Thad Box

Land, Wisdom, and Tribal Values

Sixteen years ago we buried my dad in his beloved Llano County (Texas) soil. I am not much for visiting graveyards, but there is something peaceful about Board Branch Cemetery. I go there when I visit Texas and sit in the shade of a large post oak tree. I don't go to put flowers on Dad's grave or to visit Dad's body.

I go to commune with Dad through the land he loved, to connect with my culture, my tribe. I was born just a few miles from Dad's grave at a time when Mother's diet was primarily food grown on the farm. Literally, I come from that soil.

Technically, the gravelly ground there is not as good as most soil in Texas. When my ancestors came west, they passed over rich black prairies because the soil was too heavy to be farmed by small draft animals. They settled in the granitic uplift of central Texas where the sands and sandy loams could be turned by a moleboard plow pulled by a pair of small mules with nothing but grass to eat.

The first year after land was put into cultivation, it produced good crops. Each succeeding year, the crop was less, attesting to the sand's inability to hold nutrients. Nitrogen-fixing crops of cowpeas or peanuts were alternated with corn and cotton in an attempt to keep fertility high, but the sands and gravel could not produce yields that matched those from blackland areas.

Crops like watermelons and cowpeas did well, but there was not a market to make those crops profitable. The country was thickly settled. Most properties were not large enough for economic livestock production. It was good cow country, but ranching took more land than most people could afford.

As a consequence, both the land and the people were destined to be poor when measured in economic terms. But to Dad, the soil where he had grown up knew no equal. Every crop he later grew in rich blackland prairies or irrigated valleys of the West paled by comparison to the sandy land fields of his youth. In his mind, Llano County sands provided the best life had to offer.

A few years before Dad died, I brought him and Mother to live with me in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. His last years were spent looking and walking over some of the most productive irrigated farmland in the world. But his heart, and perhaps his soul, were in the poor sands of his youth. When he died, there was no question that we would take him back to Board Branch to be buried.

Sometimes I regret that I did not move back to the Texas hills and let Dad live out his last days there. But it might have been cruel to try to return him to a land that existed only in his heart.

He left the granite gravel soon after he married. The best crops he raised were in blacklands. Had he gone back, he would have seen that the sandy soils he loved were inferior to the dense clays that stuck to his boots like brown chewing gum. When he saw that his soils had fooled him, what else might also be false? It was probably best that he return to the granite gravel only in death.

Dad never held a deed to Llano County land. Yet for his entire life he was a part of that soil. I believe, and preach, that land does not belong to us, we belong to the land. That concept is never clearer than when I sit by Dad's grave in Board Branch Cemetery.

This issue of *Rangelands* is about assessment tools, techniques, and databases for the management of rangelands. This spring I received an invitation from CSIRO (Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization) to attend a celebration of the digital publication of CSIRO's Land Research Series in Canberra.[i]

The pioneering surveys began in 1946, soon after WWII. Australian policy makers realized they had very little scientific information on about three-fourths of their country. The land was vast; the need for information great; funds and manpower were limited. The surveys required a new approach to land classification.

The objectives were to integrate information on topography, vegetation, and soils with climate, geology, and geomorphology to provide useful information for development. American land managers probably know the method that evolved as the Christian–Perry land classification system.

The composite mapping unit was a "land system." This was defined as "an area or group of areas throughout which there is a recurring pattern of topography, soils, and vegetation." Working from aerial photographs, interdisciplinary teams of ecologists, pedologists, and geomorphologists outlined what appeared to be a land system with similar characteristics.

Then an interdisciplinary team, expanded by specialists in botany, hydrology, climatology, zoology, or other disciplines, met on the ground. Each major scientific discipline had a spokesperson. The end result was an integrated, scientific estimate of land potential.

Each survey became a roving seminar where experts in many disciplines argued, compromised, and attempted to come to a professional consensus of what the potential of an area might be if the then-current scientific knowledge were applied. Science provided valid information; the blending of that information was a work of art.

This site-based, interdisciplinary team assessment approach was ahead of its time. It has worn well through time because it was more than a pioneering effort in land management or landscape ecology. By focusing on the interaction of disciplines, rather than intensive research in a single discipline, those old surveys provided information greater than the sum of the disciplines making them. They are still useful after 65 years.

Over the years, science available to land managers has improved dramatically. We now know a lot more about basic things that cause productivity. And the technology available is mind boggling. Using Google Earth, a 60-year-old land-system map from Australia, and demographic and economic data in published government documents, an American or Brazilian or Chinese investor can evaluate the development potential of lands they have never seen.

When a well-designed geographic information system is available where all the research, environmental information, and local economic data can be focused on a specific site, it is technically possible to put each chunk of land to its "highest and best" use. But science, however exact, cannot determine highest and best.

"Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad" (from Bob Anderson via Jim Thorpe). Land-use measurements and techniques such as those discussed in this publication go a long way toward harnessing science and making it available. Using science to reach a societal goal is an art. Neither science nor art can determine what a culture wants.

Forty years ago in *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*, Gregory Bateson wrote:

> *The ideas in a civilization are (like all other variables) interlinked...We are not outside the ecology for which we plan—we are always and inevitably part of it. Herein lies the charm and the terror of ecology—that the ideas of this science are irreversibly becoming part of our own ecosocial system.* (p. 512)[1]

Setting a societal goal such as "highest and best use" must respect tribal values embedded in hearts and minds of people. Those sandy soils where Dad is buried could never produce crops like the alluvial valley of the Rio Grande, but his cultural values cannot be ignored. Perhaps wisdom, like land productivity, comes through interactions and interconnections of knowledge, experience, and cultural values.

References

1. Bateson, G. 1971. Steps to an ecology of mind: collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press. 565 p.

[i] Those surveys are now available at http://www.publish.csiro.au/nid/289.htm.

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