

# Grazing Land Stewardship—Our Performance and Our Image

John L. Merrill

Stewardship has several definitions, and, like beauty, as many interpretations and connotations as there are eyes of beholders. Synonyms of steward include director, manager, custodian, caretaker. Most definitions of stewardship include management or administration, and some include "of others' property." In the case of public lands or lands leased from private owners, that literally is true. Applied to both publicly and privately owned land, stewardship acknowledges taking care of land for future generations in the full realization that "you can't take it with you."

"Husbandry" is a good word, now fallen into disuse, that might well be revived. Its definitions include "the application of scientific principles to the cultivation of plants or the raising of livestock" and also "the careful management of resources; conservation."

It is in these positive contexts of stewardship and husbandry that I should like to pursue this discussion and in which I have tried to fulfill the two commandments my father added to Moses' ten: "Rear your family carefully and well, and leave your land better than you found it."

**There are several logical steps** that must occur in any constructive action process. If short-circuited, the results will vary from less than the best to total disaster. The process of improvement and good stewardship begins with *awareness*. We can be surrounded with needs, great and small, that remain uncorrected and often worsen until noticed, recognized, and identified. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake," someone said.

The second step is *concern*, for if no one cares, no action is taken. If concern is true and real enough, it will be followed by the acquisition of *knowledge*, facts and principles pertinent to the problem. The next step in progress is development of *understanding* and *judgment*, the ability to apply knowledge to practical problem solving. Without judgment and subsequent sound action, knowledge is only of abstract value.

The next logical step is *analysis of all alternatives* for meeting the need. We tease about persons whom we describe as "playing with a short deck," but anyone who fails to examine alternative courses of action is falling into that trap. Then comes *decision*, or selection of the most ecologically and economically sound alternative, placed in context of the situation with all needs and resources considered and *prioritized*. Violation or even infringement of ecologic and economic principles by ignorance or poor judgment means results will be less effective and/or more expensive. Failure to prioritize soundly equates to "majoring in the minors" or "fiddling while Rome burns," while greater needs go unmet.

Sound *planning* involves integrating and coordinating people, activities, and resources into reasonable time frames for accomplishment. Plans must be based on averages and assumptions, but good planning provides *flexibility* to accommodate variables, unforeseen events, and human foibles which cannot be predicted accurately but can be expected certainly.

**These simple steps will avoid** short-sighted activity by persons and organizations whose concern exceeds their knowledge, which has resulted in environmental degradation rather than the intended environmental protection. One quick example is barring control of feral horses and burros, which allowed proliferating populations to decimate fragile ranges that had supported healthy numbers on a continuing basis. More than one lifetime will be required to restore those ranges to their previous level of health and production.

Another example is developing permanent water sources in the Sahara region so that arid ranges, which had been grazed seasonally for generations due to the lack of water, could be grazed yearlong. Continuous grazing converted the grazing lands into desert. I say again that violation of ecologic and economic principles, whether from ignorance, neglect, or intent, yields numerous ill effects.

When soil and water conservation needs were first widely recognized and addressed in the early 1930's, the first impression and attempt was that federal government should plan and carry out the work. Almost immediately, it became obvious that even with abundant help from the Civilian Conservation Corps, the conservation job was too great for any or all levels of government to undertake successfully.

**Much has been said of the greed** of landowners, which led them to mine their lands without regard for basic capability and needs. Most degradation was the result of lack of knowledge, rather than greed. What father would want to bequeath his children rocks, gullies, and brush rather than fertile, productive land? Stewardship of grazing lands probably has lagged most and not only from lack of knowledge. Our European heritage values land that can be cultivated and gives it more attention than the "wasteland" not suitable for cultivation. Ranking a distant second have been the tame pastures developed on lands marginal for field crops. Dead last came the grazeable woodlands and forested range of the East and South, the prairies of the Plains, and the mountains, deserts and other grazing lands of the West.

Private landowners were anxious to conserve and improve their lands, but lacked the technical assistance to assess capability, needs, and alternatives for meeting them. The Soil Erosion Service, later the Soil Conservation Service, was established to provide the assistance on privately owned lands, consistent with Lincoln's philosophy that government should do for the people only that which needs to be done in

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the public interest that the people cannot do for themselves.

Another historic step was taken in the late 30's and early 1940's. State after state enacted laws creating Soil and Water Conservation Districts made up of landowners and operators to encourage good stewardship of soil and water resources and assure that conservation planning and application would be accomplished at the most local level. Land owners worked with S.C.S. personnel on the ground to develop and apply technically and economically sound coordinated conservation plans based on careful inventories of soil capabilities and needs.

Working closely with District leaders, individual cooperators, and other agencies, the S.C.S. developed the new technology required and assembled a dedicated group of field technicians with minimum administrative personnel required to afford an efficient and effective delivery system. Through memoranda of understanding with other agencies, Soil and Water Conservation Districts could muster additional assistance, which is especially helpful in coordinated planning of ranch units that include associated public lands.

The Division of Agrostology was the first federal agency to approach grazing land management technically before the turn of the century. By the 1920's, the U.S. Forest Service was leading in range management. Since that time all the agencies have gained and shared grazing land technology freely. Research, extension, universities, and professional societies have performed vital functions in gaining knowledge and educating land managers and *other* professionals. The term "professional" absolutely should include land managers who have prepared themselves by learning and experience.

**The partnership of land managers and technicians** working together on both private and public lands produced dramatic conservation gains until the 70's, when born-again environmentalists discovered the world beyond city limits and clamored with more sound than sense for new legislation and regulation which strangled the conservation effort instead of expediting it. Most of these persons, in and out of government, ignored the working professionals and 40 years of preparation and progress to assert themselves as new leaders in reinventing a less workable wheel.

Funding for field personnel and activity was diverted to increasing layers of agency administration and central direction which have generated endless intramural activities, planning and paper work that in turn increased the unproductive work load on field people and decreased conservation on the ground. Astonishingly, the resulting decrease in conservation accomplished has caused the same people who caused it to call for more new programs and planning, claiming the old programs have not worked.

**This is a watershed time of decision** for land management and conservation. The choices are rather clear and really rather easy, based on historic evidence in the United States and elsewhere. Should government do the conservation work? It is physically and fiscally impossible. Should government tell farmers and ranchers what to do, when to do it, how it will be done and require them to do it? Who in government is so omnisciently wise to make those decisions well? Who will pay for it? Government cannot. If the producer pays for it, the government has seized authority without responsibility, which is immoral. Varying degrees of all of the above have been tried here and abroad with dismal failure. We are sending food from our system to support theirs. Will more regulation result in more conservation? It has not, will not, and cannot.

From Biblical times and before, there never has been a substitute for "the eye of the master fattens his cattle"—the persons who live on the land, love it, and learn to care for it to the best of their increasing ability for themselves and future generations. The system that works best is individual stewardship of the resident land manager, using his own knowledge, experience, and enlightened self interest with technical assistance available from qualified technicians of S.C.S. on private and state lands and Forest Service or B.L.M. on associated public lands. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are the best medium or channel for coordination, cooperation, and arm's length transaction among producers and agencies to assure a technically sound national program of conservation based on thousands of individual, most local, timely decisions and actions built from the grassroots up, not from Washington down, to attain the most conservation applied at least cost. There is a strong continuing role for federal agencies in providing technical assistance, because conservation concerns and technology do cross state lines, and a confusing and inefficient proliferation of new state agencies and funding not now in place would be required to replace them. The federal agencies in place, if cut severely in unproductive programs and administrative positions and returned to main mission priorities, have been and can be an efficient and effective technology delivery system to the land manager. This is one of the few legitimate functions of federal government.

**The role of research, extension, universities,** and professional organizations is greater than ever today in two facets. At one time the minister, school teachers, and county agent were the best educated people in town and automatically esteemed. It is not uncommon now that the technician who comes to advise the professional land manager (rancher or farmer) is less well prepared than the one he is to help. All of us on the land management team are limited everyday by our lack of knowledge and understanding, including all that is not yet known and all that is known that we do not know. We need new knowledge generated and disseminated more than ever to meet increasing needs for food and fiber and demands of sophistication and efficiency.

The second facet is in education of increasing numbers of the general public. One generation ago, most of the U.S. population was not more than one generation removed from rural life and an understanding of and appreciation for the production of food and fiber. I find urban citizens deeply interested in the people and resources that produce their food, but they are poorly informed. The lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of urban voters is extremely detrimental in legislation, funding, recognition, and appreciation for agriculture and natural resources.

With a nationwide communications network in place, Extension is the logical medium for two-way communication and motivation between consumers and producers and between researchers and producers with tremendous benefit to all concerned. New approaches must be devised, both to compete for attention with the high quality of television and other media and to make maximum use of them. I hope Extension at every level will seize these increased opportunities and responsibilities and fulfill them as a strong part of the agricultural and natural resource team.

Several times I have used the term "land manager", where some say "land user." There is a distinct difference. Land managers are those including owners, lessees, and permittees who come and stay year after year, have a definite stake

in continuing productivity, and must live with the consequences of their decisions and actions. Land users are those who come, use, and leave such as hunters, skiers, off road vehicle enthusiasts, and other recreationists. I hope in the future we will be careful to distinguish between land managers, who are stewards, and users, who are not.

**Will nonprofessional environmentalists** learn and understand before they speak and wreak havoc? Will producers accept and fulfill their role as good stewards and true environmentalists, benefit by the results, and control their own operation and destiny, or will they ignore that opportunity and responsibility until someone else does it for them or to them? Will agencies get their priorities straight to get conservation on the ground with the fewest, best qualified personnel possible? Will Soil and Water Conservation Districts step up in their rightful role of leadership and self government to plan and coordinate conservation activities from the most local level?

Will all true conservationists be much more careful to acquaint the general public with the value of our land and water resources, especially of grazing lands which have been held in lower esteem and priority, and with conservation needs and accomplishments to gain much needed public support and recognition? Grazing lands are of more value than ever before because of their extent and multitude of concurrent, compatible uses in energy-efficient production

of food and fiber, water, wildlife, and recreational opportunities. Thus far, our performance far surpasses our image. Both can and should be improved. There are countless unheralded examples of excellent conservation effort and results with related gains in productivity. With good stewardship, we can have conservation and improvement *with* production, rather than preservation without production, which is sinful in a needy world.

**These are the challenges and opportunities** we have as individuals and organizations. We have most of what is needed in terms of people and funding, *if* we get our priorities straight, talk less, and do more. Good personal stewardship of available soil, water, people and dollar resources by producers and qualified technicians on the ground, making good decisions and taking timely, effective action is by far the most effective mechanism and motivation ever devised. It also is the most personally, professionally, productively, profitably, and publicly rewarding. It is for these reasons that I welcome the opportunity to discuss stewardship with you, commend it to you, and hope to join with you in fulfilling its best meaning and connotation.

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*Editor's Note:* We all know about land stewardship but a healthful reminder once in a while as Merrill's article is refreshing and gets the adrenal juices going again.

# Range Improvements—Constraints of the 1970's

Lars L. Rasmussen and John F. Vallentine

Properly designed range improvements can benefit broad segments of rangeland resources. Improved forage production and utilization, wildlife habitat, water quality and yield, and reduced soil erosion are some of the most recognized benefits of range improvement work. Nevertheless, "Environmental and economic constraints brought improvement of sagebrush range to a virtual standstill during the 1970's," according to Nevada scientists (Young et al. 1981). Range improvements were brought to this downturn in the 1970's by various legal, social, physical, financial, and educational constraints. These interrelated constraints have not gone away, but have lingered on into the 1980's.

It is generally concluded that the low point in condition of forested western grazing lands was about 1900. This point was as late as the 1930's on lower elevation, unallocated public domain where grazing went uncontrolled prior to passage of the Taylor Grazing Act. Subsequently, range condition trends began slowly to climb until accelerated by

more intensive grazing management and range improvements after World War II.

The 1950's and 1960's were the great decades for range development and improvements as they became the tools to accelerate a return to favorable range conditions and production. This upturn was fueled by new technology and special appropriations. But as the 1970's rolled in, range managers seemingly became baffled and even buffaloed by the barrage of constraints aimed at range improvement work, and the stagnation of the 1970's set in.

Range improvements in Utah basically followed the national downward trend in the 1970's. Bureau of Land Management summary data (Rasmussen 1981), based on acreages of range seedings and brush management-control practices, reveal that improvement work completed in Utah during the 1970's was only 48% of the amount completed during the 1950's and a mere 17% of the amount completed during the 1960's.

Available data from Soil Conservation Service summaries (Rasmussen 1981) also indicate a downward trend through

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