

Cows Save the Planet: And Other Improbable Ways of Restoring Soil to Heal the Earth. By Judith D. Schwartz. 2012. Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT, USA. 240 p. US\$17.95. paperback. ISBN 978-1-6035843-2-6.

This book is about getting soil back where it can sequester carbon from the atmosphere and keep carbon in the soil. The author takes us on a world tour of Africa, Australia, New England, and other locations to view examples of good land management and the type of soil that the land managers in these areas get after their efforts. However, these land managers make it clear not enough carbon sequestration data is available yet to demonstrate what good soil management can achieve.

The trip to Australia goes to the Winona Farm, where the technique of “pasture cropping” is used to get more organic matter or tilth into the soil. The technique of pasture cropping involves seeding crops into native grass pastures for grazing. This activity increased the carbon in the soil by 200% over ten years. However, a discussion brought up how the established agriculture institutions were doubtful of the 200% even when they measured the 200%. This is a common theme through the book: established agricultural institutions, corporations, and agribusiness are against reduced use of herbicides, chemical fertilizers, and genetic modified crop plants.

Now, for us in range management, the chapters with discussion on planned grazing are of most interest. The grazing philosophy of choice is Allan Savory’s holistic planned grazing. One chapter discusses holistic management’s disturbance, brittleness, herd effect, and decay, along with other aspects of the holistic program. The example of a large ranch in Africa, called the Dinbangombe Ranch, where holistic management has been practiced with all the native wildlife species and livestock, is given with many qualitative observations on the improved water cycle and vegetation. The one measurement that showed good results was that the river on the ranch is now a mile longer than prior to management.

Later in the book the author wants to see some real results of holistic management, so she visits the Cinch Buckle Ranch and Horse Creek Ranch in eastern Montana and Black Hills area of South Dakota. The ranchers showed the author around the ranches. But, as the chapter goes on I was unable to locate any good empirical vegetation trend data showing changes to the species, ground cover, litter load, and bare-ground measure, or a soil carbon measurement. I came onto a quote from Ron Goddard (Cinch Buckle Ranch) saying “The long time horizon often necessary before seeing improvement under Holistic Management is an ongoing test of commitment. We were in on this place for ten years and saw positive changes in the percentage of covered ground and the number of species, but it was years before we started seeing anything measurable.”

To conclude, I believe this book would be good for a student or beginning range or soil conservationist to read to introduce them to the concepts discussed. I believe experienced soil and rangeland managers would find this book with little to no new ideas and concepts. The one disappointment I had in the book was that the empirical data showing that holistic livestock grazing improved carbon sequestration just never appeared. I wanted to see some tables and discussions showing the changes in carbon in the soil from the holistic management of livestock over the years. The evidence of soil carbon sequestration data was more apparent on the farmed lands discussed, but was lacking and is needed to make a convincing argument that cows (or holistic management of livestock) save the planet by promoting healthy soils and carbon storage.

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