

After Africa: Finding Home Again

How I became interested in rangeland management.

By **Abbey Kingdon**

Allan Savory changed my life. But I didn't realize that until I stepped onto the tarmac of the San Francisco International Airport. As I walked to a 19-minute express flight to Sacramento after 2 days of travel from Johannesburg, South Africa, thoughts of the 2 months I spent in Africa played through my mind like an old film. I couldn't believe it was over. I'd spent a year and a half researching, saving, and planning to get myself to Africa for a Holistic Management internship. All this was because of a soft-spoken man who drank hot tea with lunch, who said "grows," not "grass," and who over the course of an afternoon interview, planted the idea of healthy, sustainable land in my mind. As the heavy glass door pushed open and I filed out behind other travelers in a neat line to the little plane, I inhaled a deep breath of ocean air. California, at last. Home.

But home had changed, too. After the open high veld (rangeland) that borders the Kalahari and the abundant bush veld (filled with impala, kudu, warthogs, mambas, and baboons) that I had walked through just days before, my Sierra Nevada mountain valley home appeared small and a little less alive. The permanent fences crisscrossing the valley stood out like weathered statues against the weak green of the early spring grass. The land looked totally occupied.

Before Africa, I saw a picturesque landscape when I looked at the valley: tall grass, thick forests, abundant wildlife, and happy cows grazing the open meadows. But that was only a glance. When I got home I knew how to take a closer look. While studying Holistic Management in



Author at age 5 with lamb.



Judy Richardson and author on an evening walk to observe veld condition at Richardson's ranch near Vryburg, South Africa.

South Africa and working on cattle farms, I'd learned that to really view the land I had to crawl through the veld with my eyes on the soil surface, stick my hands in the soil, smell for minerals and water in the soil, and notice what types and variety of life grew in that land. In Africa, I saw healthy land, abundant with all types of life and I saw sick land, choked with monocultures that slowly let the life slip away with the soil, turning the place to desert. I saw cattle as more than beef. I saw the good work their hooves could do with proper grazing planning. I marveled at the role the rumen played in the ecosystem of a low-rainfall environment. The rumen gives ruminants, like cattle, the ability to break down organic material and provide the resources for new plants to grow. I learned to love wild places, to enjoy a sunset from the veranda, listening to the birds, the baboons, the bats, and the bugs. That glimmer of hope and interest in healthy, open



Cattle-moving camps at the Knights' cattle farm are part of their holistic grazing plan.

land that began with a conversation with Savory bloomed and took root in South Africa.

I chose to study Holistic Management in South Africa simply because that's where it began. I first planned to go to Zimbabwe, to Savory's ranch which is now a Holistic Management learning center, but national political instability diverted me south, to South Africa. I stayed with 2 families who were holistically managing their cattle operations.



Wayne Knight and farm staff entering a camp that had not been grazed yet during the growing season. The land was holistically managed in previous seasons.

The 1st family, the Knights, opened their homes to me, offering good South African food, conversation, advice, and lots of tea. Wayne and Hillary, and Wayne's parents Tom and Wendy, became lifelong mentors and friends to me. Dick and Judy Richardson, my 2nd hosts, are the top Holistic Management educators in Southern Africa. I left the Richardsons' ranch feeling that I had gained surrogate South African parents.

The country, culture, and people were so wonderful, so diverse, and so full of contrasts and raw natural beauty that I never wanted to leave. But Africa is not my home. My American psyche could not process some of the realities inherent in South African life, like land claims and farm murders. When I returned to the United States, I transplanted clippings of a South African love, respect, and appreciation for nature and for natural processes into my work and life.

My relationship with rangelands and their accessories—cattle, cowboys, ranchers, water, and grass—began at birth, long before I decided to attend Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and study animal science, ethnic studies, and agricultural communications. I was involved with rangelands long before I began working for Cal Poly's student-run newspaper, the *Mustang Daily*, which led to the sustainability issue we produced that led to the interview with Savory. As the daughter of ranchers, I was raised in cattle ranch fields of Indian Valley, my Sierra Nevada mountain valley home.



Kingdon cattle at the Johnson Ranch, Indian Valley, being moved with dogs Lucy and Todd. Taylorsville, the author's hometown, sits behind her parents' ranch.

My parents had a house, of course, but I don't remember being inside much. Before I went to school, I was following my father out to irrigate, watching his footsteps in front of me as I struggled to keep up, listening for the clink of the metal shovel as it hit rocks in the soil, then later swimming in those same ditches or jumping over them on my pony. My younger brother and I would picnic with our mother as she watched the sheep in the fields, moving them and protecting them against coyotes. As she worked, we swung from the branches of pine trees lining the meadow, raced through gullies, and made forts out of fallen cottonwood trees. We'd eat breakfast and lunch in the field with our mother. Somehow regular old Raisin Bran or sandwiches of peanut butter and jelly always tasted better in the fresh air.

When we were older, we worked with our parents, herding cows, branding, doctoring, and raking hay. They taught us to work with the cows, the grass, the water, and the seasons, but also to enjoy them. Hot summer afternoons were meant for swimming at the river and school holidays for friends coming with their horses for rides through the river willows and up overgrown mountain trails. Since then, the open spaces and growing things of rangelands have been my friends. This land is more than a place to live or work; it is something alive and amazing that deserves the best care.

Until the interview with Savory, I didn't know how to make a change, how to work toward giving rangelands the

best care. So I left. Like most children of a rural community, like most of my friends and classmates, I exchanged the dwindling rural economy for college, a career, and a fast-paced life. When I met Savory, I saw that there was a chance for my generation to have a healthy, prosperous rural existence, as Holistic Management provides the tools to account for the triple bottom line: financial, social, and ecological wealth. With this tool, my thinking became positive. It gave me hope. The happy outdoor freedom of my childhood had tremendous power over my perspective and my future plans,



Sunset over the Richardsons' ranch.

but I didn't realize it until my introduction to Holistic Management.

Today, I am pursuing a career in natural resource management in Modoc County, California, and getting into the cattle business. Sometimes I browse travel sites on the Internet, looking for a way back to South Africa for a visit to my friends who feel like family and the pieces of my heart that stayed in the open veld.

Author, age 23, the daughter of a cattle ranching family, grew up in Northeastern California. She graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and recently completed a Holistic Management internship with Holistic Management educators on cattle farms in South Africa.