

Viewpoint:

State of Range Management on Public Lands: A Response

Holger P. Jensen

This article is a response to C.D. Bonham's article in October 1991 *Rangelands*. I was educated and trained in the manner Dr. Bonham described. His description was accurate but incomplete, at least from a public land manager's point of view. I am one of many public land managers, educated in the state land grant university system, who now is forced to helplessly stand by and witness the decline of range management on public lands.

It is true that funding of federal land management agencies, in particular the range management program, has been inadequate. All through the 1980's federal agencies tried to do more work with fewer people. This approach still exists today. In addition to fewer people there is less money applied to managing the land. I do not foresee this situation changing soon, namely because there are more pressing issues to face and challenges to meet than those dealing with America's rangelands. For instance, who would suggest a priority of range management over that of the national debt, health care, taxes and social security. No matter how concerned people are about the health of our environment, the state of rangelands and its management will always take a backseat to other more important social and economic concerns.

Dr. Bonham stated that universities educated us as ecologists and there are some things that no university can teach. For a lot of public land managers the application of ecological concepts to range management has been self taught. In my opinion, this type of knowledge is more valuable than any university diploma. We must realize that this type of education is time consuming, sometimes costly, and mistakes will continue to be made. Range management is still a relatively young science but an extremely old art. We cannot expect a hundred years of science to catch up to centuries of art anytime soon.

I agree with the premise that we now know enough about grazing, its benefits, and its liabilities. What we continue to have problems with is disseminating the information and getting landowners and even public land managers to use it. At best, we have done a mediocre job of informing the non-agricultural public. That is a shame because their input into the funding of public programs is much greater than most people realize. But, it's a two way street.

Editor's Note: The author is currently an employee of a public land management agency in the West.

One would be amazed at how many public land users do not believe there is a profession such as range management. I know this to be true because I hear it every year from people who use and even make a portion of their living from public lands. Every year some of these individuals witness deterioration of their ranges along with their finances. Every year some of these individuals leave the range. Occasionally, some of these individuals change their minds and accept the idea that a change can be good. Change sometimes comes after a good range tour or a brainstorming session with friends or relatives.

I do not mean to imply that there is no longer a need for range management research and ecological research. I believe there is a greater need to bridge the gap between the art and science of range management. Universities have failed to bridge this gap. This failure is in part because the art of our profession relates more closely to the social sciences. The necessary social sciences have not been sufficiently included in university range management curricula. It is difficult to relate statistics, tables, and graphs to real life without linking them to the familiar. Perhaps this is another area the university can't do much with because each of us has our own perception of what is familiar.

We will never be able to explain ecological concepts to either range users or non-users unless we persevere to explain ecological concepts in qualitative real life terms. Agency professionals are as much to blame as educators in this regard. Agencies may have carried the statistical aspects of accounting for progress too far, as if tables and graphs are the end result, not means to an end. These methods are important for displaying information, but they should not drive the decision making process. Furthermore, some agency professionals become so engrossed with their own charts and graphs that they may neglect current, yet relevant, university research results. In which case "new" initiatives may only address the same old problems while more rangeland continues to deteriorate for lack of proper attention.

I do not intend to be pessimistic. As the population of the world increases, our environment becomes more stressed and our concerns more urgent. We, in range management on public lands, must become better communicators by necessity. At the same time we must also become more decisive in implementing proven management techniques even at the risk of being unpopular at times. Otherwise, we will not have used our education,

taxpayer dollars, our time and our energy to truly manage our rangeland resources for the benefit of the people.

The movement to remove livestock from public lands is a real threat to the livestock industry. There are extremists on both sides. There are both "environmentalists" and livestock producers who are misinformed, yet both sides raise valid points. There are numerous success stories of range management applied to public lands and there are also examples of failure resulting from complacency, as well as inadequate funding for improvements. The blame is shared by the land management agencies, landowners, special interests groups, and politicians.

Solutions to resource conflicts lie in the middle as opposed to the extremes. It seems the extremes receive the most attention. Resolution of conflict by law and regulation has become politically unfavorable and even career damaging to agency professionals. It has become too easy to circumvent a law in order to avoid controversy. Ultimately rangeland resources are neglected. Public

land agency personnel in field offices often feel helpless, always in the middle between our superiors and the land user. At times the lack of support from above and below becomes overwhelming enough that quitting is the easiest solution.

In conclusion, I disagree with Dr. Bonham's statement that academic professionals are the real culprits behind the decline of range management on public lands. Again I believe that we all must accept this responsibility. Recently, agencies have responded to challenges concerning range management efforts. Slogans like "Range of Our Vision" and "Change on the Range", for instance, portray recognition that "new" initiatives are needed to solve an old problem. Yet, what is still needed to prevent further decline of range management on public lands is a rededication by all rangeland managers to leadership, and accountability. This, in a balanced combination with a healthy dose of art and science would go a long way in filling the information gap. ●

Rangelands, Desertification, and Clements' Ghost-A Viewpoint Paper

Thadis W. Box

Millions of people picked up the June 2, 1992, issue of *USA Today* and read the articles about degradation of our planet. The well-done graphic art showing rangeland under pressure reinforced what everyone already knew—overgrazing ruins the land. Many were probably surprised to find that North America had the most degraded rangelands in the world—worse than famine areas of Ethiopia or Somalia, worse than the parched landscapes they saw on their TVs during Desert Storm, but lacking expertise in range condition, they simply filed it away as another example of our extravagant use of resources.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of professional ecologists, agriculturists, and range people who have worked or traveled overseas were appalled at the comparison. North American rangelands are among the best condition ranges, not the worst. Certainly many of the ranges in Africa and Asia are many times worse than those of North America. The reporter must have gotten her information from a horror movie.

We were shocked even more when we saw that the data were from the respected soil scientist and desertification specialist, Harold Dregne. Those who know Harold know that he is an honorable man. Although not an ecologist or range manager, he has worked with arid land soils all over the world. How could he have come to such an erroneous conclusion?

Part of the problem may be due to confusing definitions of desertification. But the definition Dr. Dregne used is the one adopted by the 1990 UN Environmental Program: "land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry subhumid areas resulting from adverse human impact." The condition of American rangelands used by Dregne are those developed by the Soil Conservation Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. The data used in his comparisons are reported in deviation from climax or some potential plant community. The deviation is caused primarily by the plant community's response to grazing by domestic animals. Using the human-caused degradation approach and our own range condition figures, virtually all rangelands all over the

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