View Points

Be There for the Conversation

By Tipton Hudson

The discipline of rangeland ecology and management has always excelled in integrating the basic sciences of soils, plant physiology, animal science, wildlife biology, sociology . . . but most of us prefer to leave the sociology to sociologists, who are usually called sociologists even if they work on agricultural and natural resource issues. With conflicts raging around the West over the highest and best use of rangelands, I am reminded of opening comments given by the dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife, and Range at the University of Idaho in an introductory natural resources course. He said that if we (the students, mostly freshmen) were looking for a profession in which we could disappear into the wilds and do fieldwork we were in the wrong place. Unless one is content to remain at the bottom of the pay scale, a career in any natural resource field will be people work, and the greatest gains to be had in our management of natural resources are accomplished through successfully influencing people, not soils, plants, or animals. People are much more challenging to work with. We have different values, different worldviews, different life experiences, and different knowledge bases, and we don't always apply the Golden Rule (love your neighbor as yourself). This is not rocket science—it's much more complicated than that.

As a consequence of several range meetings in the past 12 months, I have done a fair bit of unsupervised thinking on the nature and future of the Society for Range Management. One common thread of these meetings has been that we need to bring more people into our fold than just strict range types. Most employees of the various wildlife agencies, federal and state, do more range work than they do wildlife work. They are often more engaged in manipulating habitat than they are studying animal population dynamics, for example. And they are usually entangled in some way in the high-profile conflicts over uses of public lands. Invite them to Spokane! Another common thread is the feeling that livestock producers, fast becoming an endangered species, should be more actively engaged in the SRM than they are. Modern as well as very old sociology recognizes the experiential knowledge of landowners and users as critical to the success of any large-scale strategy to improve or conserve land. If we as a profession are not relevant to ranchers, we are failing. If ranchers don't maintain functional ecosystems, they will eventually fail. When ranchers fail, the result is usually less ecosystem goods and services, not more. As long as there are intact, contiguous ecosystems there is the possibility of improving them. Cul-de-sacs don't sink much carbon or filter much water. So it is not enough to be the keeper of the science. Communication must go both ways and knowledge is useless unless rangeland users are engaged in application. Incidentally, or perhaps not incidentally, this is the theme of the 2012 SRM annual meeting in Spokane: Winter Dance—Lessons From the Past, Strategies for the Future. Be there for the conversation.

Many academics, landowners, and environmentalists recognize that unless we maintain critical habitat for this keystone species, ranchers, the social and environmental cost will be high. The limiting factor may well be the social component of range management. We know enough to manage land and livestock sustainably. We know enough to do that profitably. I believe that the social response to livestock grazing is shifting such that many of the various "publics" are beginning to value this truly sustainable food and fiber production system. I can't resist passing along this quote from Jim Corbett of the Malpai Borderlands Group:

> *ranching is now the only livelihood that is based on human adaptation to wild biotic communities.… From an ecological perspective, range livestock production is probably the most sustainable part of our nation's beef industry, and more sustainable than most of our agriculture. When grass grows by itself, without plowing or fertilizer or pesticides or irrigation, and livestock eat the grass and grow and reproduce, and humans harvest the livestock for food—what could be* [more sustainable] *than that? Any agriculture that does not require fossil fuel inputs is, today, remarkably sustainable.*[1]

And a quip along the same lines from Nathan Sayre:

> *Ranching has been around longer than most of the livelihoods and land uses that we presently have in the West, such as suburban development and tourism. It has outlasted beaver trapping and bison hunting. Beaver and bison look like cases where an activity was ecologically unsustainable. But in truth it wasn't the activities per se that were unsustainable but the way they were practiced in the 19th century, which can be traced to economic forces and property relations rather than ecology. They might*

have been sustainable, had they been done differently. Instead, they exceeded thresholds of resilience in the ecological systems they exploited, and beyond those thresholds there was no way they could persist. As practiced in the late 19th century, ranching also was unsustainable, again for reasons that were as much economic as ecological. But the excesses of the cattle boom did not permanently render ranching impossible. The ecological conditions for it were altered and weakened, but not destroyed. The way it is practiced today is radically different from the way it was practiced then, even if we call it by the same name.[1]

I have been castigated before for advocating sustainable ranching. However, my position description assumes that there will be rangeland-based livestock production and says that I am responsible for advocating responsible rangeland use. I am *not* saying that rangelands are *not* valuable when they are *not* grazed. Personally, I believe sustainable ranching is necessary because agriculture is a prerequisite for civilization (Sherm Swanson, University of Nevada, personal communication) and, to the extent that we can produce food and fiber without destroying native plant communities (tillage, et al.), we should explore that with formal research and do it well. Professionally, I believe ranching remains important for conserving open space, that grazing serves a valuable role in enhancing ecosystem function when executed correctly, and that rehabilitating areas damaged by livestock grazing can most effectively be accomplished by the creative application of the same forces which caused the problem in the first place (an idea that Aldo Leopold set out decades ago). In a business model where profitability depends on one's ability to grow naturally occurring vegetation indefinitely and using plants to convert solar energy into pounds of protein, there is a very direct link between ecological and economic sustainability. The only reason we have the luxury of debating the wisdom of grazing public lands is because Americans, for the most part, are not hungry. According to many analysts of population change, agriculture, world oil supply, etc., sustainable forage-based livestock production may become much more critical to people in the not-so-distant future.[2] I want the SRM in the position to help manage that potential shift in land use so we may avoid (with or without global warming) the natural resource destruction documented by Walter Lowdermilk[3] in his landmark survey of ancient civilizations and agriculture.

If these things are true, range professionals should be continually reevaluating our purpose. Who are we? What are we about? Where are we going? At the Pacific Northwest Section's meeting in northern California, no one left unaffected by the novelty and success of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's walking wetlands program in the Klamath Basin, a win–win solution for local farmers and wildlife habitat managers. Examples like this all over the country have showed us that major conflicts are significant opportunities to do something new. If we look at the high-profile conflicts in the West, the social component is the dominant and driving feature. I would challenge you to consider in what ways the SRM can be relevant to these social issues. Perhaps we will have time to discuss this over coffee as the Pacific Northwest Section welcomes you to Spokane in a few months: 29 January–3 February 2012.

References

1. Sayre, N. F. 2005. Prospects and tools for sustainable ranching in the western U.S. Available at: http://rangelandswest.arid.arizona.edu/rangelandswest/jsp/about/meetings/2005/SayreSustainableRanching.pdf. Accessed 24 June 2005.
2. Holechek, J. 2011. The future of range livestock production, energy, and grazing management. Proceedings of the IX International Rangelands Congress, Diverse Rangelands for a Sustainable Society, April 2–8, 2011. Rosario, Argentina. Pp. 189–195.
3. Lowdermilk, W. C. 1999. Conquest of the land through 7,000 years. Rev. ed. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 99, originally issued August 1953.

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