviours, obesity and gastric complaints. Unable to influence what is happening to them, horses sometimes develop a learned helplessness (Birke & Thompson, 2017). This points to the need to look beyond improvements in the medical, technical or biological domains: Rather, a good life for horses depends on a sociocultural and political shift that gives them more control over their own lives (Bergmann, 2019).

Horses themselves would likely prioritise 'friends, forage and freedom' (MacLeod, 2000). Widely adopted by equestrian welfare organisations, the '3Fs' are based on the 'natural' ethological behaviours and needs of horses and consider both their physical and mental wellbeing (Owers & Fiedler, 2020). That is, a good life for horses depends upon being able to form social bonds with suitable others, having access to species-appropriate food (usually diverse but low-energy pasture) and being able to have a choice in when and how to remain active. Horse–human relations are thus rooted within specific biophysical environments:

> It is hard to think of any other kind of land use with such profound impact on the landscape [as keeping horses]… Besides being one of the main increasing activities in the countryside, it is also very specific in its way of using the land and the landscape. (Elgaker, 2012, p. 592)

These 'equiscapes' are temporal, geographical and political spaces, where human and horse boundaries become blurred in the acts and processes of care, exercise and interconnection (Danby & Hannam, 2016; Dashper et al., 2020; Franklin & Evans, 2008). Within Anglo-American society, then, the singularity of horses, our relationship with them and their impact on the land render horse–human relations a useful vantage point from which to develop an interspecies

understanding of the good life. We will now briefly explore the methods by which we developed that understanding.

Research context and methods

The rationale for the research project was to explore how *buen vivir* could provide a springboard in order to generate new posthumanist understandings of rural contexts in the global North. Specifically, we reveal how and why interspecies relationships co-create our understandings and experiences of the good life. Elias (1974, p. 63) points out that there is a need to move beyond the 'individualistic methodologies' that work against revealing the true connections within the social processes we investigate. Thus, in methodological terms, we embrace a relational ontology that enables us to explore rural sociality via a focus on the configurational complexities that underpin social processes and their meanings (Elias, 1974).

This relational paradigm enables us to embrace ways of thinking, being and acting—or a tripartite 'ethico-onto-epistemology'—that do not presuppose subject/object or nature/culture binaries (Walsh et al., 2021, p. 75; see also Bohme et al., 2022). It enables us to respond to calls for more inclusive, multiactor narratives that address the integrated dimensions of environments and sustainability (Dymitrow & Stenseke, 2016; Ives et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2021). We, therefore, focus on what Barad (2007) calls the 'intra-actions' through which animals and other beings constantly and inseparably engage with each other, both individually and collectively. This in turn highlights how horse-human relations—and the spaces and places in which they unfold—are contingent and constantly in the process of becoming.

In recognising pluralistic relationships and interdependencies within and between different constellations of actors and environments, we hope to stimulate further understandings of what Hoerning (2021) calls 'multiactor' landscapes and how these are understood and represented. Specifically, we examine enacted and embedded rural good life practices across different 'equiscapes' (Danby & Hannam, 2016). As outlined above, our theoretical framework draws on the notion of *buen vivir*. A relational approach that is well-established in Latin America but less familiar elsewhere, *buen vivir*, neatly provides a connection to the paradigmatic positioning of our research and the basis for critical thinking and learning through specific landscapes. These places provide insights into the stories of intentional communities, through our analysis of which we can illustrate actual, hopeful and imperfect strategies for living differently.

We draw on two main sources of data. First, adopting insights from a wider study (Furtado et al., 2022), we draw on participants' free-text responses to an equestrian survey into alternative grazing systems ($N = 658$). This elucidated the broad range of ideas and practices that people adopt in order to provide their horses with what they understand as a good life. Second, our main source of data was a specific social media group set up to explore rural equine lifestyles. This helped us develop broader understandings of horse ownership, land management and animal wellbeing and their relationship to the natural-social environment. Stockdale and Catney (2014) discuss the usefulness of life-course approaches and collecting stories of longitudinal lived experiences. A purposive social media group provided detailed insights into equine-centred lifestyles as rich narratives of experiences, citing and reflecting upon them across a 2-month period.

We recruited 28 participants via purposive sampling. Scott et al. (2017) note that the chance of a move to a rural destination tends to increase around midlife and retirement. Participants were mainly middle-aged women (40–50s), reflective of the wider population practising equestrian lifestyles in the UK (BETA, 2019). Participants self-reported that their motivations to live

in rural areas were profoundly dominated by their animals' needs. As a result, whether born or having migrated there, participants resided in varied rural areas across the UK, from remote to peri-urban spaces. Participants were also highly diverse with regard to their socioeconomic status and relatedly the amount of land owned/rented. However, all were linked by the common thread of living with their horses at home. The use of social media enabled participants to share stories and experiences that mattered to them, and their interactions reflect the community network and co-creative context of the equine subculture studied.

Our data, captured remotely during the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, represent the *human* view of an interspecies good life. Nevertheless, the reflective and animal-centred narratives described by participants warrant reporting and provide rich descriptions of the ways in which animals perform and shape their own lives within these interspecies settings.

The horse lives described in this project varied considerably, from part-time paddock and stabling to living on purpose-built enriched environments such as 'track systems' designed with perceived horse needs in mind (a 'track system' is a method in which horses live on a circular or complex-shaped track of around 6–8 m in width, with items such as food, toys, shelter and water dispersed so as to encourage movement around the area). What these horse lives had in common was that they had been built around the owner's perception of an idealised horse life. This usually involved a group living in a spacious environment, ready access to healthy forage and—perhaps most importantly—a recognition and acceptance of the choices made by animals as individuals. For example, participants shaped routines, exercise provision, feed choices and companions according to their observations of the individual animal and his or her preferences and choices. Of course, we acknowledge that those domesticated horses remain within the social power dynamic of a complex interspecies relationship that denotes them as a 'companion animal', their lives still almost wholly within the control of their human 'owner'. Nevertheless, this article is concerned with how these owners do not just accommodate the individual needs of the horses in question but actually design their own lives around them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout our data, the good life—as both concept and experience—is defined as relational and embedded. That is, participants talk about their interconnectedness with horses, other animals, families, communities (human and more-than-human) and the specific natural-social environment they share. They describe their pursuit of the rural good life in terms of a move from being a horse owner whose role was to simply provide care for the horse(s) to being guardians of a much wider holistic system, with the horses nonetheless remaining at the centre. This wider system is based on understanding the social processes and links between animal, human and environmental configurations (Quintaneiro & Mitre, 2006). Here, we present an introduction to the themes that will be discussed in more detail later and introduce a conceptual map (Figure 1), which illustrates participants' move towards living what they describe as the good life.

Turning to Figure 1, we could suggest that the caring responsibilities of most horse owners stop at the horse (Circle 2). The land and environment are the concern of someone else, namely, whoever owns the field or yard where the horse is kept. Since taking on their own or rented land, however, participants gain additional responsibilities and agency (Circle 3). This allows them to design and create a context that they feel is optimised for the wellbeing of their horses. This expanded role is predicated on extensive active learning and hard work. In turn, it widens participants' horizons, as they find themselves drawing on the support of other people such as family,

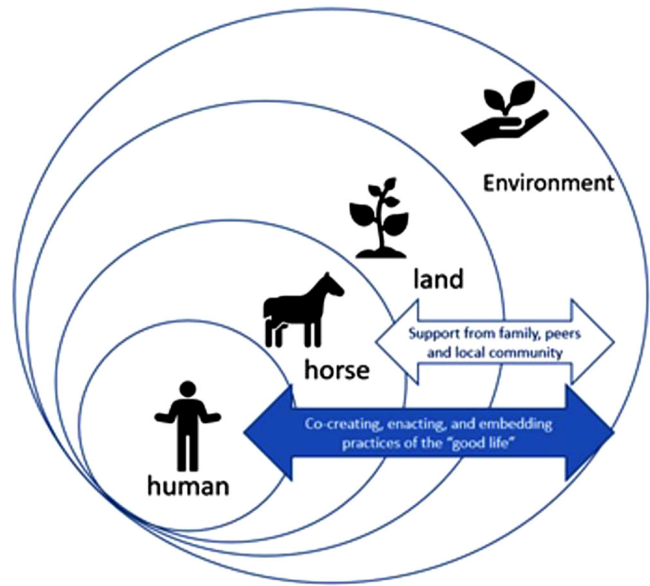

FIGURE 1 Conceptual map of how horses and people co-create, enact and embed the good life within interdependent configurational relationships

neighbours (human and more-than-human) and the local farming community in managing the land.

Some participants explicitly enlarge their horsecare models to encompass an even greater reach, aiming to support the local environment through improved diversity and sustainable management practices (Circle 4). Thus, the horse is the focus of these efforts, but in pursuing their idea of a good life for their horses and themselves, participants talk about how they are also effectively maintaining (and sometimes increasingly motivated by) the wellbeing of the wider environment.

However, portrayed, then, this more-than-human journey starts with the horses, who continue to remain at the centre of the good life that is subsequently engendered. At each concentric circle, the participant could simply remain in the status quo without moving to the next. However, moving to the next level is dependent on the one before. Thus, the horse (Circle 2) becomes an enabler of management of the land (Circle 3), and management of the land enables greater awareness of and support for environmental concerns (Circle 4). At each stage, participants describe how good lives are *co-created* through intra-actions into interdependent configurational relationships as people attempt to implement their idea of what constitutes a good life for the horse, which is in turn informed by the horse's attempts to communicate their needs and preferences. This good life is then *enacted* through day-to-day rituals and practices, including the development of knowledge and ideas through experimentation and with the support of the local community. Finally, the good life becomes *embedded* through practices that go beyond the individual horse–human–land triad. That is, the good life is situated against the health and wellbeing of the wider natural environment. The horse plays a central role as an actor who directly impacts the environment and mediates their owner's interactions with it. In this way, horses contribute to the equiscape configurations within which they live. We now consider how participants and their horses engage in distinctive and overlapping processes of co-creating, enacting and embedding the good life.

Co-creating the interspecies good life

For many participants, concern for their horse's wellbeing motivated a move to individually managed land, a life change that affected both humans and horses. This was often driven by an ongoing dissatisfaction with the practices of livery yards (third party spaces) and frustration at being unable to change them. Far from a rural idyll, participants describe livery yards as places of 'horse-sick' pastures, interpersonal conflict, stressed equines and inflexible approaches to care:

> I think there are a lot of old-fashioned views around keeping horses and people are set in their ways, doing what has always been done, without being open to new ideas, which are better for our horses.

Land use and management is a central point of tension in horse–human relations. Faced with increasingly demanding customers and ever-shrinking profit margins, yards may prioritise human over equine wellbeing:

> I have been in livery for years, and most livery owners have either lots of rye grass or they just don't manage the land at all. Poor grazing on small overcrowded paddocks is not good for horses and often the plant diversity was very poor.

In this way, livery yards had the potential for becoming unsustainable, unhappy equiscapes in which horses unwittingly became economic units within a business model, and consideration of social and environmental relations was perceived as sorely lacking. Moving the horses to self-managed land, therefore, represents a shift from orthodox practices viewed as detrimental for both horses and land towards the possibility of approaches that are better for the horse, people and land, reflecting the shift in attitude described as central to a reimagined and sustainable good life (Hannis, 2015; Hickel, 2019):

> In owning our own land, we have more than one horse and can do what we want with our fields …

> I also love learning about the land and embracing new ways of managing it.

In line with narratives of the (human) rural life as idyllic and simple (Shi, 1985; Williams, 1973), here we see horse owners rejecting the taken-for-granted accoutrements and facilities at commercial yards. Instead, they seek to provide an idealised environment for the horse in terms of grazing, buildings and care:

> We installed a track system for the horses' wellbeing…it works well in maintaining weight and mobility.

Crucially, these shifts are effectively undertaken based on people's interpretation of their horses' needs:

> Horses are herd creatures so shouldn't be left alone for long periods…Mine certainly stresses if alone.

> I love watching them in a herd...we open up the larger fields so they can have a right old time playing...

Here, we see people (knowingly and unknowingly) 'reading' their horses in order to understand what co-existence might look like and—specifically—what kinds of lives animals might choose for themselves (Driessen, 2014; Meijer, 2019). Pursuing the good life therefore extends far beyond a simple move to the countryside. Rather, it constitutes a renegotiation of the boundaries of human–animal relationships and what it means for people and horses to live well, reflective of beneficial more-than-human solidarity (Coulter, 2016; Rock & Degeling, 2015).

These idealised horse lives are frequently constructed around providing horses with a life that aligns with their 'natural' needs. For example, many participants talk about their use of 'track' systems:

> I realised that it's the best way to keep horses if you want to keep them as naturally as possible. That's what I want for my horses.

Our findings demonstrate the usefulness of moving our focus from animal welfare to wellbeing. Horses themselves are no longer understood primarily in terms of their usefulness to productive or leisure-based activities; rather, we are beginning instead to see them as social actors (Birke & Thompson, 2017; Hartigan, 2020). They at once reconfigure, co-create and mediate our understanding of the good life within rural communities. Or, as one participant says, 'Simply put, my life would be half-lived without them'.

In summary, our first research question asked how we might broaden the concept of the good life to include (domestic) animals. Our findings above allow us to reposition animals beyond their instrumentality: Horses themselves emerge as central actors in the co-creation of understanding and experiences. However, as will transpire below, other animals also play an ancillary role in framing and supporting horse–human wellbeing. The good life emerges as an interspecies endeavour, created by people *and* animals both directly and indirectly. As affective social and *political* subjects, animals play a central role in the construction of the rural (Jones, 2006). Their interests and actions intersect with those of the humans with whom they co-exist in contemporary rural sociality (Castree, 2003; Hobson, 2007). Our findings thereby give some insight into how we might begin to constitute the basis of a collective consciousness that acknowledges the social and political agency of animals themselves. In so doing, we build on the work of others (e.g., Geiger & Hovorka, 2015; Hartigan, 2020; Holloway & Bear, 2017) by exploring the ways that humans engage with the (albeit constrained) choices made by more-than-human actors. *Buen vivir* helps us do so by emphasising how our shared worlds depend upon the 'interweaving of multiple harmonious relations, none of which has a single centre' (Acosta, 2017, p. 2604). Through these interdependent relational processes, we naturally see a decentering of humans within rural good life endeavours, reflecting the potential for a new 'animal turn' to the *buen vivir* literature. Future research might therefore usefully explore how *buen vivir* enables us to understand the role of other animals—domestic and wild—in shaping the way we think about our natural-social environment world both directly and indirectly.

Enacting the interspecies good life

Participants suggested that their pursuit of the interspecies good life required significant effort and sometimes contradicted their expectations. They frequently chastise their past selves as naïve,

saying they had unrealistic expectations about what living the good life with their horses would entail. This focuses particularly on how much labour is involved in maintaining the outside space that is key to facilitating horses' access to friends, forage and freedom. All the participants were familiar with the day-to-day rituals and tasks of owning a horse, but the physical and emotional labour required for land management took many by surprise:

> People misconstrue the life… It's damn hard work…Deep motivation is required to just keep your animals fit, healthy and happy let alone fill any dreams you may have.

Whether renting or owning, participants describe needing to learn the 'language' of the land literally and metaphorically. Through necessity, they became familiar with plant biology, biodiversity, hay-cutting, machinery and regulations, all of which had previously been taken care of by others:

> It is certainly a steep curve learning the ropes of maintaining and looking after the land!! We are a bit trial and error at the moment … it looks easy and like you don't need to do much at all when you are on livery if they have a good set up!

In this way, participants enact a 'biocentric turn' (Acosta 2009), becoming embedded within a complex ecosystem extending beyond their horse, towards a multiactor configuration including flora, fauna and soil. In turn, actors flourished. For example, participants describe how over time the stress-related behaviours their horses exhibited while at livery declined. The 'hard graft' involved is thus justified by the harmonious interspecies lifestyles it facilitates. Learning these new skills is viewed as a rite of passage, an active process and an ongoing journey, all of which require substantial emotional reserves:

> 'I can honestly say nothing is as stressful as Hay Week… This year has been a luxury having so many days on the trot, usually it's rushing to get it in before the next rain…

The seasonal rhythms of pasture management mean that people experiment and adapt and continue to do so. Thus, orchestrating a harmonious good life environment necessitated a humble willingness to keep 'listening' and responding to the interdependent actors within that environment:

> I definitely viewed owning my own land…with rose-tinted glasses! Easier now after 10 years but still experimenting!

Rather than the romanticised and idyllic ideas they may have had at the outset, the interspecies good life is characterised by hard work, purposeful active learning and continuity in managing land and horse environments across all seasons. The experiences detailed here describe a more extensive version of horse-centric collective living, in which the presence of horses effectively mediates not only the horse-human relationship but also the wider natural-social environment.

Sociality and community play a huge role in people's and horses' experiences of the good life. This is partly due to the heavy workload alluded to above but also because of the remoteness of many rural places. For example, partners are sometimes peripheral figures in the imagined interspecies good life (Dashper et al., 2020). However, they take on a central role in its 'real-life'

enactment, helping with mucking out or other manual work or simply 'being' with the horses who now live in such close proximity to them:

> My non-horsey husband now loves to watch the horses and enjoys the breeding side of things.

In addition, horses catalyse the development of wider informal networks, through which interspecies relationships and bonds are formed with others who share similar aspirations, needs and motivations. Here again, it is the land on which people and horses live that is often the focus of their interactions with others:

> Managing the land is more of a 'village' affair, especially as we do not have the machinery nor time. In our case, it does take a 'village' to look after our property including friends, neighbours, contractors and farmers who in general have been super useful and friendly.

Farmers help with maintaining hedges, mowing fields and removing muck heaps but also providing information and insight into the specific characteristics of local land, weather and wildlife. Pursuing the interspecies good life thus expands the focus of wellbeing and ties horses and people into the local community, localised landscapes and the wider natural-social environment beyond.

The participants in our findings had been primarily motivated to seek out this shared life by a desire to exert greater control over their horses' wellbeing. It is therefore interesting to note how this control is constrained by a reliance on others and sometimes disrupted by external events. Yet, this is seen as reinforcing rather than undermining the good life. That is, the close relationship between people, horses, land and the wider natural-social environment is explicitly identified as key to providing wellbeing for horses, humans and land alike:

> It's not only healthier horses, the environment, the people, everyone is happier.

In this way, the experiences of the good life outlined here align with the kind of vision that underpins *buen vivir*, with its emphasis on interdependent configurations reflective of community citizenship and sociality as central to wellbeing (Calisto Friant & Langmore, 2015). Participants' relationships are negotiated and strengthened around and within the land, based on the needs and preferences of the actors—human and more-than-human—who live alongside them. In this sense, *buen vivir* helps us make sense of our participants' experience of the good life as a collective rather than an individual experience.

In summary, our second question asks how animals shape and experience the rural good life alongside people. In recognising horses as important social actors who motivate and guide good life experiences, we can draw on Danby and Hannam's (2016) notion of equiscapes to understand how space and relationships are renegotiated in interspecies endeavours, with the aim of providing horses with a meaningful good life and recognising their agency as species and individuals. In this way, horses are repositioned as significant political agents of change through their place in interdependent configurations of human and more-than-human actors (Elias, 1974). However, our theoretical engagement with *buen vivir* enables us to move beyond the leisure contexts with which Danby and Hannam are concerned. Rather, we find that romantic and recreational aspirations are swiftly dislodged by seasonal practices, hard work and purposeful active learning across the seasons. *Buen vivir* helps us understand how these interspecies lifestyles are based on a shared understanding of living well, in which 'all existing living beings on the planet can enjoy a

dignified life' (Acosta, 2017, p. 2601). In living well, people actively learn, experiment and establish practices through what participants describe as continual and self-gratifying labour. Stone (2019) finds that animal needs are typically subservient to those of humans within the leisure context. By shifting our focus to the equiscape, we counter that animals' needs and wants can and often do take precedence.

As we explore the enactment of relational processes within interspecies endeavours, *buen vivir* helps us embrace the plurality of all living things (Chassagne, 2019). This extends the 3F principles of animal wellbeing (friends, forage and freedom), as we see how horses are valued, nurtured, appreciated and allowed to flourish (Birke & Thompson, 2017). However, given the relatively recent turn to the study of animal wellbeing, we ask how future research might usefully explore the types of lifestyles and interspecies relationships that animals themselves would choose (Bekoff & Pierce, 2017).

Embedding the interspecies good life

Our findings and analysis so far show that over time, horsecare becomes one element of a holistic system. Participants articulate how the shared wellbeing of people, horses and communities and their ongoing land management practices are effectively embedded within the wider natural-social environment. This shift is partly driven by learning about the interconnections between land health and horse health:

> We can't have healthy horses if we have denuded our land and topsoil. The soil biome and the gut biome are intimately related so we need to figure out how to keep domestic horses on healthy pasture that's growing healthy forage.

This perception, described as lacking in their previous livery experience, shows participants' increasing awareness of the way in which their horses are part of multiactor environments. Components ranging from horses themselves through microbiota, soil, and flora interact (Latour, 1988, 2007) to produce an environment that can be 'healthy' or 'denuded'. This illustrates a shift from using land as a place to keep horses toward 'custodianship' or 'stewardship' of the environment, in which participants aim to prolong land health over time:

> More horse people need to understand how important good land management is when you own horses and land. The land is not just somewhere to turn horses out. Look after the land, and it will look after the animals that live on it.

As they extend their awareness and knowledge, participants talk of looking more broadly at the health of their land and the long-term viability of the practices they and their neighbours adopt:

> Traditional and even 'track systems' do not look beyond the horses. And this is short-sighted, because that means they are at best just a band aid. A holistic approach is far better; we have to be good land custodians; otherwise, we will gradually ruin the land we have.

This in turn led participants to support the development of increasingly diverse local ecosystems, which extended beyond their horsecare:

> I also love learning about the land and embracing new ways of managing it. We planted a woodland and a new hedge so have also started little projects not necessarily connected directly to the horses.

Participants become involved in degrees in efforts to shape and enrich landscapes. Initially, they create idealised environments for their horses, perhaps leaving areas of pasture to rewild in order to improve the quality of the grazing available. Over time, however, by engaging with other human and more-than-human actors, they learn about local landscapes, ecosystems and land stewardship practices where land health is respected and prioritised through active stewardship (Munck, 2016).

They talk about how sheep control populations of parasitic worms that can be harmful to horses and note how butterfly and insect populations rise as they reduce their reliance on pesticides. Thus, over time, participants increasingly—often accidentally—further their understanding of what might constitute more 'sustainable' practices but always with horses at the centre:

> It has to be about the welfare of the horse. Surely sustainability is planning for the future. You wouldn't plan to have worse living conditions for us, so why would it be different for horses?

As participants continually balance animal wellbeing and land stewardship in the pursuit of the rural good life, sustainability represents an outcome rather than a motivator. That is, our findings indicate that our relations with horses in turn embed us within wider ecosystems. This is aligned with the philosophy of *buen vivir*: In placing the highest value on the reciprocal relationship between nature and society, *buen vivir* proposes a progressive vision of social and environmental justice and happiness beyond material accumulation (Chassagne, 2019). Here, we see participants emphasising how the good life is dependent upon and shaped by their horses' wellbeing and that of the land they live on and the wider natural environment. At the same time, many participants forgo consumer comfort (and sometimes even basic services like mains water that may be unavailable in remote locations) in order to pursue their chosen lifestyle:

> It's impacted our own lifestyle with less luxury spending and just managing to pay the bills. Horses should be a lifelong commitment so whether you pay livery or own your own property to keep them on they will always have a financial impact on your income.

Of course, this is a choice that only people in a comparatively socioeconomically privileged position are able to make. Hereis where we should acknowledge squarely the very different experiences of people living in rural areas of this part of northern Europe compared to those where *buen vivir* originated. Nonetheless, it helps us make sense of the way in which our participants effectively cast rurality in more radical and relational terms: They emphasise community, understand the significance of land beyond its role in production and question human-centred approaches more widely. While their material circumstances are wildly different from the originators of *buen vivir*, there is clearly some similarity in the way they conceive their relationship with the natural-social environment around them.

Importantly, the land stewardship practices and attitudes towards sustainability described by participants vary considerably. This highlights the emergent, bottom-up character of these interspecies experiences in a manner aligned with the fundamentally endogenous character of *buen*

vivir (Chassagne, 2019). The concept of sustainability, by contrast, is rejected by many participants as having little to do with their own lived experience:

> Sustainability is a new 'fashionable' word to try to force everyone to behave as one or two think we should.

Even as people embrace environmentally friendly and future-focused behaviours, they wholeheartedly reject their uninvited imposition from outside. Rather, they act based on their own perceptions of interspecies wellbeing, the landscapes local to them and the lessons learnt about all of them through their own active and shared participation. The results of their endeavours are viewed as being suited to the particular setting—or subnational arenas, as Lobao et al. (2007) call them—in which they find themselves. Attempts to change their practices from outside are seen as potentially incongruent. For example, one participant expressed frustration about national government policies around sustainability: 'I don't know what "actionability" means… [it's perhaps just] about more ways to torture farmers'.

The notion of *buen vivir* is helpful here, as it emphasises the importance of bottom-up approaches that take account of specific ethico-political and socioecological contexts (Chaves et al., 2018; Gudynas, 2011). What is perhaps particularly interesting is the way our findings show that even comparatively privileged groups can and do resist the totalising tendencies of the 'mainstream' discourse of sustainability. Rather, participants are effectively developing what Bergmann (2019, p. 5564) identifies as an interspecies variation, which prioritises what 'truly matters to the animals concerned'. In their attempts to do so, our participants inadvertently heed the calls of academic authors (e.g., Hodges, 1999; Kopnina et al., 2018; Policarpo et al., 2018; Tsing, 2017) who suggest we should place animals at the heart of our collective attempts to imagine and deliver alternative visions of the future.

In summary, our third research question asks about wider implications for the politics of sustainability. We agree with Woods (2011b) that focusing on how interspecies relationships are embedded within rural socialities in turn offers insights and opportunities to explore global environmental challenges. Specifically, our findings confirm earlier work on how animals live alongside us (e.g., Calvert 2018; Holloway and Bear 2017) and existing scholarship on animals' configurational role in shaping rural sociality (e.g., Dalke 2019; Fijn 2011; Swart 2010). However, we add to this by illuminating how animals also impact our thinking about sustainability (Kopnina et al. 2018; Policarpo et al. 2018; Wadham 2020a).

Specifically, our findings suggest that concern for animal wellbeing stimulates endogenous, organic and collaborative efforts of caring for the land and the wider environment. That is, land stewardship is both coincidental to and a consequence of enhancing animal happiness. In both cases, land and animals alike are placed front and centre in the way participants shape and frame their contemporary good life experiences. In positioning animals in this way, we contribute to a broader, more inclusive political imaginary of rural socialities. That is, our focus on interspecies relations helps us imagine alternative hegemonic processes that go beyond 'power over' to 'power with', thereby contributing to what Monbiot (2017) calls a much-needed 'politics of belonging' (see also McAfee, 2017).

Buen vivir is a valuable ideological basis from which to begin to understand how different formulations of the good life emerge within these different socioecological contexts (Chaves et al., 2018; Gudynas, 2011). It helps us explore and reimagine sustainability within these particular landscapes by enabling us to go beyond the human. We have extended this by adding a focus on the complex entanglement of interspecies relationships and lifestyles, centred on multispecies

wellbeing, and reflecting on how this in turn impacts the land. In so doing, our relational ontological approach has attempted to engage with and question the epistemic foundations of the politics of sustainability (Escobar, 2010), capturing core 'intra-actions' found within evolving processes of multispecies environmental stewardship. Thus, future research could ask how these intra-actions—and the interdependent multiactor rural socialities they help shape—might contribute to posthumanist explanations of governance, political advocacy and action in addressing sustainability challenges and how animals can and do contribute to the protection, management and enhancement of future landscapes (Primdahl et al., 2020; see also Bellacasa, 2011; Gruen, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Our article has reframed our understanding of the good life as an interspecies endeavour via a focus on the shared lives of horses and people in UK-based equiscapes. Our findings reveal transformative multiactor relational configurations in unique landscape contexts (Heley & Jones, 2012; Lobao et al., 2007), while the resulting discussion has considered the implications of this for the politics and practice of sustainability. By drawing on the notion of *buen vivir*, we have shown that the good life is not individualistically driven but reflects and depends upon communities and the unique environmental situations in which they are embedded (Calisto Friant & Langmore, 2015; Gudynas, 2011, 2013). We have therefore expanded existing research into the understanding and practice of sustainability in rural areas by demonstrating the usefulness of a relational approach and illuminating the central role domestic animals can play in shaping postgrowth lifestyles (Bohme et al., 2022; Hodges, 1999; Houtbeckers, 2021).

In so doing, we have tried to disrupt Western individualistic ontologies of nature and society and their prevailing values (Gerlach, 2017). Instead, we have illustrated how, by recognising the interdependent nature of our shared relations via the specific lens of *buen vivir*, we might reposition both animals and nature more centrally in our understandings of sustainability (Acosta et al., 2016). Horses emerge as biocentric agents who help to both preserve and radically shape landscapes. They have distinctive relationships with humans and the social-natural environment. The intra-actions between horses and other social actors that are documented throughout our story serve to protect and enhance land—through established rural networks and active learning—where strong identities and communities preserve a way of life central to wellbeing (Bunce, 2005; Hodges, 1999).

We hope to have made two broad contributions to this knowledge. First, drawing on relational ontologies, we have brought a more-than-human perspective to existing analyses of the power relations at play in rural contexts by showing how our comparatively powerful participants defer to horses and other human and more-than-human actors in their pursuit of the good life. We have therefore helped elucidate new understandings of a more inclusive rural sociality and 'interspecies landscape' by encapsulating how interdependent configurations of interspecies actors effectively shape the symbolic, material and social other (Hoerning, 2021). For future research into the politics and practice of sustainability in rural areas, we have thereby offered a clear case for adding (inter)species to existing and overlapping critical categories of analysis, such as race, class and gender.

Second, we contribute to ongoing dialogues about *buen vivir*. By engaging in an 'experimental venture' (Gerlach, 2017) to explore alternative lifestyles in the UK, we show its usefulness and relevance beyond a Latin American context. In order to do this respectfully and transparently, we traced what Katz (2001, p. 1229) calls the 'contour lines that represent not elevation but particular

relations to a process'. In so doing, we demonstrated that *buen vivir* reframes and concretises the way in which social ruralities in this very different context offer up new narratives for a 'good coexistence' (Albo, 2017; Benalcázar & de la Rosa, 2021). However, our contribution to the literature on *buen vivir* goes beyond the geographical. Rather, in recognising their transformational and powerful role as social and political actors, we introduce (domestic) animals as a key constituency in efforts to achieve a more 'harmonious relation between society and nature' (Benalcázar & de la Rosa, 2021, p. 9).

To conclude, through our relational and interspecies lens, we hope to have contributed to wider efforts to develop a grounded understanding of sustainability in rural European society and what it might mean for people and animals alike.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available on request from the authors.

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