Western and Inner Mongolian Grasslands: Feeling at Home on the Range

Michael R. Frisna

I found my way to China during the summer of 1990 as a member of a North American grassland management delegation invited by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture. The Chinese government organized the trip through the People to People Citizen Ambassador Program as part of an ongoing effort to modernize agriculture. Our purpose was to meet with land management professionals, herdsmen and farmers to exchange information and to discuss matters related to grassland management.

After many days of arduous travel by plane, train, then bus, often over primitive roads, it was a surprise, upon arriving in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, to feel at home. This vast remote region with a long history and rich culture is inhabited by a people with an independent lifestyle tied to the land and its natural resources. In many ways it is very similar to the American West with its wide open spaces. In Montana, we refer to our "land of the Big Sky"; the Chinese refer to their country as "everything under the sky". Similar, too, are the issues both countries face concerning grassland management.

The Inner Mongolian Autonomus Region

The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region is a vast area lying between the Great Wall and China's northern border, extending over 1,500 miles from east to west and over 1,000 miles from north to south. Most of Inner Mongolia is a high, relatively flat plateau about 5,000 feet above sea level.

The climate is very similar to that of southwestern and eastern Montana, characterized by a scantiness of rainfall and dramatic changes in temperature. Winters are long and cold (5 to 6 months) with short, warm summers. There are more sunny than cloudy days with frequent strong winds. As in Montana, January is the coldest month.

Vegetation produced on this vast expanse of grassland (over 35 million acres) provides forage and habitat for a variety of wildlife and livestock utilized by the native people. Nearly 1,000 species of plants are present with about 600 utilized as favored livestock forage. These include native Mongolian plants we have introduced to North America like crested wheatgrass and caragana. However some of the native Mongolian vegetation is very similar to that naturally occurring in Montana such as fringed sagewort (same species as in Montana) and wheatgrasses very similar to our western wheatgrass and bluebunch wheatgrass.

A variety of wild herbivores including red deer, moose, wild sheep, and antelope share the grasslands with domestic livestock. A variety of predators are present, as are over 300 species of birds including large eagles very similar to our golden eagle.

Visiting the grasslands of Inner Mongolia answered a question I have pondered for years—What did the grasslands of North America look like before fences? The Mongolian landscape is similar to the western prairies, except fences are rare. As far as one can see is a "sea of grass."

The Inner Mongolian People and Culture

While preparing to board the train from Beijing to Hohout, one of our Chinese interpreters told me we would fit in well with the Mongolians "...They are a lot like North

The author is with the Montana Dept. Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, 1330 W. Gold Street, Butte, Montana 59701.

Americans"—independent and free willed". This heightened my interest in seeing the land and meeting its people.

The Mongolian plateau is a romantic land with a long history. During the 12th century Ghengis Kahn united the nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe (today's Mongolian people) and conquered China and eastern Europe to form one of the largest land empires in world history. The descendents of this great empire are a proud people who maintain a semi-nomadic lifestyle tied to the maintenance of herds of sheep, goats, horses, and cattle on their extensive native grasslands.

Western North Americans and Mongolians share the common bond of the horse infuencing development of their way of life. On his Mongol pony and dressed in bright, multi-colored garments, the herdsman strikes a romantic image that rivals the American cowboy. These are proud and proficient horsemen, with small, sturdy horses adapted to the needs of their nomadic masters. The Mongolian pony was once feared by the Chinese as Ghengis Kahn's "super weapon" and was reputed to "sweat blood" during the heat of battle. It was in this part of the world that technology like the stirrup was first developed.

Mongolian culture has developed around the necessity of being nomadic. Homes are small, portable felt tents referred to by westerners as yurts. They consist of a circular collapsible pole structure covered with felt that can be easily disassembled to move with the herds. Inside the yurt is a small stove used for cooking and heating. Animal dung is used for fuel as there is no wood. The tents are often very colorful and include all the usual comforts of home. Some are equipped with small portable wind generators and some herdsmen have small motorcycles used to visit neighbors or nearby villages. Today most herders live in these small structures during the summer–fall months and spend winter tending their flocks from small villages. Small, portable basket-like pens are used to separate and control small numbers of livestock. Unlike methods employed by American stockmen, all the techniques of animal husbandry are portable because, except for winter months, the livestock herds are continually on the move.

At meal time, people sit on the floor around the tent stove and share traditional food dishes and drinks made from agricultural products of the grassland. Fat-tailed sheep, a special breed, is a delicacy often prepared for feasts. The sheep is roasted whole and the fat is considered a delicacy. Combined with the traditional drink of distilled and fermented mare's milk called grassland beer (20–30 proof liquor), this meat creates a very festive mood at meals. Warm milk tea and fresh mare's milk mixed with millet and butter are dishes traditionally enjoyed. Goats cheese is also commonly served at meals.

It is a favorite custom to visit, sing songs, and share food and drink with friends. Our delegates were openly accepted as friends and for us the hospitality extended by the Mongolians will be remembered for our lifetimes.

Grassland Management

When asked, "How long have you grazed these lands?" a native herdsman proudly proclaimed as he pointed at the ground, "My ancestors and I have grazed this very place for at least 1,500 years." Such a statement helps put survival tied to good land management in perspective. It reaffirms that through careful management, livestock grazing can be maintained on the land over time while maintaining a long-term productive vegetative resource.

Both Inner Mongolia and the western United States are facing a critical point in rangeland management but in different contexts. In many ways our problems are mirror images of each other. Our current national controversy is over grazing on our public lands; China seeks to settle the nomadic peoples as a national policy. Faced with the need to feed a burgeoning population, China is seeking to increase production by imposing the western system of settlement upon a long-lived system that succeeds precisely because of the co-evolution of the nomadic people and the land. Forcing this settlement promotes continuous season-long livestock grazing, the form of grazing that created most of the grazing management problems faced by western land managers. Where this superimposed system is applied without consideration for the range conditions and methods that maintain it, deterioration can be seen.

The Chinese have an advantage because unlike settlement of the American West, they have a native peoples with domestic livetock breeds and grazing methods adapted to the land proven by time. They only have to draw from the knowledge of their Mongolian herdsmen.

The western United States has been faced with responding to the imposition of livestock grazing methods designed for European lands and the deterioration resulting from a similar lack of adaptation to the arid conditions of the West. Most of this deterioration occurred on the Western rangeland prior to 1900 and modern range management methods based on applied plant ecology employed today were developed to alleviate this problem. Where used, modern range management is effectively correcting these problems. As a wildlife biologist I believe working with stockmen to maintain livestock in well-managed grazing systems is critical to maintaining our wildlife resources in the western United States. In many of the western states a substantial portion of the wildlife habitat is privately owned and used primarily for agriculture. So production of wildlife is a partnership between government and private enterprise and only by working together can we maintain the Western lifestyle we cherish.

Whether it is the "land of the big sky" or "everything under the sky" it doesn't change the fact that we all live under the same sky. Our mutual survival depends on wise management of our world's grassland resource.