

Cattle and Wildlife—Managing for Both

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Farmers and ranchers in the public land states of the West might learn a valuable lesson in cattlemen-sportsmen relations and wildlife and livestock problem-solving from the way things are done in Texas.

John Merrill, faculty member at Texas Christian University and a cattleman in his own right, explained how Texas cattlemen and sportsmen get along in an interview during the annual meeting of the Idaho Section of the Society for Range Management.

It is worthwhile to note that Texas contains 10 percent of all the cattle in the United States and also has 20 percent of the deer in the 48 lower states. In addition, only two percent of the land mass of Texas is in the public domain. These facts may or may not be an argument for private land hunting, fee hunting or whatever, but Merrill did bring home the fact that livestock and wildlife can and do coexist. Furthermore, they coexist without many of the conflicts often seen in the public land states. For this reason, a closer examination of co-equal management of livestock and big game without conflict is warranted.

There are a lot of reasons why a Texan is proud of his hunting. The number one reason is that they have a high percentage of hunter success—a chance to shoot a trophy buck. Moreover, there is more than just the shot at a big game animal. There are a lot of hunters in Texas who bag two and three deer, a wild turkey or two, and some quail or whatever. Granted, it is fee hunting and this immediately evokes visions of hunters digging down into their wallets for a \$1,000 fee.

The secret of Texas is range and wildlife habitat management, the mere act of keeping land, brush, cover, grass and forage in top condition to maximize numbers and animal quality, be it Herefords or whitetails. The idea that there might be a conflict of use simply doesn't surface and any management program is predicated on the concept that game and cattle will coexist. And it works.

The rancher-landowner is responsible for the wildlife on his place. When the hunter appears, the hunter is charged a fee to hunt the land. That fee can range from a few dollars per day upwards to \$2,000 for a guaranteed shot at a trophy buck.

The deer still belong to the State of Texas and the landowner has to have a permit from the state to charge for fee hunting. In some areas, the county commissioners are involved and have input into the hunting regulations.

This arrangement gives the rancher two sources of income from his land. The first source is, of course, income from the sale of cattle. The second is income from fee hunting. At the present time (1982) the cattle market is slumping. It may well be the fee hunting carries the Texas cowman past slumping markets—an advantage not enjoyed by ranchers in the pub-

lic land states.

Because hunting produces income, the wildlife habitat and herd are well managed. Moreover, they are managed 12 months out of the year for maximum production. When land is reseeded and restored, it is renovated with wild game in mind. At leading agricultural colleges in Texas, coexistence is taught and researched. A range trial in Texas produces results on cattle and it also produces results on wildlife.

"As a rule, we try to keep some brush for cattle to calve in and to provide cover for game," said Merrill. "Research and experience have taught us to manipulate brush into small, zig-zag, irregular patterns. This stimulates movement and cover use by wildlife. The brush areas are intermingled with the more open grass and forage areas," he added.

"Many of us practice deferred rotation and we have observed that the wildlife adopt rotation grazing. I would say they thrive on it, just like cattle thrive on this system," Merrill commented.

Merrill, of course, noted that there are exceptions in any management scheme. "I don't propose to come to Idaho and tell you people how to run things. All I'm doing is responding to questions.

"Like many cowmen, we production-test our cattle and we performance-test them as well. We are starting to do the same thing with some of our wild game. If you have some good-looking yearling buck deer, you don't want them shot up. You want them around to improve the quality of the herd. As we check the livestock herds for proper nutrition, inspect for medical problems, or impact on the land, we also do the same for the wildlife," he said. Many diseases and problems cross over.

"This is why I use the expression 'quality' management," explained Merrill. "Good wildlife management, like good cattle management, is not always measured in numbers—it is quality."

Cattlemen in Texas often testify for a full budget so the state can manage its wildlife resources to the maximum, but that is because they are closely married with their agricultural resources.

"At this point, let me point out that I can substitute sheep for cattle in this discussion. I'm a cowman so I talk cows. My friends in the sheep business can back me up," Merrill pointed out.

As Merrill extolls the virtues of Texas cows and Texas hunting, other factors surface. As mentioned, the cowman participates because he makes money. By the same token, if that cowman posts his land "No Hunting," it costs him money. You just don't see that many acres posted "No Hunting". If you do see a poster, then you respect it, because it generally means he is trying to bring the herd back.

The hunter has to maintain a certain code of ethics—or he just doesn't hunt, period. This is generally agreed to before the hunter enters the landowner's property. This eliminates many problems that dominate "landowner-sportsman committees" here in the public land states of the West. For example, gates stay closed, fences are seldom cut, open fields are not invitations for four-wheel raceathons—litter and rubbish are generally no problem for the landowner.

There is probably less flagrant poaching. In order for a poacher to poach he must first violate trespass laws. If the poaching charge won't stick, the trespass charge will. Paying hunters help reduce poaching.

In the public land states poaching is easier because access is easier—everyone and his dog has a right to be in any

canyon they desire, so all the poacher has to do is wait until the coast is clear. His access is guaranteed.

The wild shooter and the drunk are two problems avoided and this helps Texas hunting safety. A careless hunter, or a drunk, can be ushered off the land. Moreover, the landowner can keep hunter numbers dispersed.

In some areas, the landowner will want hunters to shoot only spike bucks. Another area may encourage the taking of full-antlered bucks, generally two of them and perhaps a doe.

The secret is adequate numbers of big game animals so that all hunters can fill their bag. Texas comes close to that because they manage for that and they use experienced range managers—the cattleman. ●

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