

# The Wild Life of Allan Savory

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**This Rhodesian biologist has been spreading the gospel of holistic management to the masses on several continents. Some respond to his message. Others deny his successes and ridicule his changes of mind. Is this extraordinary man a genius or simply a contradiction? Is he saving the world or frightening scientists?**

Allan Savory is a botanist and zoologist with a history as varied as the flora and fauna of the country in which he was born. Rhodesia was a white ruled British territory and when he was a member of the Rhodesia Party Savory broke ranks, crossed the aisle and worked for the black vote. Soon after, he had to flee the country in fear of his life.

He landed in Texas in the early '70s, now lives in New Mexico, but for most of his 63 years, this maverick has been wandering wild places trying to stop desertification, which is a symptom of a worldwide and deadly serious loss of biodiversity.

"As a youngster, my only aim was to live in the African bush forever." He had that opportunity but ended up "forsaking it in order to work toward saving the wildlife that was my reason for being in the bush. Even in the wildest areas, the land was deteriorating, in fact turning to desert, rendering it ever less able to support life of any kind. I was determined to find a way to reverse this process."

He worked as a biologist, soldier, public servant, member of parliament, president of a political party, farmer, rancher, consultant. "Throughout that," says Savory, "there was constantly just one theme—poor land means poor people, social upheaval, political unrest. We farmers and ranchers have destroyed more civilizations than armies have done. Armies change civilizations. We farmers and ranchers destroy them, they never rise again. And I've been obsessed with this problem of why this is happening, why it's happened for 10–15,000 years, and why we've never been able to stop it.

Biodiversity loss, caused by humans, is taking place at a faster rate than any time in history. "Desertification is a symptom of the loss of biodiversity caused by overloading the air through the burning of fossil fuels, biomass burning, chemicals, fertilizer, agriculture, pollution, burning of national parks and forests," says Savory. "Scientists only have three tools—rest, technology and fire, so they try to justify fire when technology fails, but no fire lit by a human being is natural. Put those three together and those are now threatening not just trees and birds and fish, these are now threatening human survival."

Savory's quest took him a surprising route. He was compelled to work with farmers and ranchers, whose management he believed was responsible for initiating the deterioration. He's on public record in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as saying, "Let's shoot every damn cow and any bloody rancher that stands in the way" because he could see no point of being in

the army, and defending his nation, when ranchers were raping it behind him. "My feelings are very, very deep as an environmentalist and I don't particularly like cattle, but I ended running them on my own ranches, which used to be just elephants and lions and buffalo." He did change his mind and has said many times, "The number one public enemy is the cow. But the number one tool that can save mankind is the cow. We need every cow we can get back out on the range. It is almost criminal to have them in feedlots which are inhumane, antisocial, and environmentally and economically unsound."

Constantly searching for new ideas that worked, he thought all that had to be done was to get ecologists into parliament to produce change. "Well, I couldn't produce a scrap of change even when I was president of a political party."

He discovered remorseless spread of deserts and the human impoverishment that always resulted was related to management, but more fundamentally to the way people were making management decisions, whether or not those people lived or worked on the land. "Though our fate as a civilization is tied to the land and its health, and though millions of ordinary people in making their living from the land control that fate to a large degree, unless these people have the support of the hundreds of millions of others who depend on their efforts, they cannot succeed."

He read voraciously. He admires Thomas Samuel Kuhn, who wrote "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." In it Kuhn talks about science advancing through shifting paradigms. "What he discovered of our scientists, and I know its true of me, is that we have these effects that flow from our deep beliefs and our training. The information which fits our beliefs we see very quickly and easily. The data which does not fit our beliefs is almost invisible to us. We just cannot see it."

It's a deeply held belief that removing cattle from the public lands will heal it. No proof is necessary because it fits the paradigm. It is a deeply held belief that trampling by cattle is destructive to plants and soils; cattle have been blamed for destruction of water points and rivers for thousands of years—because it fits the paradigm.

"General Jan Christiaan Smuts, a botanist by love, a lawyer by training, a soldier and statesman by force of circumstance, a brilliant man, fought through the Boer War and two world wars. Although not an Englishman, he served in the British cabinet. When he was out of office as prime minister of South Africa, he wrote a book called 'Holism and Evolution.' He studied the development of the human personality. It was an







