By Thad Box

Judge Not The Axeman

When I came out of the Army, I used my GI Bill to get a college education that would help feed a hungry world. I enrolled in curriculum in general agriculture. When I took a course in range management, I was hooked. I decided to do graduate work turning grass into beef. When I applied to Texas A&M, they had a graduate fellowship for me from a new wildlife foundation formed by a prominent South Texas rancher. By a stroke of good luck, rather than by design or good planning, I did my graduate work with people of unusual and different backgrounds evaluating land for uses I had never considered.

The area where I worked had been a working ranch for almost 200 years. Rancher Rob Welder thought that unless wildlife was beneficial to private landowners, wild creatures would disappear. He gave 7,800 acres of his ancestral ranch to form the Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Foundation in 1954. The land would continue to be an operating ranch, but its research would be for sustaining the biological and economic health of private land.

The research was to be done by graduate students who would become ecological scientists. I was their first student. Since then Welder funds have supported over 300 students from major universities. Over 2,000 publications dealing with basic and applied biology, economics, agriculture, and policy have been produced. In December 1958, while I was still a graduate student, I gave a paper at the Texas Academy of Science entitled "The Multiple Use of Rangelands: A Problem in Ecosystem Management." (Contribution number 27, Series A, Welder Wildlife Foundation, Sinton, Texas).

I wrote:

> *The concept that the entire complex of organisms and environment forms a physical system, or ecosystem, was presented by Tansley in 1935. Although most conservation workers agree with the basic ecosystem philosophy, far too few have extended the concept into practice. Tansley stated in his original definition that "though organisms may claim our primary interest, when we are trying to think fundamentally, we cannot separate them from their special environment with which they form one physical system." In the use of rangelands, many of us have been guilty of giving too much emphasis to a particular group of organisms, i.e., livestock, wildlife, or vegetation without considering the entire ecosystem and its complex relationships.*

Fifty-six years later, range management is no longer a "cows and grass" affair. It is a profession that manages ecosystem changes. Change happens. Ecosystems change. Economic systems change. Social systems change. When climate changes, the larger system is never the same—biologically, economically, politically—as it was before. Systems must be sustainable for humans to reproduce and future generations to succeed.

Keeping systems sustainable is our mission, the reason range managers exist. Sustainability depends upon balance and fairness in resource use in the current generation, intergenerational transfer of resources to next generation, and long-term stability trumping short-term gain. Those are our marching orders as we muddle through the present and look to the future.

A significant portion of today's rangelands are suffering from the most severe drought in recent history. Over 90% of our scientists predict our earth will get hotter and drier as the

number of people increase. Over seven billion people occupy our planet today. These include some of the richest and some of the poorest people ever known. Some are educated, others illiterate. Some have internet access and advanced technology, others have no water in their homes. Some have well-balanced diets, others are slowly starving.

Most protein in human diets comes not from grazing animals, but from plants. But as animals go, poultry and swine provide more protein for human use than all ungulates combined. If producing animal protein is our major goal for rangelands, then 40% of the earth's surface will be used to produce a minor part of the human diet. The human population is expected to reach eight billion in the next 30 years. We don't know what they will want from rangelands. Rangeland ecosystems will continue to produce animal protein, but they must provide other things as well.

We have come a long way from determining the number of cows a square mile of prairie could carry. We have a new piece of work cut out for us—work we can only imagine. We live in a world where the elite carry mobile devices that have the world's knowledge at the click of a button. We must be able to understand and communicate with those folks, work to improve the lives of those still in poverty, and develop science that allows the land to sustain the children of both. We do this for the wellbeing of people who live most of their lives in dense urban areas outside rangelands.

In the early 1990s I was at New Mexico State University. One weekend I climbed the Organ Mountains east of Las Cruces and sat in a rock shelter near the place where the oldest corn in the United States was found. I looked at petroglyphs on the rocks near me and as I gazed out over the lush, irrigated farms; the housing developments; and the intersection of two busy interstate highways, I wondered if our civilization would also go the same way as those who made the petroglyphs in the shelter I had invaded.

Coming down the mountain, I took a shortcut across a dry, barren, west-facing slope. There, with no trees anywhere in sight, was an ancient stump with weathered ax marks still showing. As the sun went down, I sat and wrote this:

STUMP NEAR SOLIDAD CANYON
On desert ridge
bare
save yucca
cacti
and woody scrub
a stump clings
a relict of a gentler time
viejos
cannot remember cedar
on that dry west facing slope
though centuries
the tree grew
it fell
in modern times
it stood proud
against drought
and twisting wind
a rare
dark green dot
on a purple hill
a pioneer
climbed that hill
swung his axe
removed the life
that clung to stone
did it make
vigas for adobe hut
spokes for wagon wheel
a fire to warm a newborn babe
in rare Mesilla snow
the axeman
judge him not
he was a product
of a harsher time

Let us reassess our role in this rapidly changing, challenging time. Let us judge not the people who overgrazed the rangelands, or plowed the prairies, or drained our aquifers, or fouled our air, or denied what we did to the earth. Let us instead examine our individual role in the world of tomorrow.

When I was in graduate school at Texas A&M my preacher brother-in-law asked me to talk to a group of ranchers in a country Methodist church. After my talk I copied a handwritten sign above the door in that church. Years later I found similar quotations attributed to Edward Everett Hale and Helen Keller. But the country church version changed my life and has been on the wall of my many offices for the last 50 years. It says simply this:

I am not everyone
But I am one
I can't do everything
But I can do something
And what I can do
I ought to do

Let us continue with the zeal and the wisdom of those who have gone before us. Let us encourage and help the bright young people who will replace us. We can't do everything. But what we can do, we ought to do. Let's do it.

Thad Box, thadbox@comcast.net.

Rangelands 36(2):61–62
doi: 10.2111/RANGELANDS-D-14-00004.1