Speaking With People in Our Profession

An interview with G. Robert (Bob) Welling

Bob Welling's resume spans a wide array of very practical and very academic experiences. A graduate of Kansas University, Bob has postgraduate experiences at Fort Hays State University; Kansas State University's Research Center at Hays, Kansas; and Montana State University's Northern Agricultural Research Center at Havre, Montana. This background allowed Bob to bring an intense curiosity to his current work as a Research Support Manager with Ridley Block Operations in Vaughn, Montana, where he serves as a "field scout" for discovery of new research directions and commercial opportunities in livestock grazing management. Bob has extensive experiences with rangeland livestock, emphasizing animal behavior and novel approaches for ruminant grazing management. He has been a coauthor of a number of important research articles that substantiated methods for improving livestock management and performance. He has also worked as a nutritional consultant and a feedlot-farm manager, and is a lifelong cattle and horse owner. He brings this renaissance set of experiences to his current ranching "base camp" in the Sun and Smith River valleys of Montana.

Seeking the Next Generation of Grazing Management Tools

Question: You've worked for years on management approaches to improve livestock use and distribution across rangelands. What is the basic challenge we face in trying to manage grazing by livestock?

Answer: The free range ruminant's individualized approach for self-procured nourishment is the basic biological principle that has motivated our grazing distribution research efforts. Last year a Nevada cattleman offered this very succinct perspective: "A cow will not *voluntarily* starve herself to death." That observation summarized the primary domestic ruminant grazing challenge of "diminished quality feeding choices by fencing." Inattentive human management can effortlessly starve a cow into lessened financial performance behind an electric fence.

What do you mean by "inattentive"?

I mean the inattentiveness to the animal production needs that achieve optimal financial performance. Typically

Bob Welling.

those animal production needs in this profession are clearly subordinate to the hierarchy of plant production needs.

What do you see as the next revolution in livestock management on rangelands?

The sustainable provision of food, fuel, fiber, and fun for humans, within the parameter of decreased dependence on fossil fuels, aligned within the societal assignment for dependable watershed yield, is likely the next revolution in domestic livestock management on rangelands. Our apparent human proclivity for technological and mechanical solutions has approached the financial and energetic maximum for sustainable vegetation manipulation solutions on rangeland. The sustainable grazing by ruminants as a means for vegetation manipulation, for further enhancement of the ruminants' own self-replication opportunities, brings the human culture back full circle in the human life-cycle synergy with domesticated ruminants. Appropriate grazing of ruminants on rangeland yields sustainable self-replication of both the plant and the animal. Appropriate domestic ruminant grazing management that recycles decadent herbaceous vegetation promotes the heterogeneity demanded for the seasonal nutritional wildlife needs, as well as provides that mosaic of vertical habitat structure, critical for so many of our rangeland avians. Life for all emerges as better.

So, what's holding us back from this progression?

The current rangeland professional hegemony of a singular planning and management protocol, to the exclusion of alternate range management conceptual approaches, challenges any new intellectual momentum. It would appear that as a profession of trained ecologists who profess the value of a high degree of ecological diversity within the rangeland landscape, the professional subjugation, within this current hegemony for a singular planning and management approach, begs logical and professional discourse, with a hopeful and eventual congruent resolution for the future trajectory of the rangeland management profession.

Hegemony seems to be a strong word that invokes images of governments seeking world domination. Is the range management profession really controlled by a dominant, singular philosophy of rotational livestock grazing?

Recent symposia and a published paper (Briske et al. 2008, Rotational grazing on rangelands: reconciliation of perception and experimental evidence, *Rangeland Ecology & Management* 61:3–17) addressing grazing systems research have reinitiated an appropriate professional examination of that philosophy, which animated the SRM within a healthy and vibrant internal dialog. I assign the reader their judgment of the height of professional animation and consternation as the measure for an answer to your “dominant, singular philosophy” question. Read the data sets.

Here's a chance to be more specific. Who exactly are you railing against here that you think is standing in the way of real progress?

Not railing against nor standing in the way; more likely my personal observation of our profession's continual question: “Why are there not more producers here at our SRM meetings? Doesn't the SRM bring those producers value?” Our profession and society remains challenged for participatory inclusion of those multigenerational privately owned grazing operations that have not chosen parallel alignment within the hegemony of the profession's current “fence, water, and rotate” recommendations. Why those private multigenerational operations do not perceive value for their changes, which might “attain” the current professional recommendations and application of such practices, remains an undiscovered answer for the rangeland management profession. That value, within this profession for the inclusion of this multigenerational artistry of range management, appears as the next quantum leap for the profession of range management.

So, by seeking oversimplified management prescriptions we have lost the faith and trust of the people for whom we have been writing the prescriptions?

Maybe not faith and trust, but surely their current judgment skills are questioned at landscape-scale manipulations,

with our presumed professional knowledge superiority. “A prophet is without honor in his own country.” Take a tour of their own country that those indigenous have managed for multiple human generations. Those long-term rangeland residents might be the philosophy unification “prophets” that the SRM seeks.

Is there a next generation of tools?

The next generation of grazing tools will likely challenge the Western hemisphere's dominant fascination with the larger, bulk feeding *Bos taurus* ruminant. Humankind's earliest domesticated, selective feeder ruminants command the physiology and nutritional efficiency required within the current societal mandated vegetation manipulation objectives for invasive and noxious plants. Integrated-herd social grazing interactions, as well as potential predator protection synergies, of these “fherds” of sheep, goats, and cattle offer the next generation of academic range animal behaviorists lifelong research careers.

With this emphasis on technologies and products, how do we maintain the basic herding skills in the next generation of managers that are so needed in order to properly manage livestock grazing across large landscapes?

Horseback stockmanship is *not* a virtual experience. Many qualified stockmanship programs appeared with quick and affordable training for those with little or no stockmanship experience. But as with all life skills, daily repetition, within the immediate analysis of a skilled master, has no viable substitute. A land management agency program that would place highly motivated range management interns in the saddle for a summer, daily immersed within the culture and knowledge of that local rangeland place and further mentored by those masters within that local culture, could pay career dividends for the intern, the master, and the agency.

Several years ago in *Rangelands*, Utah State Emeritus Professor Thad Box listed his 40 qualification questions for a range management graduate student. My list now has two: “Can you ride a colt in rough country and teach it something at the same time?” and “Can you shoe your own colt?”

Having shod a few horses many years ago, and with the scars to prove it, this can be a difficult and time-consuming skill to master in an era when we also need tremendous skills in communications, knowledge of myriad biological processes, and abilities to manage people as well as landscapes. Can we truly afford to put so much emphasis on one skill set, even if it is threatened and endangered, so to speak?

Working with a horse represents more than one “threatened and endangered” skill set. Colt riding and horse

shoeing is all about accurate communication, enhanced knowledge of biological processes, and personal emotion management. The opportunity for creative solution adoption, in the face of physical forces much larger than any single individual, remains our cultural challenge for acceptable platforms on which that personal skill set might be practiced and then hopefully emerges. Our current “virtual solutions” apparently fall short of the ecological goals and landscape expectations assigned by society. For those personal mentors that “reinvented” the use of the round pen for people, cattle, and horse training enabled all who wish to participate the opportunity for the poignant lessons in the humility required for accurate communication, enhanced knowledge of biological processes, and personal emotion management. For that, I thank them.

So, the 2-inch scar above my right knee left by an uncrimped horse shoe nail could be viewed as a diploma of sorts, or maybe just a failed exam?

That scar would *only* represent a failed exam if new personal knowledge was not generated. You are never done paying tuition when individual skill improvement defines and motivates personal achievement.

Interview conducted, edited, and condensed 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 Dept of Agriculture, whose rangeland scientists are a segment of our Society.