



By Thad Box

Tools, Science, and the Art of Compromise

When I moved my parents into our home, my 86-year-old father insisted on bringing his saddlebags. He said, “You can’t get a horseshoe hammer like mine anymore. And you never know when you might need stuff in that bag.” Dad died 18 years ago, but his values live with me. His hammer hangs in my basement as I wrestle daily with mingling the old with the new.

Getting rid of old stuff is really hard. Last summer I celebrated my weight loss by going from closet to closet filling containers with oversize coats and pants. Then I found a Pendleton Woolen Mills shirt—dark blue with red threads woven to make checks ranging from red to purple to blue. It’s 100% virgin wool. Like Dad’s horseshoe hammer, you just can’t get things like that anymore. I bought the shirt in Logan in 1970. Then I gained so much weight I couldn’t wear it. For 43 years it has been hanging in closets as we moved from place to place. I tried it on. It fit.

Soon after rescuing the shirt, I wore it to a meeting where public lands and maintaining a sustainable environment were discussed. I went because I was expected to be there. People are so polarized I feared little would come from the meeting. Dysfunctional politicians draw party lines and vow never to give an inch. My state legislature wants to take control of public lands. This “my way or no way” attitude often turns once reasonable groups into radical camps backing preservation or exploitation. Letters to the editor are filled with personal attacks. The art of compromise, needed in almost all land use decisions, is missing in action.

My Pendleton shirt is not a red shirt. It’s not a blue shirt. It’s an American shirt. Its wool came from sheep that grazed the public lands. Those same lands provide water, recreation, and other ecological services for our luxurious life. The wool was washed with water from public rivers. It was woven into fabric and manufactured in “green” Oregon by proud workers. I bought it in a local store, where the owner was an active member of the community. A product of our beloved United States, my old shirt is a result of compromise on many conflicting issues.

My shirt’s story is not unique. In every step of its journey, there were major problems to be solved. Every dispute required give and take. Hundreds of successful businesses provided goods and services that allowed our people to prosper. Each success required compromises. No one got everything he wanted, but by working together we ended up with families making a living, educating their children, and pursuing the American dream.

Through seeking middle ground, our country became the envy of the world. Our US Constitution is a product of negotiation. Adding the first ten amendments as a Bill of Rights required compromise. So did freeing of slaves and allowing women to vote. Abandoning polygamy so Utah could become a state was a trade-off. Most every product of humankind that has lasting value came about by finding a balance between individual freedom, human rights, and community health.

The journey toward community viability was not short or easy. For the first 300 years after Europeans invaded North America, liberty and individual freedom were driving forces. Human populations were low. Abundant land was available for the taking. New communities formed as native occupants were killed or displaced. Liberty and personal rights were guaran-

teed for the conqueror, but denied to the displaced and the enslaved.

As the European immigrant population increased, technology developed that allowed greater numbers of people to live on the land. By the late 1800s, the Era of Exploitation was having an adverse effect. Most of the land had been settled and changed. Forests had been cut, topsoil was eroding, and grasslands were overgrazed. Crowding caused community health to decline. Altruism became a major factor in both individual and group survival. Establishment of the first national park and setting aside forest reserves were early signs the country was moving from extraction to an Era of Preservation.

Land care professions such as range management, forestry, and wildlife and soil conservation discovered new science and applied it to the land. As ecology developed, its principles became the lynchpin in management of natural resources. In the 1930s we entered an Era of Rehabilitation. Trees were planted, farmland terraced, and rangelands reseeded. As we invested in rehabilitation, the land gradually healed. Today, the dust bowl of the plains and eroding mountains of the west are remembered by only by viejos, the old timers.

With each decade, fewer people lived on the land. The American people, and with them the power of government, became concentrated in cities. Contact with the land was unnatural to most. By the 1960s many Americans doubted their chance for personal survival. "The Bomb" loomed over mankind. Total destruction could come with the push of a button. The Korean conflict was in armistice and the war in Viet Nam seemed unending.

Rachael Carson's "Silent Spring," published in 1962, convinced many that the problems of pesticides and industrialization were more dangerous than the bomb or wars between nations. Other books, like Paul Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb" (1968), moved our country, and the world, into an Era of Environmental Awareness. Today farms, ranches, national parks, and forests are a romantic mirage to most Americans.

Powerful corporations, trade associations, farm organizations, and "conservation" groups push their limited interests. Well-meaning rangeland groups often work at cross-purposes with little attention being given to the land system. Feral horses and burros are called a national treasure and protected by federal law as they overgraze habitat for native plants and animals. Privately owned rangelands are often cleared of native plants and animals and converted to exotic plant species and domestic animals for meat production.

These land uses are not necessarily wrong, or right, but it is in this era that land care professionals try to find their niche today. The role of range management professionals is not to maximize, or even optimize, output of meat, water, recreational opportunities, carbon storage, or any other specific product of the land. Our job is to maintain rangeland health and keep options open for future generations.

The first step is to improve science so we can better know, and perhaps predict, the consequences of our actions. The next step is to develop and improve tools to analyze system change with specific uses. These two steps fall clearly into the role of a land care professional. New and better tools will have to be developed and used, but a mission looking to the future fits a profession.

The choice of how rangelands will actually be used is made by the owners of the land. If the land is privately owned, the person with title to the land makes the decisions. On public land, it is the voters who decide. One of the major roles of a range manager is to guide the owner, public or private, toward a safe middle ground where the system provides services today without eliminating future options.

The American Society of Range Management was formed 65 years ago to apply art and science to properly take care of the basic rangeland resources of soil, plants, and water. Our science is better now, our challenge greater, and our tools different.

It doesn't matter that most Americans won't know why Dad's horseshoe hammer was an important tool in his saddlebag. Or that my Pendleton shirt is out of style. They are tools of the past. The art of compromise is not a tool like a hammer, computer, or smart phone, but without it our planet will not be able to support eight billion people.

Worth Re-Reading

CARSON, R. 1962. *Silent Spring*. New York, NY, USA: Houghton Mifflin. 378 p.

ERLICH, P. 1968. *The Population Bomb*. New York, NY, USA: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books. 201 p.

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