Identifying Shinola

Lonnie L. Williamson

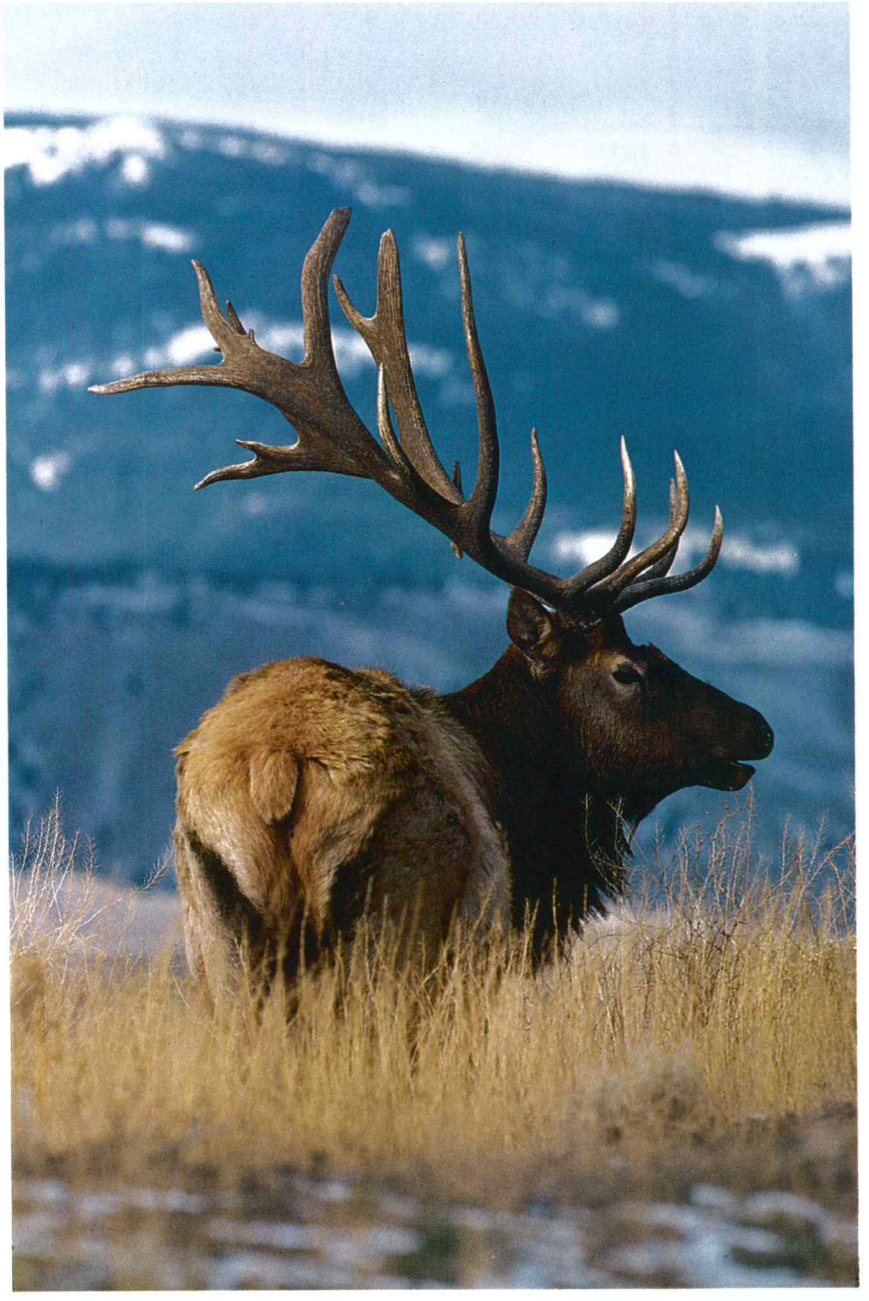

Photo by David N. Olsen, courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

A keynoter, I guess, is supposed to set a tone for a meeting. He or she should draw some lines in the dirt to delineate situations, then offer general suggestions for advancing beyond those subjective lines in a manner that serves the interest of all concerned.

That admittedly is a tall order, one that should adequately expose my shortcomings and prejudices. But as I try to set the stage for this meeting, I hope mostly to engender some sincere feelings that longterm livestock and big game survival on western rangeland is possible, and that it is probable, if both interests learn to accept reality, seek compromise, and become somewhat dependent on one another.

That livestock grazing eliminated much wildlife from this nation's 266 million acres of federal rangeland is not a moot point. It's a fact. Overgrazing by cattle and sheep is historic and has been difficult to control. The reasons given for this misuse are many, but mainly it happened because no one managed the land early on. When major herds of livestock hit the West in the 1800s, there was no U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management, or anything else to effectively prevent destruction of the "commons." By the time that appropriate agencies were created, the range had been trodden unmercifully. After more than 100 years and some recent progress, the scars remain.

There's the ranching side to this story also. The federal government lured people west with offers of "free land." Officials believed that settling the territories was in the country's best interest. And there was sufficient ignorance in Washington, D.C. at that time causing Congress to

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think that a fellow could survive raising livestock on a 160-acre arid homestead. The truth is that ranchers had to accumulate more land and water to make it. They also had to use, and were encouraged by the government to use, surrounding public land, which was necessary for establishing profitable ranching operations.

Ranchers, therefore, are not interlopers on public land, as many people seem to think. They are legal, historic and welcomed users of multiple-use land, just like hunters, hikers, anglers, and campers. Yet we forget that our forefathers, East and West, who originally raped the land so long ago, are gone. There are new generations of ranchers using public land, and who want to protect that land. Despite an array of the unreconstructed permittees who cling to old ways, public land ranchers, as a whole, have improved public range conditions during the past 50 years. The problem is that progress has been too slow and too localized, which reflects the inefficiencies of government as much as that of ranching. Yet those places where range condition remains below acceptable standards continue to fuel controversy.

Most recently, that controversy has centered on big game/livestock conflicts. Actually, it seems to be mostly an elk/livestock problem that has ranchers and wildlife conservationists snapping at one another. A couple of wet years probably would make everyone a bit less bilious, but only temporarily. The drought has merely forced us to face a problem that is sure to become more troublesome if sane solutions are not reached.

An oversimplification of the situaton is that livestock use in some places is being reduced to improve range conditions, while elk are increasing and are perceived to be eating the feed.

Ranchers, quite predictably, are upset, especially since many of them invested time and money in public land range improvements that, in concert with reduced livestock use, helped produce additional forage.

Wildlife interests, on the other hand, say that it's about time that elk got some consideration. After all, wildlife has played third fiddle to livestock on public rangeland for more than 100 years. The public is fed-up, and the overwhelming call is for more wildlife and fewer cows. State wildlife agencies are attuned to this growing and already dominating public opinion in favor of wildlife and against historic livestock abuse of public land.

What we have is a situation that no one anticipated more than a few years ago. There is the urbanized West, wherein most people live in cities and towns rather than rural areas. Nevada, for example, has the nation's most citified population. Of all the states, it has a larger percentage of its residents living in metropolitan areas. So, Nevada's population is urban, not rural. It consists mostly of businessmen, professionals, service sector people, mining and gaming employees, clerks and laborers. The hallowed halls of ranching are shrinking in relative terms. Cattlemen and sheepmen now are the minority. As in other states all over the country, Nevada ranchers and farmers no longer have the most votes. Political power has shifted to dudes who value public land for recreation purposes, not livestock or timber production.

Along with that demographic change came new urgency within the Forest Service and BLM to restore overgrazed range. Relatively recent laws, such as the Forest and Rangeland Resources Planning Act of 1974 and Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978, are evidence of the public prodding agencies to get on with range improvements. Consequently, range management plans were devised, many of which call for fewer livestock to allow forage plant recovery.

Also, state wildlife agencies have been reintroducing big game to historic habitats, as they are required by law to do. Most of the introductions took, and big game populations expanded. And since elk and livestock generally eat the same forage plants, feed left by reduced livestock use in some places was believed to be snapped-up by increased numbers of elk.

Complicating the situation was poor land management planning on the part of federal agencies, which was aided by reluctance in some state wildlife agencies to set big game population goals for the areas covered by those plans. The combined frailties caused indecision all around. And since federal agencies have responsibility only for wildlife habitat, while states are supposed to manage wildlife populations, no limits were agreed to on where brakes would be applied to big game numbers. The general result is that plans call either for less cows and more wildlife, or more of both.

So here we are, with everyone agreeing that range restoration is good and that animal use must be limited to allow the forage resource to recover and do its first job, which is protecting watersheds. Yet there is no agreement on what eats how much of the excess forage that is produced by restoration. Ranch rs understandably want as much of it as they can get for livestock. State wildlife agencies, conservationists and the general public likewise want more for elk and other wildlife. It's a stalemate, but wildlife has the upper hand now because of the shift in public opinion, and because all that has to be done for wildlife to push livestock off is nothing.

In short, the federal agencies are required by law to restore range. They can control livestock numbers on the range to do that. But they cannot control the elk. That is the responsibility of state wildlife agencies, which can limit elk numbers through hunting regulations. But if states refuse to control elk adequately, the federal agencies have no choice but to keep reducing livestock use.

There are lots of reasons why sportsmen and conservationists should be concerned about this situation, not the least of which is that forcing ranching off the public land is not

right. Ranching is as much a proper use of public rangeland as recreation.

Sure we want the lousy ranching operations that abuse range gone, just as we want the poachers and other nere-do-wells of hunting eliminated. But now is the time, I believe, to be selective with ire, to direct it toward the abusers while extending a hand to the many conscientious ranchers with whom we can share the land amicably and profitably. Conservationists haven't fought the "range war" just to be pugnacious. They have stuggled, I think, to get fish, wildlife and recreation proper status on the range. And it's not just the trendy thing to do either, because there's much for wildlife and livestock to gain by a conservationist/rancher partnership.

For wildlife and recreation, ranchers offer millions of acres of private land, generally the best land in the west which is important winter range. This is land that could be lost to big game if ranching is excised. An example is ranches along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, which are used by grizzlies, elk and other wildlife. There are conflicts with bears cold-cocking a calf or sheep now and then, or elk raiding haystacks, but these are manageable problems. There are many ways to compensate landowners for such damages. But if ranchers are forced to sell out, experience shows that hordes of recreational and retirement land buyers can split the property into damnable "ranchettes." The bear and the elk are forced out by people, and the habitat is lost forever.

And let's not forget water. Ranchers own water rights and construct water developments that wildlife often depend on. Should ranching go, those water rights could be sold to urban areas whose governments are desperately searching for every drop that becomes available.

For ranchers, a partnership with conservationists could offer much-needed business stability, some assurance that their ranching operation (which necessarily includes grazing public land) will be viable for their children and grandchildren to assume.

To be succinct, wildlife can win the battle with livestock in a big way, but it could lose the war later on as a result.

In essence, wildlife in the West needs ranching for protection. I hope ranching comes to understand that it needs wildlife for the same reason.

As we deal with this issue, which is also an opportunity, we must be aware that neither the public land livestock industry nor big game interests have complete control over their futures. I'll try to explain.

I once wrote a column titled "It Wasn't Fat Riders That Killed the Pony Express." The point I tried to make was that progress, in the form of telegraphs and railroads, put the ponies out of business; it was not over-worked horses nor a drop in public demand for communications. Now, we could argue whether the coming of telegraphs and railroads was progress, but that they were significant changes in this country is obvious. The fact is, there have been and will be changes in American society. People with high hopes for their buggy whip businesses after Henry Ford's innovations did not recognize this basic truism. They went the way of Pony Express. They were victims of change.

Those of us in natural resource management and ranching are equally vulnerable to changes, especially shifts of societal whim. Governmental agencies and private industry consistently are buffeted by the crosswinds of time, crosswinds brought on by changing public desires for products and services. The survivors are those who recognize that a chronic crosswind is really a new prevailing wind, and that a bumpy ride probably means the agency or industry is maintaining a course for where the public no longer wants to go.

This amorphous "public" that I speak of is a very fickled entity, and it is heartless. Tradition means little in its midst. As product of a so-called "family farm," I know. The public could not care less that family farms are disappearing at amazing rates, that corporate agriculture and increasing foreign investors now control most of the nation's agricultural output.

Public support for the traditional ranching family and operation is not forthcoming. John Wayne is dead and Willie Nelson wears a ponytail.

Neither can conservationists and wildlife managers depend on continued mass backing as we have enjoyed in recent years. Traditional uses of big game, such as hunting, could be less of a factor in the future.

For example, 30.2 percent of the Intermountain Region's population that was 12 years and older hunted and/or fished in 1955. In 1985, 30 years later, that percentage had barely changed, with 30.6 percent involved. In 1985, only 36 percent of Utah citizens 12 and older hunted and/or fished, while 87 percent enjoyed nonconsumptive use of the resources. Between 1980 and 1985, the number of Utahans fishing increased slightly. Those hunting decreased slightly. But nonconsumptive use rose 62 percent. The nation had fewer licensed hunters in 1989 than it did in 1979.

All this tells me that the wildlife constituency has diversified and grown beyond the sporting public to include other wildlife users. It is not a case of dumping sportsmen and embracing others. The need among wildlife agencies is to broaden their base by supplying services to more than just hunting and fishing interests, and thereby strengthening a program which provides more benefits to all. And this partnerhsip should not be limited to wildlife users. It must include "outsiders" that may have been traditional enemies, but who should be supporters, including the livestock industry.

Partnership, I think, is the key, the kind of partnership that the National Elk Foundation already has forged among federal and state agencies and the livestock community in some areas. There is no salable reason that wildlife should not be an economic benefit to private landowners. State wildlife agencies and native Americans East and West have, and are developing successful programs to this end.

Retaining livestock use while res-

toring wildlife populations and public land will not be painless to any concerned. Some wildlife, for example, cannot be maintained on all public land that they once were. The grizzly and wolves are obvious examples. Other big game, such as elk, must be managed to subsist with other uses. But livestock permittees will feel the sharpest crunch, primarily because it will be economic.

There's no use kidding ourselves. Livestock use will be reduced more on federal public land. The only question remaining is where the public will allow those reductions to stop. In my opinion, some positive moves by the land management agencies, Congress, and the livestock industry can ease that loss.

First, I believe that livestock grazing must be eliminated on submarginal land, not only because the public demands it, but because such grazing gives the industry a black eye. Second, in order to continue multiple-use grazing on all remaining productive rangeland, many allotments may have to be combined and distributed among fewer permittees, in order to maintain economic ranching units. Thirdly, no where will the public allow livestock to be allocated more than 50 percent of the forage available for animal use. And fourth, riparian areas must get more and better attention. They must be restored quickly. These are, in my view, some basic concepts that all must accept if livestock and big game are to prosper on federal public land.

Given these changes, in one form or another, then federal, state and interest groups can sit down and set realistic goals, for both livestock and big game at equitable levels that protect the basic forage, land and water resources.

I suspect that a lot of the things which I have mentioned here will be discussed in detail during this meeting. It would serve us all well to listen, and to think about this issue and its solution, with our brains instead of our emotions.

Those of us gathered in this room have lots of common enemies out there. Animal rightists, antihunters, people who despise wildlife management. Then there's the huge 80 percent of the U.S. population who could not care less one way or the other.

Is it better that we face this faceless horde together, or separately? I hope this symposium will help us decide.

The Habitat Partnership Program in Colorado

Joe Gerrans

Livestock/big game conflicts have been an issue for a number of years in Colorado. Considerable efforts have been made to provide relief and/or compensation for these conflicts. Two of the areas where adequate solutions had been lacking were rangeland forage and fence damage. During the winter of 1988–89 an increased level of concern and frustration on the part of the landowners surfaced towards the entire issue of wildlife and livestock conflicts. The frustration most often expressed was that it was unfair for landowners to support an ever increasing number of big game animals, particularly elk. The situation was further complicated by the uneven distribution of the burden. In some areas ranches are located where big game tend to concentrate only in the spring. They may suffer an impact on newly emerging vegetation and yet have no opportunity to take advantage of those animals in the fall during hunting season. Other ranches may have those same animals only in the fall and may realize a substantial economic benefit from the lease of hunting rights.

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Colorado's Habitat Partnership Program was designed to meet the Division director's commitment to the legislature and the State's agricultural industry to address conflicts with rangeland forage and fences resulting from big game herds (Lipscomb et al. 1991). The program was designed to encourage an atmosphere of partnership between wildlife managers, habitat managers, including private landowners, and users of the wildlife resource. Local committees are to be established to ensure appropriate public involvement, on a local basis, in identifying conflicts and recommending strategies to reduce, alleviate, or mitigate those conflicts. The Division has committed funds to implement those strategies. Private land habitat issues are to be considered in the big game herd management plans. The emphasis for antlerless harvest is to be shifted to impact more of the animals that are causing the conflict and fewer of the animals that are not.

Guidelines for implementing the program were approved by the Colorado Wildlife Commission in January, 1990. Included in the guidelines were the methods to appoint local committees, identification of perennial conflicts, types of strategies that might be considered, and recommendations for development of a five year plan (Lipscomb, 1990).

Local committees were formed by the director appointing committee members based on nominations from the agricultural industry, State, and Federal agencies. Conflicts were to be identified in units of affected area which are 640 acres or larger which may involve one landownership, portions of one, or several. In order to