Strangers on the Range: Responding to More People, New Values and Social Changes in the Decade Ahead

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There is a growing concern among resource managers about how to address the impacts of an increasing number of strangers on the range throughout western North America in the decade ahead. These strangers are the newcomers settling in energy rich areas of the United States and Canada. Most resource managers are unprepared for the projected industrial and population growth. In provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan and states such as Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, continued social change is certain. The newcomers in these areas will demand more recreational opportunities, more water production, more fire protection, and will have less understanding of the complexities of existing resource management objectives. Newcomers will not be familiar with traditional resource values and will bring a different set of expectations and values.

Resource managers must recognize that the radical social change expected in the future is not going to go away like a bad dream. In the coming years, the need to effectively maintain the land’s resources, respond to increasing public demands and perform under tighter fiscal constraints will only intensify. Successfully accomplishing this task will require the leadership and initiative of individuals within the resource management profession.

There is not enough time to wait for organizational or agency direction on how to manage the effects of social change. Institutions cannot respond quickly enough. However, individuals who understand changing conditions at the local level can respond. This discussion will identify actions managers can take to provide leadership in responding to the impacts on resource management. Both short- and long-term strategies for managing social change will be outlined. The type of leadership skills required to function effectively in the future will also be presented. But before discussing these leadership skills, let’s first examine the challenge that lies ahead.

The Challenge For Resource Managers

The extraction and production of energy resources are the driving force behind the anticipated social change. Those living in energy rich areas are already experiencing the effects of population growth. The settlement of construction and mining work forces, the presence of roughnecks and survey crews, and the expansion of associated service industries and populations are all beginning to have an aggregate impact on resource programs.

An immediate impact on local residents and resource managers is dealing with the growing number of strangers in town. In boom situations, the volume of people moving in sometimes cannot be assimilated by existing residents. Newcomers usually have different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and have unique work and leisure routines. A majority of newcomers therefore remain strangers. Studies have demonstrated that boom towns are plagued with social disorganization because of the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new environment. The experience of towns like Rock Springs, Wyo., has shown significant increases in mental health caseloads, suicides, divorces, family tension, and emotional distress. Eventually, this social disorder influences resource management programs and reports of poaching, vandalism, and off-road vehicle violations increase.

A more long-term impact is the transition from an agricultural to a mining and industrial economy. In some rural areas, economic diversification and income generated through mineral leasing have assisted family farm and ranching operations to stay in business. It is the first time many ranchers have been out of debt. However, the amount of rangeland in production continues to decrease as more properties are sold for subdivisions and water is sold to energy and utility companies. In the long run, agricultural activities have the potential of being displaced.

The same trend is occurring in wood product industries. As mining intensifies, the economics of saw log operations...
change. Many mills cannot compete with the high wages being offered by the industrial sector. Employees who have been with a company for 20 years leave to operate a coal loader for three times the income. Often, the cost of living in a boom area requires that loggers and other lower paid individuals leave their historical work activities.

For many, the loss of grazing and timber production on public and private lands will go unnoticed. But in certain rural areas, a lifestyle will go by the wayside which will be difficult to reintroduce when non-renewable energy resources are depleted. More and more long-time residents who know how to survive in harsh Western environments are giving up their businesses. It is possible that other means of harvesting range and forest resources will have to be found in the future if this trend is not interrupted.

Western communities put themselves in a vulnerable position when allowing a single industry to dominate their economy. Coal, uranium, oil shale, and oil and gas industries have all proven to be subject to fluctuations in demand. Measures need to be taken to maintain social and economic diversity as mining builds up and declines. Resource managers have a contribution to make in supporting existing agricultural and recreational business and encouraging new renewable resource businesses. This is a major challenge in rural communities that continue to be disrupted by the boom and bust cycles of the mining industry.

In urban areas such as Calgary, Denver, and Salt Lake City, the resource management issues currently being addressed will only intensify in the future. Much of the public land adjacent to metropolitan areas will continue to be used as a playground by urban residents. Managing these lands so recreational and other values contribute to the quality of life is another major challenge for resource managers.

These are just a few of the challenges in the coming years. Now let’s review the opportunities available to respond to the future situation.

The Choice: Manage Or Be Managed By Change

Much of the projected development and growth is within or adjacent to prime range, forest, wildlife, water, and scenic resources. Both short- and long-term strategies will be needed to protect the resource base and provide programs that contribute to the quality of life of current and future generations. Resource managers have an opportunity to respond to the anticipated impacts now or wait until the situation is beyond their control. Lost management opportunities and increased operating costs will result from allowing resource-related issues to become disruptive.

There are many creative ways to respond to the social changes that lie ahead. First of all, new arrangements for financing the impacts of energy development must be explored. Rather than closing campgrounds and roads and reducing services because of budget cuts, programs should be expanded to prepare for growth. However, resource managers must give up the time-consuming fight for scarce public dollars to finance programs in mineralized areas. There are other sources for funds. Managers in growing, communities are resource-rich, and should start acting like it.

What is meant by resource-rich? When an agency like the Forest Service prepares a timber sale, the preparation cost is usually built into the stumpage price. The same procedure should apply for minerals programs. The cost of extra staff, facilities, and time to manage the impacts of mining activities should be built into the permit price for industry to operate on public lands. Funds to maintain programs such as outdoor recreation should be provided by industry just as police cars and sewers are provided.

Working directly with industry to finance recreational facilities and programs on public lands for its workers is just one of the ways to respond. Direct contact with miners and construction workers to orient them to the cultural values of an area, including land ethics, can also prevent future conflicts. Letting newcomers know where recreational opportunities are available and making efforts to accommodate their interests is more productive than increasing law enforcement budgets to restrict use. It is also less costly.

Promoting renewable resource programs which insure long-term social and economic diversity is another way to stay responsive in mineralized areas. Through cooperative efforts with state and regional governments, incentives for agricultural, recreational and wood product businesses can be designed. Providing the leadership in such an effort can prevent or lessen the impacts during mining decline and closure.

The Wild West is not the same as it was during the gold rush days. People will not be able to “leave their wash on the line” and run off in search of the next motherlode. Today, the costs of resettling are higher. In a bust situation, many people will be forced to stay in place without work or migrate to urban centers where their fate is uncertain. As a society, we cannot afford the increased costs and the loss of productive individuals. A renewable resource base can be managed to provide social and economic stability in rural areas. Agencies like the Bureau of Land Management in the United States and Alberta Agriculture in Canada should include measures to manage the social impacts of mine closings in their permitting process, just as reclamation plans are included.

Another area in which leadership can be exercised is the land use planning of local municipalities and counties. Resource managers need to make their objectives more explicit and work with local governments to ensure that mutual goals are achieved. Zoning and other land use controls to protect prime wildlife habitat, open space, and other environmental qualities are needed. Measures to protect the property and lives of those living adjacent to forested lands, such as fire break and fireproof building material ordinances are needed. Land exchanges and sales to assist towns to meet their objectives and to preserve access to public lands are needed. All these preventive measures are within reach, but require more diligent work in a spirit of cooperation.

Those brief examples are intended only to point out the possibilities for managing change rather than being managed by change. The specific strategies for administering resource programs will have to be worked out in the trenches. There are, however, some essential skills required to function effectively in the future.

Skills for Responding to the Impacts on Natural Resource Management

Three essential skills need to be exercised by resource managers to respond to the projected social change. . . the skills of an advocate, an educator, and an expeditor. All three skills are essential in working with citizens, industry and other government agencies to resolve resource management issues in the decade ahead.

Most resource managers are familiar with what it means to be an advocate. They are usually on the receiving end of citizen advocacy. In the future resource organizations will
have to advocate their cause more strongly if they expect to preserve a renewable resource base. Allowing events to take their course will restrict management options and force agencies into a survival mode of operation. Survival is not good enough for the future of renewable resource management. Quality of life, enjoyment of the environment and pleasure in cultural diversity is the only future that should be tolerated.

Visibly advocating renewable resource management objectives, such as those stated by the Society for Range Management, is critical. The public generally does not know the importance of maintaining a productive multiple resource base. Most people do not know how the management of range or forestry resources contributes to water and air quality or the recreational opportunities they enjoy. Most people, especially the new strangers, do not know the implications of allowing renewable resource industries to disappear and be replaced by vulnerable, non-renewable resource industries.

As part of a community of professionals who are aware of these relationships, it is time to more actively promote the importance of a renewable resource base and a productive human environment.

The second skill, that of an educator, is needed to perform advocacy work. For example, it is rather difficult as a resource manager to control the social factors influencing certain organizational objectives. Resource management agencies do not have control over the zoning ordinances to stop the urban sprawl into agricultural lands. However, citizens do, and they can take the initiatives to assist in achieving mutual objectives.

Using educator skills to make citizens more aware of and more involved in the resolution of resource management issues is a must. Both the short- and long-term impacts of energy development and population growth must be clearly elaborated at the local level so people understand the social change confronting them. Struggling with the effects of growth on the cultural values, economy, and physical environment at the local level is the only way to manage social change. It is the level where citizens are most able to participate and take action to control their future. The educator strives for a partnership in which the final decision-maker, the citizen, carries the responsibility for action.

In order to become effective educators, there must be willingness to get out on the ground where citizens are. The key is to meet with people in gathering places where they are comfortable and function best, talk about resource-related issues in language people can understand, listen to what people are saying, and tie the discussion to their particular interests. The education process takes time, patience, and persistence, but once citizens reach an understanding of the issues, they are better prepared to manage their environments. Managing resources for people is no longer possible in our age of diverse public values and demands. Today’s challenge is to manage resources with people.

The third essential skill of a resource manager in the decade ahead is that of an expeditor. Once citizens are prepared to take action, a manager must be ready to assist them in the issue resolution process. In many rural areas, managers are viewed by citizens as a community resource. As professional people, you are aware of the laws that can be used to maintain productive harmony among social, economic and biological environments. For example, resource managers should know how to write impact mitigation measures into permits. The law—ordinances and regulations—is one of the most creative tools for the resource manager, yet many live in fear of it rather than enjoying its use. In addition, resource managers have the capability to see the issues from a holistic perspective, something citizens sometimes have a difficult time doing. Having an understanding of the opportunities available to manage future issues on a long-term basis is an asset.

A resource manager is in a pivotal position to engage citizens, industry, and other agencies in a process of exploring their future, establishing mutual goals and designing strategies that all parties have a responsibility for implementing. Expediting a stronger partnership between these sectors is the greatest challenge. It is where the solutions to resource management problems lie.

Exercising these skills will assist in accomplishing the mission of resource managers and make the manager indispensable to the future of our democratic institutions and quality of life. These are strange, exciting, and challenging times, where individual effort counts as never before. By exercising the skills of advocate, educator and expeditor, a manager can effectively accomplish resource management goals and make a valuable contribution to future generations.