On Work, Land, and Landscapes

Years ago, before cell phones had digital cameras that sent images at the click of a button, researchers from the Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University (USU) interviewed tourists as they entered our state. Visitors were given cameras and film and asked to take pictures of the things that interested them most. They sent the exposed film and notes on what they liked to USU in a postage prepaid envelope. They kept the camera.

Many pictures were not images of individual animals, arches, or things, but of landscapes. The dictionary says landscapes are “all the visible features of an area, countryside or land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal.” Some photos included mining roads cut into mountainsides, beaver-slide hay stackers, farm houses, orchards, and artifacts of the other economic engines—mining and agriculture. Tourists were not just interested in “natural” beauty but cultural beauty as well. Economic activities, if they were not offensive to the eye, were accepted as part of the picture.

One of the most photographed scenes was a band of sheep and a covered wagon camp on the Ashley National Forest. Notes with the photos indicated visitors considered that pastoral scene a sampling of the old west they never got from movies or travel advertisements. Sheep grazing among wildflowers, a sheepherder on his horse, border collies waiting for a command combined into a more powerful message about public lands than advertising programs by grazing associations. Studies by psychologists and behaviorists show our actions and our moods are influenced by what we see. How we, or a landscape, look affects the way people feel about us.

“Working Landscapes” is a term that is catching on throughout the west. But the embrace of those words must do more than changing the way others see landscapes. It must examine and direct the work within the land itself toward sustainability.

Iowa Public Television highlights sustainability in their discussion of “areas inhabited or used by humans in such a way that native plants and animals are able to continue existing in the area in sustainable populations while at the same time the landowners achieve economic gain” (http://www.iptv.org/exploremore/land/). Colorado Working Landscapes calls itself “a landowner-driven coalition of interests dedicated to the advancement of public policies and private initiatives to conserve land, preserve and sustain agriculture, and enhance landowner values while recognizing public benefits.”

Some farm and ranch organizations see the working landscape movement as a way to increase landowner profit. Others just welcome a chance to make landowners the white-hat guys once again. To commodity traders, the movement offers another market to make them rich. Like the “green tag” system for trading carbon, working landscape certificates are created as a derivative that can be separated from the land and sold on Wall Street. To the vast majority of citizens, the movement adds a little more beauty to their lives.
The working landscape movement is, whether we like it or not, primarily a marketing scheme. It is an attempt to rebrand agriculture as something good for the larger society. Being a marketing scheme does not make it bad or dishonest. Nor does it necessarily make it good. In the end, if it makes communities more sustainable, is good for both the land and the people who depend on it. But recognizing it for what it is helps clarify the role of land care professionals.

Our role is not to endorse or condemn the movement. Our role is the same as it has been in past land use practices: 1) to make our experience with managing complex biological/social systems available and 2) to develop and evaluate good science. We use our skills to assure the movement contributes to system sustainability. We exist to make sure there are sound science and positive experience behind any cultural or economic land use.

One major role is sorting out and explaining confusion between landscape and land. Landscape is a visually-determined concept. It goes as far as the eye can see. And beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The way an area looks does not necessarily mean the site is healthy, its function is sustainable, or its appearance is related to any measurable sustainable attribute. Beautiful valleys of wildflowers may be invasive weeds that are there because of excessive disturbance or overuse. A heavily used rotation pasture may be grazed expressly to favor sustainable plants, but it looks like abuse. Landscapes are not land. They are, at best, a picture in time.

Land is the sum of the biotic community and environment. Aldo Leopold’s land ethic convinced most of us that we are part of the land. Writer Gary Nabhan explains: “We do not stand apart from the energy and water flows of our home ground. Instead, they work through us, and we work because of them. The land is not mere scenery suitable only for tourism and leisure. It is a functioning community in which we either live well or poorly, depending on how efficiently and conservatively we participate in the land’s work” (http://www.garynabhan.com/).

Nabhan continues: “When we ponder the term working landscapes, we do not merely imagine lands where cowboys still find work driving and branding stock, mending fences, or breaking horses. Let us more fully imagine a land in which all the human residents are part of the cascade of solar energy through grama grass and winterfat, through saltbush, buckbrush, or greasewood, up through the mouths and guts of bull, ram, buck, cow, or ewe, and on into human mouths, bellies, muscles, and bones.” In the process, he argues, we commit ourselves to being one with the land.

Many working landscape programs directed work to the welfare of the “owner” rather than to the land. The “work” in land is not to produce human gain. It is in those things the land does to sustain itself. It is what is done so nutrients cycle, energy flows, and communities remain healthy. It is in keeping interconnections within and between communities operating freely and efficiently. The land’s work is focused on keeping the land healthy. Options are kept open for future generations. Our responsibility, as professionals, is to land health. Our time frame is not a crop cycle, but for succeeding generations.

It is in this concern for sustainability of land systems that we must evaluate the economic and social schemes developed to create beef, water, or market derivatives—anything separated from the land. In the housing crisis, financial experts created derivatives from both sound and toxic loans. Others bundled them into packages to spread risk. These were sold to people who didn’t understand either the science or the product.

Although we have scant experience dealing with derivatives, we must not let our land system fall prey to similar schemes. The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) hopes to market working landscape certificates (WLC). They and other companies try to create demand. They hope to separate the sustainable practices applied to the land (WLCs) from the product raised (beef) so a rancher can sell two products: food and working landscape derivatives. I do not know if their proposal will lead to increased land health or decreased land productivity. Or, if it will end in a Wall Street plea for a taxpayer bailout. But I think evaluating working landscape derivatives is more important to rangeland than arguing over what percentage an introduced grass should have in a range condition score card.

And I am quite sure our profession, and the land we serve, will suffer if we do not tackle the big problems. There’s nothing bigger than evaluating proposed uses for sustainability using good science and guided by our considerable experience.

Some people think our trail boss logo is antiquated and inappropriate. Granted, Boss was no scientist. But you can bet your boots (or running shoes or sandals) that he never put a cow crew and a herd into a situation he had not evaluated thoroughly with his experience.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net.