

Speaking With People in Our Profession

An interview with Dr Mark Brunson

Mark Brunson is a Professor in the Department of Environment and Society at Utah State University where he has been on the faculty since 1992. Mark completed his PhD in Forestry at Oregon State University in 1991. He has published numerous papers on sociological aspects of natural resource management. Mark is an active member of the Society for Range Management, and has won awards for both his teaching and research activities. He had a few minutes to answer a few questions over a quality cup of coffee during a recent conference held in the southern region of the Chihuahuan Desert.

Looking for Human Behaviors That Will Enhance Our Environment

Question: Do you sense that there is a renewed interest of late in trying to understand the socioeconomic influences on management of natural resources?

Answer: I don't know if it is a renewed interest, or just new, but I definitely see an interest in the topic within range management and more broadly in ecology. I have gone from being "Oh, that guy" to someone who is now being asked to contribute and participate. Well, at least until they hear what I have to say.

I just realized I asked a question with the term "socioeconomic influences" and I don't really know what that means. Could you please explain what it is I just asked you?

Actually, I don't think this term captures what I do. I think that range scientists have maybe underestimated the

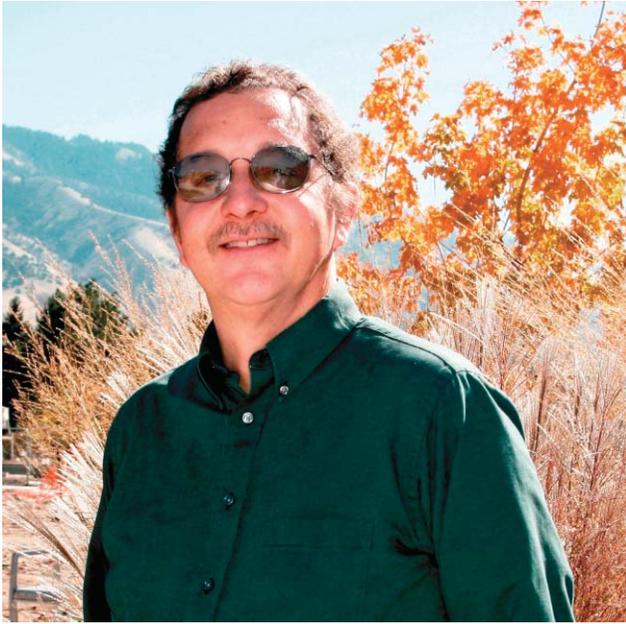
complexity of the social sciences. So, when we talk about socioeconomic influences we are talking about big system stuff, the big drivers like the employment rate, cattle prices, and interest rates. I'm really asking questions at a smaller scale, trying to understand how human behavior interacts with ecological systems. There are people working at the big scale, but I prefer to work at this smaller scale.

In hindsight, don't you think that range science programs have always needed this kind of focus, or did this focus on human-environment interactions exist but it was studied in a somewhat limited fashion?

Yes, it does need this focus. In addition, if you read early issues of our journals you will find articles by range scientists who had acquired experiences and seen how their work fit into a societal context. They tried to explain those social impacts and consequences. Sometimes they got it right, and sometimes they just didn't have the background to get it right.

What literature do you draw from to support your work?

There is now a literature base in the human dimensions of natural resource management. We have a journal and a professional society, and I can draw upon those resources. Most of the people in this field are more truly social scientists than I am. I am strongly influenced by ecology. I try to draw on literature from both fields. You might say I am disciplinarily promiscuous; I will draw on information from any source deemed scientifically appropriate. This keeps me from being "married" to any specific theory, a behavior that I think can limit a scientist's thinking.



Mark Brunson standing in the sunlight on a beautiful fall afternoon in northern Utah.

What are the driving questions that you are trying to answer?

How are human behaviors linked to the conditions of ecosystems, and how can we encourage changes in behaviors that will have effects on those natural systems? For example, my students and colleagues and I have found that citizens' opposition to range management practices is usually more due to skepticism about range management itself than it is due to poor understanding of ecology, so that tells us we need to put more emphasis in our outreach activities on how and why we choose the practices we do, and how we try to prevent negative consequences of those practices.

There seems to be recognition that very specific past decisions and resulting actions shaped today's landscapes.

We have had many unintended consequences over time, and these often can be traced to specific events. I am interested in slower, more adaptive changes. The truth is, we will always have unintended consequences, given our imperfect knowledge. We have to find ways to increase our monitoring to catch these consequences sooner. For example, we are just starting to recognize the effects of technologies and two wage-earning parents on the willingness, or unwillingness, of the children of these parents to explore the out-of-doors. These parents have wanted to protect their children from elements of their environment, but they have created a whole generation of youth who are unconnected to the land.

So, where have all the boy/girl scouts and cowboys/cowgirls gone?

Yes, they do seem scarce, but so are the simple tree-climbers, and the explorers just wandering around their environment, or at least in places without an electrical outlet. We have a generation that has not been inquisitive about their outdoor surroundings.

Will global wireless access continue to lead us away from environmental connections?

The American Recreation Coalition is encouraging the use of new gadgets and technologies in recreational areas as a way to recognize the widespread use of these technologies by the younger generation in order to get these youth into the outdoors. We have to understand when these technologies can be used and useful.

How do you add elements of a human component into monitoring programs?

Actually, there is a huge amount of social monitoring done by the government, such as census and economic data, but maybe it's not collected at ecologically relevant scales, or reported at the scale of individual behaviors. We have lots of data that can be used in monitoring, we just have to access it at the correct scale of interest for our questions.

What do your students end up doing as professionals?

A lot of them work in extension, or other outreach education activities. These are the perfect opportunities for them to use their education.

As an observer of humans, what are the quirks of people in our profession?

What I really enjoy about our profession is the sense of family, which has positive and negative consequences. For example, we are members of a small group of professionals who regularly try to attend the annual "family reunion," our annual meeting. As a forester, and as a social scientist, I have certainly been made to feel welcome within this profession.

Does this mean you are no longer "Oh, that guy"?

I think I've been accepted by the profession, and there are now many other members with similar backgrounds and scientific interests. I'm not sure I'm ready to be an elder statesman for this group, but I do enjoy the company.

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