By Thad Box

Who Speaks for Rangelands?

I agreed to write these pieces because I hoped it would start conversations among land care professionals about who we are and why we exist. But far too often, this space has been a monologue, rather than an exchange of ideas. Perhaps this is because I have failed to frame the discussion properly. Please bear with me, although sometimes my words may come across as academic gobbledygook or the ramblings of an 84-year-old man.

Here is the situation, as I see it, facing those of us interested in land management. We live on a planet with finite resources. The population of the dominate organism (*Homo sapiens*, humans, we-the-people) is rapidly increasing. Land is decreasing as we build transportation systems, cities, and other things necessary for our concept of “civilization.” As the oceans rise, we lose more land. We support thriving populations of more humans than are “natural” because we use technology—from domestication of plants and animals to irrigation systems to genetic modification to whatever comes next.

Some technologies, irrigation systems, for instance, increase the ability of the earth to produce human food. But even a good technology, improperly used, may lead to land made unproductive for centuries. Millions of acres of salted-out farmland from failed irrigation programs are monuments to optimistic action without understanding the limitations. The application of technology is controlled by economics, culture, religious beliefs, and social systems. Understanding where an individual, a profession, or a technology fits into the big picture of land use comes from knowledge gained and passed on through teaching the young.

An individual person can be effective only if she understands where her work fits into an ecosystem, the prevailing culture, and an unknown future. This understanding starts with what is taught in the home. It continues through the public schools. Those of us who become land-care professionals get a crash course in college or university. Good teaching is not measured by scores on standardized tests, regurgitation of facts presented by the professor, or even application of the principles taught in courses or curricula. Teaching is best evaluated by the effect it has on lives of people in future generations.

Any of my ex-students who read this may remember that my first lecture of every course was much the same. I laid out the increasing population—decreasing land—changing technology scenario summarized above. We discussed a slide show Tex Lewis developed on how an ecosystem functions. I followed that with a list of the major principles we would cover in the specific class. I told them that their job, if they chose to accept it, would be to evaluate new technology and apply principles in a future that was sure to be different from the world they knew.

Later when I became a dean, I used a similar approach with colleagues and new recruits. We might make an admirable academic reputation studying a given species or a single function in an ecosystem. But our role was to be a positive force in maintaining a sustainable system in a future we did not know. Our mission as a group was to make the land more productive on a sustainable basis. The research and peer-reviewed publications were just steps toward making the world a better place. The steps should not obscure, but lead us to, the mission before us.

Range managers of my generation often saw our job as optimizing livestock production while improving range conditions. We were in the same boat with fisheries biologists, who based their worth on trout in the creel; foresters, who saw their success in number of board feet hauled to the mill; and economists, whose goals were return on investment. Each served a given industry admirably by increasing production of a given good or service. In many cases, productivity of the land increased for our target industry. For instance, range condition in most of the United States improved greatly in the half century between the first range surveys in the 1930s and those in the 1980s.

Technologies we employed to get more beef or trout or trees may have made the land itself less capable of supplying other things people might value in the future. Unfortunately, we may never know because we were estimating value of land by off-take of products rather than its potential capability. Sometimes deliberate overuse of land was accepted because of market demand (short grass plains plowed to produce wheat or corn) or by patriotic need (livestock buildups for the “war effort” during WWI and WWII). Such extractive uses were tolerated, even though they could cause long-term damage to land.

These and similar examples are well known and occur from both market demand and government policy. But in most cases, it is people and policies outside the land type that generate situations where overuse seems acceptable. Tinned beef for our men in uniform trumped rebuilding plant communities and stopping erosion. The demand for water in distant cities or for extracting fossil fuels leads to diminished production of native ecosystems.

In my April column, I described an imaginary country where most of the land was too hot, too dry, too cold, or too high for growing crops or intensive forestry. Most of the people live in a few large cities and have little direct connection with the lands we call rangelands. Political and economic power of the area is controlled by individuals and corporations in the cities. The state of Utah and the entire country of Australia are examples. Much of Africa, Asia, and South America fit that pattern.

Much of the land is in some sort of collective or government ownership: Public Lands in the United States, Crown Lands in Australia, national parks, indigenous peoples’ trusts, or government reserves. Names for commonly held lands vary with countries. Freehold or private-property titled lands are generally those with water, mineral deposits, or strategic locations for specialized use. I suggested it was up to us land-care professionals to listen to these lands. But I left unanswered the question of who speaks for these lands.

In almost all cases, politics are such that policy decisions about the use of such land are made by people in governments or corporate boardrooms located well outside the rangeland area. People actually living on the land are not content with just living off the land. They want the good life that marketers promise. For them to have good roads, electrical power, broadband Internet access, modern medical service, good schools, etc., their lives are subsidized by those living outside the area.

This relationship between people on the land and people with power has been the topic of hundreds of studies for many centuries. It exists under dictatorships and in democratic republics, who load the system in favor of underpopulated areas (every state in the United States gets two senators regardless of population). Hundreds of documents from the 13th century (Magna Carta Charter of the Forest, 1217) to current academic think tanks (Fixing a Hole in Australia’s Heartland: How Government Needs to Work in Remote Australia, 2012) offer suggestions. But with these multitudes of voices, the question remains “Who speaks for rangelands?”

The Society for Range Management has operated for more than half a century. During that time, it has been a “y’all come” fellowship, a cheering squad for good stewardship, a creator and repository for scientific rangeland data, an innovator in teaching, and watchdog for range education. And, at times, it has come dangerously close to becoming a lobbying organization that would void its professional status. Even with its self-inflicted scars and growing pains, it can and should be a major voice for rangelands. But because the major decisions about land use are made from people outside rangelands, should that voice be limited to sound ecological science and nothing else? Do range professionals have a responsibility in policy areas? Are they qualified to speak? If not land-care professionals, who speaks for rangelands?

Additional Reading

MAGNA CARTA CHARTER OF THE FOREST. 1217. Available at: http://www.constitution.org/eng/charter_forest.html.

WALKER B. W., D. J. PORTER, AND I. MARSH. 2012. Fixing the hole in Australia’s Heartland: how government needs to work in remote Australia. Alice Springs, NT, Australia: Desert Knowledge Australia. 98 p. Available at: <http://www.desertknowledge.com.au/Files/Fixing-the-hole-in-Australia-s-Heartland.aspx>.

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Rangelands 35(3):21–22

doi: 10.2111/RANGELANDS-D-13-00011.1

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