



## FOCUS

# Sheep Benefits to Human Welfare

By Cat Urbigit, The Shepherd Editor

As shepherds, we understand the direct benefits of the healthy meat and natural fiber produced by domestic sheep. But it's worthwhile to consider the wider range of benefits that sheep bring to human lives.

Sheep provide ecosystem services – from reducing fuel loads and spreading seeds so new plants will grow, to controlling weeds, insect pests, and invading vegetative species, all without the use of chemicals or machinery, and while depositing fertilizer into their environment.

Sheep are a vital part of medical research to improve the human condition. Sheep were some of the first animals used for successful blood donation (in 1667!) and womb transplants (in 2007), and were also used to create artificial heart valves. Domestic sheep are naturally docile, their physiology is similar to humans, and the animals are similar in weight and size to humans, so their use in medical research is widespread. Biomedical researchers use sheep for vaccine development, studying neonatal development, and for optimization of drug delivery and surgical techniques. Geneticists used a sheep as the first mammal to be cloned from the DNA of embryos. Sheep are used to study heart disease, asthma, and kidney disease; and are used as models for implanting medical devices, as well as improvements in the repair of broken bones and wounds. Since sheep can carry diseases that are also found in humans, sheep help scientists to understand diseases and identify possible treatments and cures.

But a shepherd's connection to the flock goes deep, to the human-

animal bond. The American Veterinary Medical Association has acknowledged the benefits of this type of bond: "The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and wellbeing of both. This includes, among other things, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment."

We as shepherds feel the benefits of human-animal bond as we work with and interact with our flocks on a daily basis. My favorites are when we assist a ewe in labor and hear that guttural, contented murmur to her newborn lambs, when we watch small children fall asleep with a lamb on their lap, when we greet the rising sun alongside our grazing flock. Our blood pressure drops, and we are reminded of the good in the world – simply by being with our sheep.

In *Therapeutic Benefits Of The Human-Animal Bond*, Wiley-Blackwell states, "A growing body of research now documents the value of the human-animal bond has benefits in child development, elderly care, mental illness, physical impairment, dementia, abuse, trauma recovery, and the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth and adults."

Sheep provide meat, wool, numerous sheep byproducts, ecosystem services, medical advances, and overall health advantages, but our flocks also provide shepherds with inspiration and a special type of calling. Celebrate the sheep, for all they bring into our lives.