

## Sustainable Pig Production

### Manuscript Pigfilm EN (*woman/ man*)

*Can pig production be profitable and can the pigs live a good life at the same time? At the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences a project studying sustainable food production and the maternal instincts of sows is currently under way.*

*Let us visit Gun, a pig producer, to see how producers, pigs and scientists work together to put new research ideas into practice.*

Welcome to the pig production of the future! We are visiting Gun Ragnarsson at her farm, Kärra Gärde, just outside Varberg on the west coast of Sweden.

The piglets are very alert; they may want to tell you how nice it is here at Gun's farm. But there are two others who are also eager to present what goes on - Gun Ragnarsson and her adviser Bo Algers.

*If you look here, all of these are my girls and they are all in the late stages of pregnancy. All of them will farrow three weeks from now.*

Just before farrowing the sows build a nest – how does that happen?

“Hormones are released in the pig, and they trigger the nest building behaviour of the sow. The first thing she does is that she leaves her flock mates and walks away on her own to a dry place where she feels protected from bad weather. She roots a shallow hole in the ground. She then collects branches and softer materials for the nest, which will protect her piglets from cold.”

If the sow is prevented from building a nest, as she is in conventional pig production, she will suffer from stress. That's why Gun gives the sows the opportunity to follow their instincts.

*Yes, it is just like in nature where every sow has her own nest. She leaves the nest to forage, drink, urinate, dung and to spend time with her flock mates. And she goes back to the nest to look after her piglets.*

The sow steps elegantly over the rolling threshold but the piglets cannot get out – a mother needs time for herself now and then. In conventional pig production the sow cannot get away from her young.

*You might almost say that the piglets rape their mother; but here she can get away.*

Seven to ten days after farrowing, the walls of the cubicles are removed. The sows and the piglets come together in one big flock. Gun has decided to keep the sows in groups of eight. In natural conditions they live in groups of 6-10.

*I kept sows in groups of six a few years ago but that was not good at all. If one sow was missing and there were only five of them, the flock didn't work well at all. The group lost its*

*dynamic and was less competitive – the piglets did not put on weight as well. That’s why I claim that eight is the optimum number.*

Yes, pigs are like people. It’s no fun when there are too many or too few of them. But why do the piglets have to stay inside the cubicles for seven to ten days?

“During the first period it is important that they are with their mother, so they learn to recognise her and so she can recognise her piglets. When it is time to nurse with the other sows in the larger group, and the sows call their piglets to suckle, it is important that the bonds between the mother and her young are strong”.

I have noticed that there is a mother over there, nursing her piglets, and it sounds like they are talking to one another - the mother and her young. What are they saying?

*I think that she is saying: "Come over here!" Because some of her young have got her to lie down. So I believe she is saying: "Come quickly and massage so that the milk is let down".*

“When the piglets have been massaging for a while, they stimulate the sow to let down her milk and, because the milk is only available for about 15-20 seconds, the sow has to let her piglets know that they must stop massaging and put the teat in their mouth and start sucking. She does this by suddenly increasing the speed of her grunts”.

In this stable it is so quiet that the sow really can talk to her piglets about eating. But sooner or later, the piglets have to get use to ordinary feed. Here, the piglets are eating at their own pace. If the transition to feed is too abrupt, the piglets will get diarrhoea. That’s not the case on Gun’s farm.

When the piglets are a bit older they are taken away from their mother. How does it feel for the sow to be separated from her young?

*It is as if something just snaps in their heads. When I open this door, they gallop out of the pen. And I say to people that it is as though they are longing for the boar. As if the sows who have been through this before know that they can spend 4-5 days with the boar before insemination. And if you know what nursing is like, you must also know what a relief it is to stop nursing. I think that it’s a combination of wanting the boar and getting away from the nursing.*

Here you see the result. The piglets are nine weeks old and ready to be sold to a slaughter pig producer. When it comes to selling - can it really be profitable? Can you make a living from this, Gun?

*Yes, just as well as anything else - or maybe even a little better because I have lower building costs than on a conventional farm and much better health status.*

Gun has low investment costs for buildings and fittings, a better piglet survival rate, virtually no medical expenses, higher growth rate and the longevity of the sows is better.

“There is no law of nature that says it has to cost more to be decent to the animals. And this case is a glowing illustration that there is no such law of nature”.



Gun even works less than conventional pig farmers and her 140 sows produce more than 3,000 pigs per year. A record breaker! What possible explanation is there for so few farmers following in Guns footsteps?

*If I were to be a bit outspoken, I think that farmers are conservative and just want to do what everybody else is doing. But the truth is probably not as simple as that. You need so much knowledge for this.....I think that people are a bit lazy – it takes some effort to acquire knowledge but it is much easier to go along with all the conventional stuff like all the other farmers.*

*From talking to the students who come to me from the farm school, they say they would never consider keeping pigs any other way. The more youngsters that visit my farm, the more people will start this kind of system...But you cannot teach an old farmer new tricks!*