Letter to the Editor

A Producer Perspective on Savory's TED Talk

By Grady Grissom

Dear Editor:

Allan Savory's recent TED talk elicited a dialogue in *Rangelands* disputing Savory's claims on reversing desertification and climate change.^{1,2,3} A scientific perspective has dominated this dialogue with discussion of peer-reviewed literature. Here, I offer a private lands producer's perspective on Savory's claims and multipaddock grazing.

Savory has been promoting Holistic Resource Management (HRM) in one form or another for over 40 years. His TED talk was essentially a sales pitch—not a scientific presentation. He made claims but presented no empirical data, except photos, related to his claims. A producer, unfamiliar with HRM, would treat it like any new product or method; he would consult peers and “tinker.” Producers tend to try new methods in the smallest dose possible. If results are positive we invest more resources. Hence, we usually disregard a promoter's “claims” and evaluate the product or method for results in our unique complex environment.

Through this empirical producer filter, products and methods that do not work disappear. Methods that work survive and adapt to each producer's environment. Producers have been adapting HRM to their environment for over 40 years. The continued existence of HRM testifies to its value regardless of scientific evaluations. Producers do not, and cannot, waste resources on unproductive methods, or the producer does not survive. This “economic-ecological review process” for producers and methods is absolutely objective. Economies and ecosystems do not have favored theories or ideologies. Things that work stick around; those that don't, disappear.

The 40-year survival of HRM testifies that it is effective, but its relatively low use rate suggests that it is no panacea. My guess is that 10% of the producers I know use HRM or some form of adaptive multipaddock grazing. My experience tells me that there is a fairly steep learning curve in adaptive grazing management to get positive results ecologically and economically.^{4,5} Those willing to tackle the learning curve continue on with adaptive grazing; those unwilling to adapt and learn drop it.

I fully understand Briske et al.'s original point in refuting Savory's claims based on current scientific knowledge.¹ However, I am troubled by their mischaracterization of Savory's “planned grazing method.” Briske et al. suggest that adaptive grazing management shows promise in producing favorable outcomes on rangelands but that “Savory's grazing method ... might actually accelerate” degradation.^{1,2} Yet Savory says (at 14:00 in the video) that he is talking about HRM. HRM is, and always has been, a method of adaptive management. HRM involves setting goals, deriving a plan to reach those goals, assessing monitoring metrics toward the goals, and readjusting plans to address mistakes (plan—monitor—control—replan). These are the fundamental components of adaptive management systems proposed in Range Sciences, yet they are seldom referenced to Savory. I do not understand why. It is ironic that Briske et al. propose adaptive management as a promising hypothesis in grazing but argue that “Savory's methods” (a systematic decision-making framework to facilitate adaptive management) may accelerate the degradation of rangelands.

Savory's claims have not always been in line with science or management experience. However, his fundamental premise—maximum long-term economic return in a range-based business requires maximum ecological health—and his underlying message of adaptive management have remained consistent over 40 years. Managers who understood the premise and carried out the message (through their own adaptation of HRM to their unique circumstances and goals) have seen long-term success. Those, including scientists, who focused on inflexible application of specific grazing protocols (ANY specific grazing protocols) *without considering the ecological and economic processes involved* saw only confusion and failure.

Finally, Briske et al. say that Savory “attempts to divide science and management perspectives,”¹ but both sides can share in the divide. Producers who practiced HRM-based adaptive grazing management for an extended time were told repeatedly by the scientific establishment that their methods do not work. These producers embraced the assumption (primarily from Savory) that economic health derives from ecological health. They *adapted* management methods (includ-

ing grazing protocols) to achieve a better water cycle, a better mineral cycle, and a more diverse suite of plants, animals, invertebrates, bacteria, and fungi. Economic health followed. The small percentage of producers who care about and focus on the ecology of grazing have been rebuked and occasionally laughed at by the scientific establishment.

References

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3. BRISKE, D. D., B. T. BESTELMEYER, AND J. R. BROWN. 2014. Savory's unsubstantiated claims should not be confused with multipaddock grazing. *Rangelands* 36:39–42.
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Editor's Note: While these letters are unlikely to be the last word on this topic, they will be the last we publish in this exchange of Letters to the Editor prompted by the Briske et al.¹ View Point. I welcome and encourage submission to Rangelands of future peer-reviewed articles and View Points on the topic.