Women: a Growing Range Resource

Berta A. Youtie

Ten years ago it was quite unusual to meet a female range conservationist employed by a government agency. Recently an increasing number of women have shown an interest in a range management career and a noticeable number of women are entering the professional work force. Equal opportunity legislation has aided women in securing employment within the federal agencies. However, women as individuals must prove their abilities in order for the old barriers to dissipate.

In 1977 I applied for a seasonal position with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Responsibilities were to conduct a rare and endangered plant inventory on nearly 2.5 million acres of federal rangelands. Since no women had previously been hired for a field position by that office, the supervisors were skeptical. However, my qualifications were good. I had a degree in botany with range training and I had identified plants and mapped vegetation types on National Parks and Nature Conservancy lands in the sagebrush grassland region. The people I listed as references were all questioned, in particular, regarding my abilities to work under strenuous field conditions.

I obtained the position and began work in February before the snow melted from many areas. To accomplish my job I would leave the office on Monday morning, drive backroads to locate suitable sites, hike to inaccessible areas, camp in the evenings, and return to the office on Friday afternoons. By the end of the summer I had demonstrated that even a woman raised in Philadelphia could survive on the range and successfully complete the job. Today many women biologists and range conservationists in similar situations have proven their competency.

When I first enrolled in rangeland resources classes at Oregon State University in 1973, only three women were associated with the program. During the ensuing years, I worked for the department as a work study student and later as a research assistant. When I left Oregon State in 1981, a much larger number of women were enrolling in range courses. Women constituted 50 percent of the graduating seniors in 1980 and three women were enrolled in graduate programs. In view of this apparent increasing interest by women in rangelands, I wondered if other universities were experiencing similar trends.

Last spring I conducted a survey of 28 U.S. universities which offered a degree program in rangeland resources or range science. I asked the schools to provide data on the number of men and women who were granted B.S., M.S. and PhD. degrees in range from 1970 through 1983. Many of these schools did not have a separate range department, but included range science within agronomy, plant science, botany, forestry, natural resources, wildlife or animal science departments. A few universities granted combined degrees, but these were not included in the following summary. Sixteen of the 28 universities provided usable information.

The author is graduate research assistant. Department of Plant, Soil and Entomology Sciences, University of Idaho, Moscow.
The total number of women earning each degree each year and the percentage of total degrees which were granted to women were analyzed to determine if there were significant trends. There was a statistically significant increasing trend in both the number and percentage of women granted professional range degrees from 1970 through 1983 (Table 1).

In 1970 only one woman graduated from the 16 responding universities with a Bachelor’s degree. However, since 1977 women have constituted a yearly average of over 20 percent of the graduating seniors. Perhaps, this recent growth of female interest in the range management profession reflects the change of the female role in our society and the increased awareness of environmental issues.

Even though there has been an increase in the number and proportion of range degrees granted to women, the critical question is whether or not these women are obtaining employment in their profession. Statistics from the federal agencies have been difficult to obtain; however, at the end of the third quarter of 1983 the U.S. Soil Conservation Service included 20 women in their employment of 299 range conservationist. As of October 1983, 70 out of 514 U.S. Forest Service range conservationists were women. The BLM employed 31 (6.7%) females in their range program in 1983. If these available figures are taken as estimates of the percentage of range positions held by women in federal agencies, then the 10 percent average is only about one-half of the proportion of Bachelor’s degrees earned by women from 1977-1983. Alternate employment sources and a lag between graduation and professional employment may account for part of this difference.

In addition to federal employment, women in the range management profession may be finding positions with universities and with other state and private concerns. Since statistics on these sources of employment have not been obtained, it is difficult to objectively evaluate whether or not women are entering the job market at the same rate they are graduating from universities or if they are dropping out or experiencing some personal prejudice. A survey of women members of the Society for Range Management may be the best way to evaluate some of these questions.

I have never felt any personal discrimination because I was a woman. I have always found range management professionals to be helpful and encouraging. The inspiration and support of Dr. A.H. Winward and E. William Anderson encouraged me to pursue my interest in rangeland ecology. Currently, I am seeking an advanced degree in a rangeland entomology program at the University of Idaho.

Women need to be encouraged to further their education in rangeland resources. Although women are entering the profession in increasing numbers, there is a smaller proportion of women obtaining advanced degrees than Bachelor’s degrees (Table 1). Hopefully, with higher education, women will attain greater responsibilities and add much to the range management profession.