

## Letter to the Editor

# Deficiencies in the Briske et al. Rebuttal of the Savory Method: A Reply to the Letter From Andrés Cibils

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The letter from Andrés Cibils et al. in this issue of *Rangelands* maintains that the rebuttal of Briske et al.<sup>1</sup> in the October issue of *Rangelands* by Teague<sup>2</sup> in the February issue of *Rangelands* was incorrect regarding grazing results in Patagonia and that it omitted important information regarding a serious event involving a holistically managed farm in Chile. The letter by Dr. Cibils et al. needs correction regarding the previous research and monitoring work in Patagonia and clarification on the farm incident in Chilean Tierra Del Fuego.

Dr. Cibils tries to make his point using a paper<sup>3</sup> that was published 16 years ago. Although it was a long-term grazing trial (10 years), it used small paddocks at a single location. The data presented only analyzed vegetation cover and biodiversity, without any reference to landscape function, community dynamics, and spatial heterogeneity. It suggests that the enclosure and light stocking strategies would be regenerative, and that moderate stocking rates could be considered stable. This has not been borne out by Ovis XXI monitoring data gathered on large commercial farms in many areas of Argentina and Chile.

Ovis XXI developed an adaptive management procedure based on flexible stocking rates that ranged from moderate to light, and was presented at the International Rangeland Conference (IRC) held in Townsville, Australia. In 2012 Ovis XXI developed the Grassland Regeneration and Sustainable Standard (GRASS) with The Nature Conservancy, and developed a Rangeland Health Index (RHI) based on 15 biological indicators. Scores can range from +100 to -100. Negative values correlate with active land degradation, and positive values are correlated with higher biodiversity and land regeneration. Ovis XXI has a certification scheme that brands farms as FULL when their weighted average RHI is above +15, and RESTORE when the farm is below +15. Last year, from a population of 52 farms, comprising 1.27 million hectares, 20% of farms in the FULL and 80% in the

RESTORE categories were recorded. Seven out of 10 farms that rated FULL are currently using holistic planning. This information is public, and Ovis XXI is ready to share it with any person interested.

Some farms of the Ovis XXI network have a 23-year history of using the Ovis XXI practice of adaptive management. Of the 12 farms in Patagonia that applied long-term continuous grazing with flexible stocking rates only one, Estancia Los Pozos with light stocking, achieved an increase in RHI of 25. It is located in the same region and gave results consistent with the results in the paper cited by Cibils. However, light grazing did not generate positive values in drier zones like the Central District or San Jorge District, despite massive destocking. All the other 11 continuously grazed farms monitored in Patagonia applied moderate grazing and showed active degradation processes in every ecological area, including the area of the grazing trial. These processes are easily observed at patch scale, and at site landscape unit scale (spatial variability). As Ovis XXI monitoring covers many more properties over numerous ecological areas we think that this evidence is much stronger than the paper cited by Cibils conducted at a single site.

Ovis XXI started practicing Holistic Management because farmers observed stagnancy or slow retrogression of their land. Results from the four farms in Patagonia monitored by Ovis XXI to date look very promising with improvements in RHI ranging from 10 to 49 measured in 2013. Ovis XXI started without any advocacy, and used the same objective measurements used 23 years before. Similar promising results on farms using planned holistic grazing management have been consistently monitored on more than 40 farms in other ecological areas of Argentina and Chile. As part of the GRASS standards, Ovis XXI has installed long-term monitoring transects in every farm, and will start rereading transects in the near future. This will provide strong data to evaluate the changes observed on farms being monitored.

The loss of 25,000 sheep in a bad winter in Chilean Tierra Del Fuego on the Estancia Cameron in September 2011 is certainly a terrible thing. But to use it as an argument against Holistic Management is like condemning commercial aviation after a plane crash. The situation occurred as follows: Tierra del Fuego had an unusually severe snow event that year. Neighboring farms lost from 25% to 35% of their flocks while Cameron lost 50%. The loss on Cameron was made more serious by poor management that had nothing to do with Holistic Management protocols. The cause of the problem was human failure: poor monitoring and improvisation beyond the plan, something that is totally against recommended practice. Many of the deaths could have been avoided by applying Holistic Management like the owners had done in the past.

Prior to this bad incident, the farm had achieved a 300% increase in carrying capacity after 2 years under Holistic Management. Currently the owners keep planning their grazing and have not returned to continuous grazing. Ovis XXI is now working with 40 farmers using Holistic Management in Patagonia and no other abnormal incident like that on Cameron has happened on any of them.

In summary, Ovis XXI monitoring records show that the statements made by Teague<sup>2</sup> outlining the deficiencies of the Briske paper in the October issue of *Rangelands* are correct. The rangelands monitored for over 20 years on continuously grazed rangelands in Patagonia showed a continuing retrogression even with lowering of stocking rates. However, on the farms that converted to Holistic Management all showed a strong increase in range health indices. Further, the results from the paper that Cibils et al. use to strengthen their viewpoint do not agree with the results obtained in Patagonia from commercial farms. Therefore, Ovis XXI data are in agreement with the points made by Teague<sup>2</sup> criticizing the *Rangelands* paper by Briske et al.<sup>1</sup> on the grounds that the research cited in that paper has examined the issue from a reductionist viewpoint that has not included the critical influences of scale, or used the best management strategies of Holistic Planned Grazing to achieve sound animal produc-

tion, resource improvement, and socio-economic goals under constantly varying conditions on rangelands.

The extremely unfortunate loss of a very large number of sheep on one farm when their use of Holistic Management lapsed does not detract from the fact that many very positive results have been obtained by farmers using Holistic Management in Argentina and Chile. Abnormal death losses have not been experienced on any other holistically managed properties in the region, and based on the positive results they have achieved in the past, the owner who experienced these huge losses did not return to continuous grazing.

## References

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3. OLIVA, G., A. CIBILS, P. BORRELLI, AND G. HUMANO. 1998. Stable states in relation to grazing in Patagonia: a 10-year grazing trial. *Journal of Arid Environments* 40:113–131.

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*Editor's Note: While these letters are unlikely to be the last word on this topic, they will be the last we publish in this exchange of Letters to the Editor prompted by the Briske et al.<sup>1</sup> View Point. I welcome and encourage submission to Rangelands of future peer-reviewed articles and View Points on the topic.*

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