

Viewpoint

Where Have We Come From? Where Are We, And Where Are We Going?

By Mort Kothmann

During the Business Meeting, at the Texas Section Annual Meeting in October, I made a comment that I thought that SRM as a society had lost the vision of "Who are we?" and "Where are we going?" I also stated that I thought that we had lost our passion for the mission and work of the society. These statements confused and hurt some of the people who have spent their whole lives in dedicated service to the profession of range management and to service through SRM. I tried to clarify my comment to indicate that I meant to apply these statements to the general membership of the society and not to each individual member. The objective of this viewpoint is to extend and clarify these statements and to open a dialogue with the general membership on the issue, "Who are we and where are going?"

I remember years past going to Aggie football games and watching a few individuals play their hearts out while most of the team was uninspired and unmotivated. The team went 1-9 during one of those years! A few dedicated, hardworking members on a team do not make a "winner". A winning team takes the total effort and commitment of every individual on the team plus a good coach. This included those that never play in a game; they are a vital part of the mid-week preparations for the action on Saturday. SRM is the same way. A few hardworking-dedicated individuals among a generally apathetic membership do not result in a growing, dynamic Society! In addition to enthusiasm and dedication, we also need a sound game plan. Well, how have we gotten to our current status and if you agree that we need to change, what do we do about it? Let me share some of my perspective on "Where we have come from?" and "Where do we need to go?"

The profession of range management began during the late 19th century. Major John Wesley Powell, who led USGS survey and exploration of the western US after the Civil War, recognized that the lands of the west were "a different kind of land" that was not suitable for cultivated agriculture, but was suitable for production of grazing animals. USDA researchers, Smith and Bennett, working in Texas recognized the need to control and manage grazing and to restore rangeland vegetation that had been depleted by excessive grazing. During the early 20th century, the discipline of ecology began developing and range management focused on the application of ecological principles for sustainable production of livestock. By the middle of the 20th century, the need for "range management" was widely recognized by a significant group of scientists, educators, and practicing professionals and the American Society of Range Management was organized in 1948. This new professional society had a clearly identified vision and

mission that unified the membership; it was *land conservation* through proper *grazing management*. It was based on a strong natural resources conservation ethic.

During the 1960's, our national attention focused on "science" and our discipline shifted its focus from land conservation and management to science and research. Departments changed their names from Range Management to Range Science. The growth of the body of range science knowledge over the past 40 years has been truly impressive. As our focus shifted from conservation to science, our emphasis shifted towards more basic research and economics. These were effective in rallying our rancher and professional base and SRM grew to over 7,000 members.

However, during the 1960's, the *environmental* movement began as a distinct group that differed in focus from the *conservation* movement. It came primarily from persons whom we believed were "not involved" with agriculture and "not fully informed" about scientific agriculture and natural resources. These persons raised their voices and took action to protest many of the advances in "scientific agriculture" such as the widespread use of pesticides. Our general reaction was annoyance and frustration. We both ridiculed and ignored them. After all, did they not recognize that we were the "original conservationists" and we were feeding America and the world! But, society in general was listening to what these new environmentalists were saying and we began to see congress enacting new laws that regulated the use and management of natural resources. By the early 1990's there was a significant body of environmental laws enacted and a proliferation of governmental regulations affecting a wide range of environmental and natural resource issues. Meantime, the success of production agriculture continued to improve the supply and quality of "cheap" food. Support (funding for research, education, and technical assistance) for the science of "production agriculture" began to decline during the 1980s and during the last 10 years has decreased greatly.

Where does this leave SRM today? The paradigm of "maximum sustainable use of rangelands for the **production of goods (livestock)** and services" no longer has the enthusiastic support of many of our members or the general public. Much of the current science in our research universities is no longer based on this paradigm of production agriculture. The "new" rancher/land owners do not desire maximum sustainable use of their lands. Livestock grazing is now justified as "a tool for vegetation management" on some rangelands, but "probably should be excluded from many".

The original theme of SRM, *Land Conservation and*

Management, is highly relevant today; as evidenced by the formation of numerous new professional organizations, each with a rather specific focus related to conservation of some specific natural resource(s). Our general response has been, "Hey, that's our job!" but they have ignored or attacked us and pressed on with their "special purpose agendas". As production agriculture has declined, the number of students interested in careers in production agriculture, which includes the traditional range conservationist positions in federal agencies, has declined. Only a small minority of the students currently enrolled at TAMU has any interest in pursuing a career in traditional range management as a government employee. The majority are interested in working in the private sector, primarily in various aspects of environmental management, regulation, or science. Many do not see SRM as an effective professional organization that represents their interests and will support and enhance their professional development.

Along with these changes, SRM membership has declined. Younger age classes are not adequately represented in range management positions. It is estimated that 40% of professionals in government land management agencies may retire within the next 7 years. This combined with the low level of interest by young persons in pursuing these careers can be considered an indicator of an apparent downward trend. These are symptoms of a declining profession.

Where do we go from here? The future of SRM as a professional society will be determined by our ability to clearly define and communicate a central paradigm that will energize and motivate a large number of professionals and generate broad public support. This paradigm must have high "value" to the potential members and to society at large. It must support the development of an "action" agenda that will promote the strongly held values of the membership and promote the conservation and wise use of all lands for the benefit and welfare of humankind. It must be "forward looking" not clinging to what we were, just because it was right in its time. To paraphrase Thad Box, SRM has several options; we can identify what society feels that they need and want and try to meet those needs, keep doing what we are doing and slowly fade away, or close-up shop and move on now.

The values and paradigms of the public are constantly changing and if we do not evaluate and anticipate these changes, we are destined to become less and less relevant in what we do. We need to anchor our personal lives and our professional organization on basic values that do not change. We need to learn to interpret the context of a continually changing society. This need to deal with change has been the justification and purpose of SRM's involvement in Journey to Change. The dialogue has begun on what, when, where, and how we need to be changing! It is time for action to begin to flow from the dialogue. The following are some of my personal opinions on the kinds of changes that we need to make at the present time.

It is time to drop "range" as the *primary identity* of our profession. In the on-line Encarta World English Dictionary (2001) under "range" there are 28 definitions of the term, 18 used as a noun and 10 as a verb. Only 2 definitions have any

relation to the concept or range as we have defined it in SRM. Number 9 is "range n. AGRICULTURE **open land for grazing farm animals**: a large area of open land on which farm animals can graze. *Also called rangeland*". Number 5 is "range v. *transitive* verb AGRICULTURE **put livestock out to graze**: to put livestock out to graze on a large open area". While there continues to be some individuals in SRM that insist that the term range does not imply a "use" of land, it should be little surprise that most of the public does not understand the concept of multiple uses, products, and services from rangelands and that those who think they do, view range management as "cows and grass". The SRM membership is not unified on "who we are" and "what we do". As we have striven to change our own definition and vision of range management some still cling to old concepts and some insist on new concepts and new definitions for the old terms. To change a public concept that has been firmly engrained for over 100 years will require a clearly focused vision, broad commitment, and many resources.

We need a new name and a new vision statement that will more clearly reflect the broader mission and expertise of our organization so that the public and other professionals will be able to understand "Who we are!" and "What we do!" It should not require us to try to rewrite the dictionaries and encyclopedias and reeducate the public. I think there are three key words that define our vision: **land, conservation, and management**. Land is a broad concept that includes the soils, topography, water, flora, fauna, and climate. The terms, and the concepts that they embody, are readily translated and understood in different languages and cultures. Therefore, I propose that we change the name of SRM to **Society for Land Conservation and Management**. Along with this change, we need to reach out to professionals and non-professionals who share a common vision for the conservation and management of land resources.

If we are to grow and increase our influence, it will not be because a few dedicated individuals in upper leadership of SRM work long and hard; it will be because we have an identity, vision, and mission that motivates and energizes a broad spectrum of professionals and public who have a genuine interest and commitment to land conservation and management. Leadership is needed at the national level, but strong leadership and most of the work and progress must occur at the local and regional levels. The sections need to identify areas where we can broaden our suite of professional services and serve a broader clientele to the many and diverse needs for land conservation and management at the local and regional levels. If we are to survive and *prosper* as a professional organization, it will take a sound game plan and the best effort and dedication of each member.

I welcome your responses at m-kothmann@tamu.edu.