By Thad Box

Listening to the Land

Thoughts of a Barefoot Boy in a Graybeards Body

Fourteen years ago, I left the cold mountains of Utah to attend the annual Society for Range Management (ARM) meeting in Hawaii. I had been asked to give a summary paper at the meeting about the past, present, and future of the range profession. I was chosen because I was one of the SRM's graybeards, *viejos*—I was 72 years old. I had retired from Utah State University 11 years earlier and from New Mexico State University in 1996.

After my talk, Dan Merkel asked me to turn my paper into a series of commentaries for *Rangelands*. Dan was persistent. He brought *Rangelands* editor Gary Frasier and me together. Gary agreed to a six-issue trial with the title “Listening to the Land.” Fourteen years, four editors, and 85 commentaries later, I am still listening to the land, not as a detached being, but as a living part of it.

I look out the window at the green mountains of the Bear River Range. They are part of the Cache National Forest, owned by the people of the United States. Only a few miles west of where I sit are thousands of acres of public lands. In our valley, and other places with adequate water, land is cut into parcels for agriculture, industry, or housing. Each piece of land has legal documents showing ownership of the plot. It took many decades for me to discover that deeds do not show the real relationship between land and the people who claim to own it.

For over 86 years I have had an intimate association with land. Soon after I was born, my parents started living in a tent. They gathered native pecans to earn cash money to buy things they could not grow. Mother put me on a pallet and tried to keep me from rolling off into the dirt and becoming a habitat for insects. I learned to crawl in the sandy soil of our garden. I took my first step barefoot. I didn't have shoes until I was six. Every step was bare skin contact with the land. Everything I ate in my early years came from the land. Fruits and vegetables were picked from plants directly connected to the soil I walked on. Our old Jersey cow turned grass to milk, which was then turned into butter. Eggs, meat, sorghum molasses, and honey came from living things—microbes I did not know existed, bees, chickens, horses, and cows. Energy from the sun powered a complex community of which I was a part.

As I grew older, my elders taught me to plant seeds in the ground, cut weeds with a hoe, kill insects, and butcher animals. The Bible that sat next to the Sears-Roebuck catalog proclaimed that God gave us dominion over the earth and all living things. My people believed that if rains did not come or grasshoppers destroyed the crops, we had not acted as God wanted. Life was simple. Everything had a cause and an effect. When bad things happened, we had let God down. In school, I found other books, other ideas, and other worlds. When I was drafted into the army, I found there were many different kinds of people with strange ideas and concepts that kept me awake at night. The world of my barefoot days, that tenant farm where God or fate placed me, was very different from the wider world into which I was being pulled.

I went to college on the GI Bill. Surely education and science could bring the worlds of my childhood and the world “out there” together. But courses were designed to increase knowledge and competence in single, specific areas: literature, mathematics, or chemistry, each digging deeper into a single subject. Universities gradually, and usually unintentionally, changed from educating thinking generalists to training specialists in narrow areas of science and economics. I was advised to pick a major and dig deep.

An ecology course began to tie things together. Relationships and interactions were more important in a system than the things that occupied it. And each influenced the system of which it was a part. Human-system interactions were governed by ethics – differentiation between social and antisocial conduct. When I was 20 years old, Aldo Leopold wrote that a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain members and citizens in it. Years later, when I first read that statement, it put my role in a new light. I and other humans were the thinking parts of the system and as such had responsibility, not just for ourselves but also for the system.

In my youth, my background and beliefs told me I should buy land and use it as I pleased for my benefit. It was mine. I could sell the topsoil, subdivide it, or use the land to graze livestock and grow food to feed a hungry world. If I was successful, I would make a profit that would give my family the good things of life. As I grew older, I observed that many people reaching for the good life left the land wounded. I began to realize the main job of the thinking organism in the system was to keep the land healthy to support generations and needs yet unknown.

That is a big order for mere human beings stuck somewhere in the middle of a system that reaches out thousands of light years into our solar system and inward into bacteria, viruses, and even the atoms of our own body. Our job is not just to keep fellow humans from building bombs that could destroy our planet or keeping prestigious hospitals from treating diseases with antibiotics that change the entire biology of the patient's gut.

Our human responsibility is to keep the land healthy enough for future generations to reproduce and prosper. This starts with the realization that land can no more belong to us than it can to a hummingbird, a cow, a mesquite tree, or an earthworm. Legally, we pay taxes on, and have title to, a small chunk of the earth. But human ethics suggest that our use of that small chunk should benefit other humans alive today and

leave the land healthy enough to support future uses we cannot imagine.

When our founders met in 1948 to form the American Society of Range Management, their main concern was preventing overuse of land and rehabilitating the abused rangelands of the west. Their tools were simple: balancing grazing use with available forage, using terraces and physical structures to control erosion, and revegetation of overgrazed ranges.

In the 67 years of the existence of the SRM, rangelands have improved, the science has become better, and the uses of rangelands have changed. To that extent, we have succeeded. But what people want from that land changes as human density increases. The world human population has almost tripled – from about 2.5 billion to over 7.4 billion since the SRM was formed in 1948. The amount of land per person is about a third of what it was then.

There are about four times as many people on Earth today as when I learned to walk in the sandy soil of the Texas hills. Since I retired, the world population has increased by 2 billion people. During the years I have written *Listening to the Land*, the world population has increased about three-quarters of a million people a year. Human lifestyles plus the increasing number of humans have created new and greater demands on each unit of land.

Our science is better than it was when I ran barefoot. Our tools are better. The amount of land per person is shrinking. It is still viewed by some as a platform on which individuals conduct business and live their lives. Many think they own it. But land does not belong to us; we belong to the land.

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