Thad Box

Our Voice for the Land

On 2 March 2010, the University of Nevada Reno (UNR) announced the intent to close its College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources. This is Nevada's Land Grant University. Its Morrill Hall was named for Senator Justin Morrill, author of the Land Grant College Act of 1862.

The Land Grant College Act created one of the world's most effective university systems. It made the liberal arts and sciences available to poor kids from farms and factories. By combining university education with research and application of results, it produced graduates equipped to change the land itself. And they did.

Land grant schools created land care professionals. Schools merged basic sciences with economics and social sciences to graduate a new kind of applied scientist who listened to the land and translated what they heard into action. They embraced the emerging science of ecology, emphasizing interconnections and interactions. These unsung heroes of the 20th century nursed overcut, overgrazed, overplowed, and overhunted land back to health.

The Wellsville Mountains, just west of where I write today, is a national wilderness area. Eighty years ago, most trees large enough for a railroad tie had been cut. Sheep grazed plants down to the soil. Mudslides destroyed homes and villages. Local people organized to buy the land. They petitioned the USDA Forest Service to annex the mountains to the Cache National Forest.

SRM hero Bill Hurst became the Cache land acquisition officer when he returned from military service after World War II. Bill was one of many land grant graduates who turned abused mountains into prime assets. Few who walk wilderness trails today appreciate the science and sweat that saved those damaged landscapes.

About 1966 a dust storm hovered like a dark monster stalking Lubbock, Texas. People grabbed cameras and recorded it blocking out the sun, engulfing houses, and changing day to night. Thirty years earlier, dust storms were a way of life; one carried prairie soil to our nation's capital. Congress passed laws for the rehabilitation of our overplowed and overgrazed lands. Range management heroes such as Hershell Bell, E. J. Dyksterhuis, and B. W. Allred applied their science and sweat to the prairies. They helped make dust storms rare enough to merit photographing.

Every community in the west has local land grant college heroes who healed land suffering from the excesses of well-meaning people who did not understand arid landscapes or the science needed to manage them.

Fewer than 2% of Americans today live on farms. Abolishing a College of Agriculture in a desert state with three-fourths of its land publicly owned may seem reasonable to real estate developers, hotel owners, and politicians. People, money, and power in the western United States are concentrated in a few large cities. Value and beauty of the area lie in vast, open spaces between cities that include farms, ranches, parks, forests, watersheds, mines, and scenery. A major role of land grant universities is to provide research and people to keep those vast lands healthy.

The small number of graduates was a reason UNR gave for closing its Ag college. The number of graduates is not a good criterion for judging the impact of a university in a western state.

Some 25 years ago over half of the land area of the United States was managed by graduates of one small college, Utah State University's (USU) College of Natural Resources. Ed Cliff was Chief of the USDA Forest Service and Bert Silcock Director of the Bureau of Land Management. Add to that scores of farmers, ranchers, state land directors, park superintendents, and corporate land managers. Land and quality of life of many Americans was directly affected by a small academic unit in an arid state.

As Nevada closes its College of Agriculture, some of its programs will merge into other colleges. Other western universities are combining and renaming land care programs. Gone are many departments of Range Management, Forestry, Soils, Water Management, and Wildlife Management. These programs are not vanishing because their graduates have failed the land. Quite the contrary, their track record is good.

Land care professionals search for reasons that programs are closing or being morphed into something else. Some say urban people have little appreciation for the land. But that excuse is way too easy. We must look at ourselves. If we are so good, we should be loved.

About 50 years ago John Hunter, Gerald Thomas, and I spent considerable effort surveying landowners, managers, and land care professionals as we developed the range program at Texas Tech. We asked what kind of graduates were needed. We had a few suggestions for improving the technical aspects of our proposed program. But we had tons of requests to improve the ability of our graduates to understand the broader world.

Respondents wanted graduates who read widely and understood the problems facing our country. They wanted graduates who understood economics. They wanted people who could write, speak, and communicate, not just about technical matters, but people who understood large problems and cared enough to interact with others to solve them. They wanted an educated person, not a trained technician.

The university limited us to 126 semester hours. Professional societies required about two-thirds of those hours in technical topics. That, plus a university "general education" requirement, took up most of the courses for four years.

During the 20 years I was dean at USU, we did dozens of similar surveys. Again, practitioners wanted educated graduates who could think and communicate. We could not produce the breadth of education that people wanted in a four-year curriculum.

Rangelands was created, at least partially, to broaden our education. I was SRM president during the magazine's birth. We envisioned it as a communication tool between our profession and those we serve. Our members would write interesting and exciting stories about the land, and the magazine would be in dentist offices and other public places. People outside our profession would subscribe to it and donate it to public schools. Our stories would be reprinted in other media. Laypersons would become disciples of sustainability. It would be an extension of what universities taught us.

Instead, we wrote to ourselves, using a style and terms only a range manager could love. Instead of outward-looking pieces addressed to ecumenical audiences, we looked inward. For almost three decades we have argued about what *Rangelands* should be. Some have suggested hiring professional writers. Does this mean we can't write? Or that we have nothing to say?

It means, I think, that we are victims of training, not education—the how rather than the why. We're not alone in this. Almost all professions are substituting vocational training for education. Medical doctors and attorneys are as captive of how-to curricula as foresters and range managers. A college education is too often sold to our children as a tool for getting a job rather than a basis for understanding life.

Land grant colleges were created specifically to teach the liberal arts and sciences to children of the agricultural and mechanic classes. Their mission was not to create scientific farmers and mechanics, but to educate middle-class people who did not usually go to college. It served us well for decades, but when exercise science becomes a more popular major than biology, it is a sure sign we value vocational schools over universities.

Closing colleges of agriculture, changing names of majors, and combining land care programs into general natural resource management degrees will not better serve the land. Turning land management over to liberal arts college graduates is not the answer either. Perhaps a three-year liberal arts program combined with two years of professional school is what is needed. Or a professional school that accepts only baccalaureate degree graduates. Or teachers who demonstrate professionalism by the way they live. Or a society that values knowledge over entertainment?

We will never have the land managers we need unless we in the profession do those things we expect from graduates: write, speak, communicate, inspire, motivate, and mentor. Nothing would please me more than for *Rangelands* to be filled with thoughtful rebuttals of what I, and others, write—essays, stories, and exegeses from educated people who love the land. If we remain silent, we are only a little bit ahead of bloggers who spout hate and hide behind anonymous screen names.

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