The Aroma of Change

When I was a child, we didn’t have refrigeration in our home. We belonged to a beef club. Once each month a family butchered a beef and divided it into twelve portions. By rotating the cuts of beef, each family got every part of the animal in a year.

But “fresh meat” generally meant goat. We kept a small flock of Spanish nannies to provide tasty meals in carcasses small enough that refrigeration was not needed. When I moved to Utah, range goats were not available. I bought surplus kids from local dairy farmers. Now Latino immigrants compete for available goats.

A friend told me that a new store in town carried goat meat. Actually, it isn’t new. It’s the long-established Horlacher Meat Market, which made sausage from my venison for many years. It was purchased by an immigrant named Gonzales. When I checked them out, the butcher didn’t speak English.

“Tiene chivo?” I asked.

“Si, chivo de Australia,” he answered.

With minimal Spanish, I tried to sort out whether he meant some Australian breed of goat raised locally or if goat from Australia was actually in his store. The butcher walked into his freezer and brought out a frozen hind quarter of a goat. It was stamped “Product of Australia” and “Inspected by the Department of Primary Industries.” I bought it for about a third the cost of a leg of lamb.

When I worked on Australian rangelands in the 1960s, goats were considered vermin. Large feral herds existed in hilly and rough areas throughout the arid and semiarid regions. These animals were descendants of useful animals abandoned by miners in the late 1800s. They, along with feral donkeys and camels, were shot on sight.

Some 20 years later (1985), I spent a sabbatical with the West Australia Department of Agriculture. They worked on ways to turn feral goats into a useful range of products. Ships transported live goats, captured from the wild, to Arab countries, where they were slaughtered properly for Muslim consumption. There was little interest in developing a market for goat in America.

Two decades later my taste for fresh meat is supplied from Aussie critters considered vermin not long ago. It is imported and sold by an immigrant who took over a business that was being crowded out by national chain grocers. His business flourishes because he serves a new labor force working in an old business.

Most of his customers work for a beef-processing plant in our valley. The plant was established decades ago by local businessmen to butcher and market Utah livestock. In the beginning it hired local people. It became one of the biggest employers in the area. Hundreds of college students put themselves through school working there. As the business grew, more livestock were shipped in from surrounding states. It was sold to regional, and then national, food companies.

Now it is owned by a Brazilian firm. The workers are mainly Mexican immigrants. Most animals are brought from surrounding states to be killed and processed. Some livestock are born in Mexico and fattened in the United States. Others are raised in Canada. It has been
decades since animals from Utah rangelands provided a majority processed in the plant. Meat may be shipped all over the world.

It boggles the mind to try to relate packaged beef in a big box store in any western town to animals grazing any piece of American rangelands. We no longer put meat on our table from a few goats browsing in the west pasture. And our beef club has over six billion people in it.

It is in this new and changing world of free trade and global markets that we land care professionals work. Our goal is to keep the land healthy enough to keep land use options open for unnamed needs of the next generation.

Most importantly, we aspire to a world that will keep Homo sapiens human rather than force them to evolve into some other creature that can thrive on an altered planet. That charge goes beyond providing food. Or rehabilitating ranges. The future of our species depends on our providing suitable habitat for our kids and grandkids.

I gave my SRM presidential address in 1977. I talked about “Food, Fiber, Fuel and Fun from Rangelands” (Journal of Range Management 31:84–86). Like most people 30 years ago, I emphasized products from rangelands rather than the land itself. Three decades later those 4 Fs are still major outputs from land. Their relative worth in a free society may have changed, but they are important products of land that can be valued and sold.

Now we go beyond products, and consider the land itself. This brings us to things not easily valued. We say land provides “ecological services” without understanding fully what those services are, what they do, or what benefits from them. We protect endangered species and try to eliminate invading exotics, emphasizing the species and not their function in the community. We claim to be part of that community, interacting with other organisms in a habitat shared by all. But we have not yet learned how to manage as a humble citizen within the community we manage.

Human nature forces us to behave as if we are the central actor in a drama. But we want to be served by all other parts of the cast. Our land care profession preaches stewardship, or responsibility for the land. We become a part responsible for the whole. We are expected to direct the play while acting in the starring role. And to do that without fouling our nest.

Aldo Leopold, who brought the concept that we are part of the land to our profession, wrote the following 60 years ago: “We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without destroying it.”

Six decades later, in the twenty-first century, we are still faced with the same paradox. Our tools are better and growing faster. The piece of land we live on is more difficult to define. It may be a ranch, a city lot, or a flat in a high rise residential tower. The web that holds together all organisms in the biotic community and binds us to the soil is much more complex. Interconnections in our community are global, often fragile, and attached to remote nodes.

Land health depends on keeping viable interconnections between soil, plants, animals, primary producers, labor unions, corporations, and governments. It depends on using our better and faster tools to understand overgrazing, burning of fossil fuels, credit default swaps, and other human activities that directly affect community health in a one-community world.

All this may seem too heavy a load to put on range managers. Certainly none of us can do the things needed alone. And even working together, the task may be beyond us. But our job is not to fix all things that need fixing. It is to leave our little piece of land better than we found it, making sure we do not destroy options for the next generation.

The smell of Australian goat, brought on a Chinese boat, sold by a Mexican immigrant, cooked with New Mexico chiles brings pleasant memories of a simpler time. The aroma of change fills my being. And it shouts that we need new thinkers, new science, new systems, new management for sustainable lands in the twenty-second century.

Our nest is no longer the homestead, heated by its wood stove. Our fresh meat does not depend on managing the west pasture so we can raise a kid goat for Sunday dinner. Land is not a piece of real estate with ownership recorded in the court house. It does not belong to us. We belong to the land.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net.