

# Speaking With People in Our Society

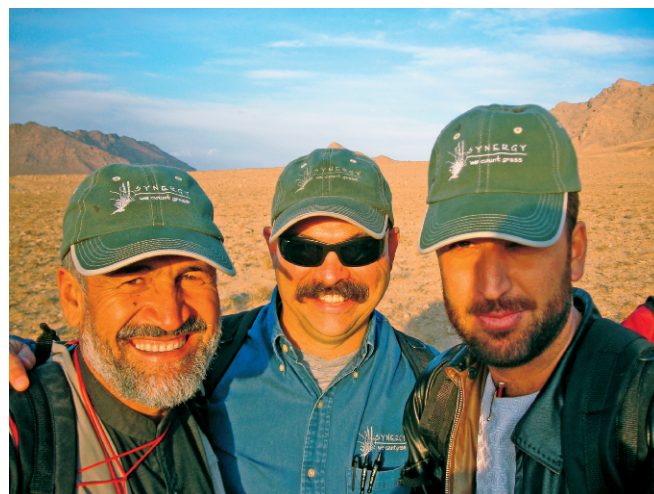
## An interview with Jack Alexander

Jack D. Alexander III is President and Senior Resource Specialist of Synergy Resource Solutions, Inc. (see <http://www.countgrass.com>) based in Bozeman, Montana. Jack is on the ballot of the Society for Range Management in 2007 as a candidate for Second Vice-President, a position that would serve as President of the Society in 2010. Jack is certified by the Society for Range Management as a Certified Range Management Consultant, a Certified Professional in Rangeland Management, and certified by the International Erosion Control Association as a Certified Sediment and Erosion Control Specialist. He is currently Chair of the Association of Rangeland Consultants. He received his Bachelor's degree from Texas A&M and his Master's degree from Montana State University in Range Science. The Society for Range Management presented Jack with an Outstanding Achievement Award in 2005. As the founder of Synergy, Jack has more than 20 years' experience in vegetation monitoring, data analysis, range management practices and principles, erosion control, and permit preparation.

### Passionate About the Profession

*Question: Being a self-employed small-business owner, what made you decide you had the time, if elected, to serve as President of this nonprofit, volunteer organization that is the Society for Range Management?*

*Answer:* It may have been a weak moment when I agreed to be nominated, but I have been committed to and passionate about this Society for over 20 years. I started calling past Presidents to ask them about this position and the amount of time they devoted to the office. I spoke with about a dozen of the last 15 Presidents, and I realized if I just



Jack Alexander, center, with friends in Afghanistan.

redirected the time I currently volunteer for various activities into the President's duties, I would be able to handle the time and the travel demands.

*What is it about this Society that piques your interests and has kept you so involved in various capacities over the years?*

SRM is an amazing club. People care about each other and about SRM. It is a rare organization in that you can be actively involved immediately. In fact, at SRM you are encouraged, if not expected, to participate as soon as you join. At SRM, we expect undergrads to be involved in several activities and graduate students to present papers themselves. Many other organizations leave the speaking to more senior members, but SRM is very open. What is impressive is that you can meet and talk with the leaders of

the profession. People are approachable. You can be a college junior, sit in a committee meeting, and interact with your professional heroes. And soon you discover that they welcome your energy and input. Not every professional society does that.

*Who have been your influences in this profession and organization?*

To name one, leaves out 10 others. However, Al Steninger, John McLain, and Ken Zimmerman taught me a lot about range consulting. Many of my less-than-mainstream range ideas have come from Lamar Smith and Joel Brown. My major professor, Jack Taylor, helped move me from range student to range professional. I could name 100 more if you had the space.

*How does SRM move forward in the 21st century?*

We need to be the source of information about rangelands. We can't be everything to everybody, but we can be the "Range" thing to a lot of people. We need to focus on rangelands. We have probably spent too much time arguing about what rangelands are. We need to move forward with doing great range science and great range management. When National Public Radio (NPR) wants a sound bite on rangeland or arid lands, they should call SRM first. We need to be the place people come to find great range people. We have the tools to do that; we need to expand our online presence, develop mechanisms for online discussion, and tap into the expertise and interest of our younger members. We need to set goals of having 90% of range professionals being a member of SRM, and 50% of people in associated fields being members, 25% of rangeland ranchers. Then we need to work to reach those goals. SRM is a great organization, and it has the people and talents to move forward and continue to do great things.

*You've hired many people over the years. Are you finding people appropriately trained to work in your business?*

The people I hire are people who have developed the skill sets to learn. Range-trained people come to work ready to figure things out. If you can place in the top 50 in the plant contest, you can identify plants in the field—and you know how to identify those you don't know. If a person has a sound understanding of basic ecological principals and has learned how to learn, we can train them to do range consulting. It takes some adjustment of the thinking and skills sets needed in the academic world to make a living in the consulting world.

The great thing about range-trained people is that they can handle complex systems. They have been trained

to work in environments where there are many variables operating and things are always changing. That is why you often see range-trained people do quite well in other fields. They can handle complexity and the dynamic of change.

*Many people in SRM work for various government entities or nonprofit organizations. Can you actually make money in this profession as a small-business consultant?*

Yes, there are several people who have done it, and I have not had a real job for 11 years now. Most consultants, including myself, would tell you that you could make more money doing something else with the same effort, but you can make a respectable living in this business. Running a business takes a bit more than 40 hours a week, so if you are going to work that much, it is good to be doing something you are passionate about.

Like all of us in this profession, I get to live in environments where most people wish they could live, and work in places most people pay to go for their vacations. So, things are good.

*So, what is it you're doing for fun these days?*

I work at Synergy—where every day is a picnic and every night a campout!

That's not a good question to ask someone who is self-employed and always worried about cash flow and payroll. For fun, I ride motorcycles and used to race them. When I found out how much more broken bones hurt when you are middle-aged than teenaged, I became an ex-racer and changed to being a motorcycle racing fan instead.

The truth is, I figured out about myself that I tend to get wrapped up in what I am doing, so I found a job that I think is more fun than most recreation. Many years ago, my sister told me I needed to find a job where I could use cool tools and wear out perfectly good four-wheel-drive pickups. She was right. Now I have a bunch of cool tools we use to build cool range monitoring tools. And I spend over 150 days per year in the field wearing out pickups. I love my job, I love running a business, I love working with great range people, and I am passionate about what I do. So it turned out she was right, and I am lucky to get to do just that.

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*Interview is by Susan R. McGuire, a pen name used by the author of this article. Her interviews with members of our profession are a regular contribution to Rangelands. All costs of publishing these interviews are sponsored by a research unit of the Agricultural Research Service, the in-house research agency of the US Department of Agriculture, whose rangeland scientists are a segment of our Society.*