Thad Box

On Choosing the Right Whetstone

When I wrote in the June *Rangelands* that our profession is not a job but the dedication of a life to an ideal, some readers hinted I had abandoned science and gone to preaching. Maybe so, but how we treat land is largely determined by our understanding of the interconnectedness of our job to the land. That understanding is based on science. But what we do with our science is an ethical decision based on morals.

My grandfathers didn't agree on details of morality. Granddaddy Box was super religious. His God drove him to admonish people for drinking whisky, swearing in front of women, and having fun on Sunday. Granddaddy Hasty never went to church. He kept a bottle of bourbon for snakebites. His God urged him to help his neighbor. He neglected his own crop to plow corn of the man whose legs were crushed when a horse fell on him.

They agreed on one thing: it was morally repugnant for a man to have dull tools. Each carried a pocket knife and a whetstone. After use, a knife was drawn across the whetstone, then the edge was polished by several swipes on a leather boot. The knife went back in the pocket as sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, ready to peal a peach, remove a thorn from a child, trim proud flesh from a horse wound, cut a chew of tobacco, or castrate a calf.

Those values followed Dad when he became a construction boss. He fired carpenters who wouldn't set their saws and sharpen them before work. And he wouldn't tolerate a man who used an ax to shape a rafter. The choice of the right tool was as important to him as keeping the tools clean and sharp.

Like most moral rules, the insistence on sharp tools and using the right tool to do a job have practical bases. Survival often depends on it. Even when survival is not in question, work is more efficient when sharp tools are applied to an appropriate task. Since sharpening tools is usually done in "spare" time, dull tools indicate lack of dedication. And choice of tool depends on knowledge and experience. It's easy to go from those things to judging a man's character by the sharpness of his blade.

The wisdom behind sharp tools guided me from youth to old age. As a young man, I was drafted into the Army. Although I complained about having to clean and oil my rifle each night, even when it hadn't been fired, it made sense. Although I hoped I would never have to fire at a human being, I wanted my rifle to work if needed.

In college, I found that knowledge is a most powerful tool. And it was easy to tell which teachers kept their tools sharp. Those who taught from a textbook had dull classes. The teacher who did research or read a lot and brought new studies to our attention operated with sharp tools. And these were the same teachers who took us on field trips to evaluate the interconnectedness of nature, to experiment stations to examine new tools, and to progressive ranches to see the results of applying knowledge.

Throughout life, I have found myself checking the sharpness of tools. I find that colleagues who read and solve problems are the ones I depend on. Ranchers who attend work-

shops and apply current research are prized stewards of the land. When I interview a medical doctor, I ask about his training—not just the schools he went to but also what training courses he takes each year, what journals he reads, and who he consults.

I find public servants who openly mingle with and learn from those who disagree with them to be our best. When a politician asks for my vote, I ask what data source he depends on for decisions, what expert opinion he seeks, what books he has read recently, and which newspaper columnists he admires.

You get some interesting answers when you question the dullness of a person's tools. You find equally interesting situations when someone uses the wrong tool or has only one tool in his kit. There is an old saying that to a man with a hammer, every problem becomes a nail. Neither my grandfathers nor my father went past the fourth grade. But they were smart enough to know that you can't trust a man who doesn't know how and when to use his tools.

This issue of *Rangelands* is devoted to grazing management. Grazing management is not an end in itself. It is a bag of tools. We use them in our quest for sustainability. We can also use them to harm the land by seeking quick profits.

We do not look favorably on an SRM member who manages grazing for short-term gain and diminishes the productivity of the land. Such action violates the land ethic that guides us. It goes against the objectives for which our Society was formed—the objectives that are printed in the front of each of our journals. The value of our land care profession is determined not by the tool but by how we use it.

We have more tools in our bag, and they are more specialized, than those taught in my first range management courses. Dr. Vernon Young stressed four major elements in proper grazing: kind of animals grazed, numbers (intensity of grazing), season of use, and distribution of grazing. These are as important today as they were 90 years ago, when Jardine, Sampson, and other grazing pioneers started developing such tools for our profession.

Our tools today are much superior to those we had in 1975, when Art Smith and I revised the last edition of *Range Management.* The principles of range management outlined by the classic textbooks of Sampson and Stoddart and Smith are still valid. But research has shown that some of the tools used to get to those principles were mighty dull. And in some cases, the tools were just plain faulty.

New tools have been developed and old tools sharpened in three important areas of grazing management: ecological succession, carbohydrate storage and nutrient cycling, and animal behavior. These improved tools do not invalidate the four major principles of grazing management described in separate publications by Sampson and Jardine in 1919. They just give us a much better way to succeed.

While we were developing tools for grazing management, the invention of X-ray gave medical doctors their first crude tool to look inside the human body. They could distinguish between air, fat, muscle, and bone. Today, modern hospitals have CT scans, ultrasound, and MRI devices interacting with computer tools that allow a physician to look inside every organ of the body. It is now possible for a surgeon to use images and computer technology to know intimately what he will find when he makes his first cut. He can actually do virtual dry runs of an operation before he enters the operating theater.

Some say that in 10 years our annual physicals will consist of reporting for a whole-body scan and walking to our physician's office, where the doctor will go over the details, including probabilities associated with each problem on a computer screen.

But with all the great tools available to the medical profession, our health depends on the morals and ethics of people, individually and collectively. It depends on whether our doctor has the latest tools available and is properly trained in their use. It also depends on whether our people as a whole, through economics and politics, make the tools and doctors available to everyone or only a few who have money to pay for them. Human health is a product of societal values. So is land health.

As land care stewards, we are guided by our professional values: do good science, apply that science ethically, and take responsibility for our actions. Being a technician can be just a job with tasks to be done and a paycheck to be collected. But most people in our Society are not range managers because of money; they have dedicated their lives to making land better.

We may disagree on what "better" means. Some think better is producing more livestock products. Others see it as increasing water yield or more beautiful landscapes or greater species diversity. But increasing the output of any good or service in the short run does not necessarily fit the societal goal of keeping options open for future users.

If sustainability is our goal, we look beyond the current generation. We use an ethical whetstone to sharpen our tools. We work to ensure that long-term productivity of the land will not be impaired by any short-term use. I still think implementing that goal is not a job—it is the dedication of a life to an ideal.

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