



Thad Box

## Changing With Change

This issue of *Rangelands* does not have a special theme to guide my story or a suggested topic to stimulate our thoughts. But before you read this, read the article about curricula in universities that teach range management (“Which Direction is Forward: Perspectives on Rangeland Science Curricula” [Editor]). I do not know what is in the article. But it provides an opportunity to think about the state of land care professions. Maybe, just maybe, something will provoke members to express their ideas on our mission and where we are headed.

I was asked to use the “Listening to the Land” column to discuss our history, suggest who we are, think aloud where we are headed, and promote discussion. I am not an expert on any of these topics. There are hundreds of others more qualified than I. But few were, or are, willing to lay their thoughts out for others to rummage through, paw over, and dissect.

My thoughts have no special significance, but professional discourse among our members will make us stronger. Writing the column offers me a way to serve our profession and the land. I don’t like to think I’m getting old. But I am, much to my amazement, a senior, an old one, a mossback. In any culture, a *viejó*’s role is to think, to reflect, to prod. The teacher in me wants to stimulate others to think about sustainability. Apparently, my efforts are not very effective.

The positive comments, e-mails, and letters I receive lift my spirit and keep me writing. It is encouraging when things I write touch someone. It is especially gratifying when someone writes they have been inspired to action. Thank you.

But this column as a stimulus for change has failed. The meager response in letters to the editor or viewpoint articles challenging my positions, offering alternative opinions, or expanding our thinking is both discouraging and bewildering. I reject those who say that range management is irrelevant and headed toward slow death. More likely, our profession has just lost its voice.

Land care professions are at a crucial stage. Our world changes around us. Land uses change. New clientele, improved science, and rapidly developing technology dictate we operate differently. The half-life of businesses and organizations shorten each year. Only a few companies that were leaders 2 decades ago even exist today. Churches, labor unions, fraternal groups, and professional associations struggle for relevance. We are not immune. Unless we change, and evolve like the organisms we manage, we become first irrelevant, then extinct.

There is considerable irony in our lethargy. Our profession formed to work with change. We use principles of ecology and other sciences to make what we do more efficient—to get better at what we do. Yet we seldom apply those principles to our role in a rapidly changing environment. New ideas on why we must change, or how we can change, seldom find their way to our publications, Web sites, or professional meetings. We debate image rather than principles.

Perhaps we are responders, not visionaries. Our professions formed because of natural and man-made catastrophes. In North America during the 19th century, European

expansion, drought, and overuse of natural resources spawned a whole group of organizations that used science to treat wounded land. Range management was a response to overgrazing. When trees were cut for houses, railroad ties, and mine braces European forestry was modified to form American forestry. As native animals were hunted toward extinction, wildlife management became a profession. Watershed management was born when mountains slid down on towns.

The list goes on. But in every case, professions arose in response to problems. Like doctors who bled their patients, land managers depended on imperfect science. As science developed, action was taken. Catastrophes required action. Sometimes observation and experience were all that was available to guide us. But even with those constraints, the record shows our actions over the last century had positive effect on the land.

Our critics say we became captive of extractive industries, often acting as spokespersons for products rather than for the land. I disagree. But I understand the basis of that criticism. Lacking a good measure for land health, we assessed progress in land improvement with products—lamb, board feet, trophy bucks. Those who paid our salary and sought our guidance understood beefsteak on the table, two-by-fours in a wall, and quail in the hedgerows. Ecology and sustainability were foreign concepts waiting to be translated.

We allowed people to use the words soil and dirt interchangeably without challenge. We talked about products rather than soil structure, water infiltration, plant succession—the things that made steak and lumber affordable. By measuring land health with a product rather than sustainable options, we became champions of things rather than possibilities.

Not only did we present ourselves as favoring production of commodities, but we squabbled among our professions. Some of my most embarrassing times have been situations where a range and a wildlife person agreed on principles needed to improve land, but argued over whether livestock or wildlife should graze the vegetation. They pushed biases of their clientele rather than let society, or the market, select which critter was to be used.

Statements like “Range management will die if grazing is banned from public land” indicate that even professionals get hung up on such things as land ownership rather than land potential. Different forces guide the use of land under different ownerships. On private land, the welfare of the owner, largely determined by market forces, dominates land use. On public land, societal wants and needs determine how land is used. Social action and politics are more direct influences on public land than the market.

Land ownership can change with an act of Congress or the stroke of a pen. Land potential remains the same, regardless of who owns it. That is, unless the soil is removed, buried, or changed irreversibly. A role of land care professionals is to be able to predict such changes and warn society. State-and-transition ecology is just one of the emerging tools we have to understand both the process and results of irreversible changes.

I argue that our role as land care professionals is to work for sustainability—to keep land use options open for future generations. If we accept this, it means a fundamental shift in our thinking. Instead of being a doctor who just responds to wounds of abused land, we seek to understand the principles of change, how to direct change, and how to manage land based on forecasts of future uses.

This does not mean we abandon our traditional doctor role. Or that we divorce ourselves from land uses or products. If an investor buys a cattle ranch and wants to shift it to a sport hunting operation, it is clearly a range manager’s role to help him make the change while keeping his future options open. If a Bureau of Land Management district manager wants to rehabilitate an area burned by wildfire, the range manager uses scientific principles to keep future land uses possible. If a rancher wants to keep his sheep ranch viable for his grandchildren’s children, range managers should have information to help him do it.

Sustainability challenges us to be concerned with land health in the future. We now have greater computational power, advanced theories and better science to help us. Unfortunately, predicting biological futures is still a very messy business. We do not have precise tools. But with present knowledge and tools, we should be able to put probabilities on most actions.

Given the state of our profession, what is our future? What road should we take? Do we revert to just responding to catastrophes? Do we narrow our profession and concentrate on one item, like really understanding herbivory? Do we risk getting lost in the complexities of trying to understand sustainable land uses?

Our profession is the best equipped of any group to tackle problems affecting sustainability of rangelands. An article in this issue describes what is taught in our colleges. Think about what you and your colleagues do. Imagine what will be needed in 20 years. Understanding and directing change are what land care professionals do. Dare we apply those principles to ourselves? Grab a pen (or a keyboard) and share your thoughts with all of us.

Happy Holidays. May 2008 be the year land care professionals plan for their own sustainability.

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