

# Let's Not Forget the Art in Range Management

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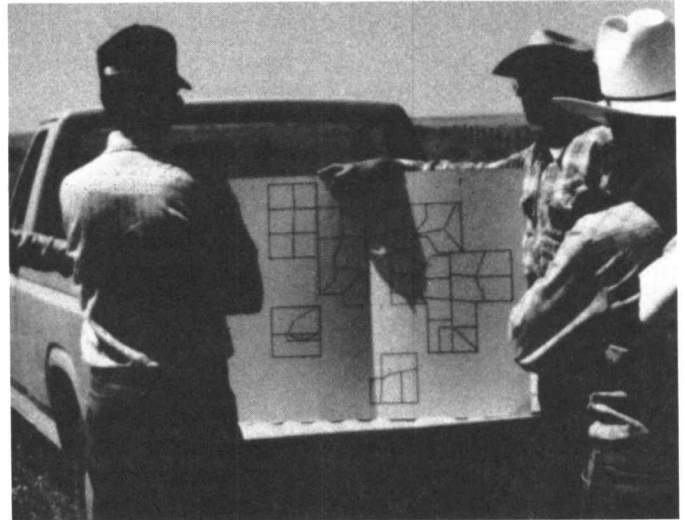
**Editor's Note:** This paper has a very important theme. It should be required reading for everyone interested in the proper management of our rangeland resources.

Want to start a fun discussion? Next time you're perched on a corral rail or gathered around the coffee table ask some coworkers to define **range management**. The definitions you receive will most likely vary as much as the sizes and shapes of spots on an Appaloosa's rump. Some people may spout a complex, rambling oratory while others might reply it's simply "cowboy science." Depending on the company you're keeping, probably very few of the definitions you hear will resemble this textbook description of range management: "the science and art of optimizing the returns from rangelands in those combinations most desired by and suitable to society through the manipulation of range ecosystems" (Stoddart et al. 1975). For our purposes, let's focus attention on this definition's first few words—**the science and art**.

**These words are meant to form an inseparable pair**, to always go together like a young boy and his dog. But I believe that too many range men and women today have forgotten the importance, or perhaps the meaning, of the word "art." The term "art" does not imply that proper range management requires a certain wizard-like, intrinsic ability. It does imply, however, that effectively managing rangelands is a talent that needs to be nurtured and cultivated through time. Including art in the definition succinctly states that range management is an applied science that cannot and should not be reduced to a simple, technical "cookbook" approach.

Whether implementing grazing systems, locating new fences, or selecting herbicides, we simply cannot generalize that one choice or method is categorically better than another. And thank goodness, for this is the very essence of range management that makes our discipline so exciting and challenging. Since every ranch, ranger district, and resource area is different, every range problem demands original locally tailored solutions. As SRM members we need to appreciate and promote more fully this artistic nature of rangeland management and its unlimited possibilities for new ideas, techniques and personal expression.

Of course we must not overly downplay the importance of technology in range management. Unquestionably we need range research and all the help that science can provide. For



*Strategically placed water developments and innovative grazing systems require a creative blend of technical knowledge and practical experience—the key to solving most management problems.*

years our ranges were managed with a seat-of-the-pants approach that regrettably caused many serious abuses. But the point I wish to convey is that we may have overreacted in our efforts to compensate for these past transgressions. In other words, we may have swayed too far in the other direc-

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This article is a contribution of the College of Agricultural Sciences, Texas Tech University, No. T-9-395.

tion and begun to include too much science and not enough art. Perhaps no better example exists than with our modern methodologies for determining carrying capacity.

First, vegetation is meticulously sampled and classified according to its palatability or ecological response. Data are then cranked through a series of calculations resulting in a precise carrying capacity figure. Once derived, the number miraculously assumes Biblical proportions and becomes revered as gospel. But I submit that the words of Arthur Sampson (1923) are just as true today as when he wrote in 1923, "... it is impossible, in the light of our present imperfect knowledge, to declare definitely . . . the optimum grazing capacity of a given range unit . . ." Or as more recently echoed by Dan Fulton (1982), former eastern Montana rancher and past SRM president, "Range, and particularly Great Plains range, cannot be rationally managed on the basis of range carrying capacity surveys. The only way to find for sure how many cows can run on it is by grazing cows on it." I do not question that our modern methodologies can provide us with carrying capacity estimates or ballpark figures, but it is foolhardy to presume that our calculations yield the final answers. I strongly support these current methods of quantitative analysis as useful tools for today's land manager, but we must be careful to use this information merely as a tool to direct us and not allow it to constrict us.

**If we accept the need to temper modern quantitative analyses** with practical experience, the next question becomes where can we find an accessible source of this experience? Where can technically sound range managers obtain needed experience without spending several years and making the same mistakes as their predecessors? Of course there is no real substitute for personal experience, but luckily there are countless "old school" ranchers, agency and university personnel who can and do pass on the knowledge gained through their many years in the profession. I myself feel most fortunate to have worked with several such individuals, and there is no doubt that the wisdom they have generously shared with me will have a lasting impact on my career in range management. But in addition to ranch owners, agency, and university personnel I wish to recommend another, often-neglected source of guidance and experience. These are the many individuals who for years, in some cases several decades, have made their living closest to the land—the range riders and sheepherders who daily observe the plants

and animals on their ranges.

**If you have a question about a local range, ask the person who knows it best;** ask the person who spends his life there. These men and women possess valuable knowledge that we cannot afford to ignore. As the old saying goes, spend some time talking with these people and you may learn in a few minutes something that took them 40 years to discover. Personally, I have found observations from range riders and sheepherders especially helpful in identifying key management areas and traditional livestock travel patterns.

In summary, if we are to continue responsibly practicing *the science and art* of proper rangeland management I suggest these guidelines. First we must recognize the importance of artistry in our profession. We may not all be as artistically blessed as Charlie Russell or Frederic Remington, but we all do possess latent morsels of originality and imagination that are needed to creatively solve our management problems. At the same time we should capitalize on the advancements from over 60 years of range research. Coupled with sophisticated quantitative measures now available, research findings can enable us to continually hone our artistic management talents. And, finally, we need to further tap an invaluable source of practical knowledge. Rather than repeatedly reinventing the wheel, rangeland managers of all kinds—private, state, and federal—should draw more heavily on the years of experience available in range riders and sheepherders.

In these ways, artistically molding together the best of modern range technology and historical on-the-ground experience, we can aggressively confront the future challenges awaiting us. Let us continue to expand the body of range scientific knowledge, but please let's not forget the art in range management.

#### Literature Cited

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