

The Power of New Thinking

Reversing desertification while benefiting yourself, your community, and the planet. By Allan Savory

Recently my wife and I drove 600 miles from Albuquerque to enjoy Thanksgiving with family. Eleven hours driving through scenic western rangeland allowed time to think about things that I am thankful for in my life, which, with luck, will last another five to 10 years. Always living in the future, I wondered how our actions today would affect the lives of my four grandsons. Like a flickering compass needle, my mind kept returning north to their future. Not just their future, but young people of all cultures, colors, tribes and religious persuasions living in the largest land areas of the world—the rangelands composed of grasslands, savannas and man-made deserts—including most of the vast American West.

Just like a cattleman who has weighed thousands of cows is able to accurately judge any animal's weight as it steps on the scale, so too am I used to judging quickly the "weight" of any rangeland after over 50 years of working around the world. Endlessly, we cruised through millions of acres of dying ("low weight") western rangelands. As usual, I kept a sharp eye out for the hordes of cattle causing such degradation but did not see one. My wife tells me I missed a couple of cows she sighted while I dozed at one point.

The single most important measure of desertification is, of course, the amount of bare soil between plants. Over our entire journey these rangelands consistently hovered around 80 to 95 percent bare soil. Range scientists, and ranchers influenced by them, would judge such rangelands healthy because they have the "right" species and few "nonnative" plants and most tourists would see only open grassland in magnificent scenery.

Throughout history, land in such condition has never led to abundance, prosperity, stability or peace and harmony but inevitably to increasing man-made droughts and floods, poverty, social breakdown, violence and collapse of economy and society. Is this going to happen in the United States? It is already happening. In fact, it is well advanced, although masked by environmental illiteracy and temporary wealth, based on fossil fuels, combined with a low and declin-

ing rural population. One of the clearest indicators of the inevitable cancer of desertification, as such terminal rangeland is called, is the dying of the rich, heartwarming western ranching and cowboy culture so much a part of the nation's psyche. Dying in reality while kept in mind by romantic cowboy poetry, films and rodeo entertainment.

How sadly those vast rangelands devoid of animal life and consequently turning gradually to desert contrast with my alternate home in Zimbabwe, Africa, where I live a simple life on a ranch I once owned. There, because the people practice Holistic Management and because they have increased livestock stocking rate 400 percent with holistic

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planned grazing, they are now struggling to keep up with grass production even in the driest years. With no fear of droughts they also now enjoy permanent water in pools throughout the long dry season where none was known in living memory. Permanent pools with water lilies, fish, otters and geese amidst teeming animal life are entirely due to increased cattle and goats properly managed.

How sadly America's dying rangelands, so devoid of animal life, contrast with a recent visit by a Chilean rancher proudly showing pictures of two flocks of 25,000 sheep each on holistic planned grazing, resulting in both the sheep and the land increasing 50 percent in productivity in the first year.

How sadly mainstream fear of animals contrasts with historical information about the many millions of bison in the past (themselves a remnant of former species diversity and numbers) or with this record of similar dry country in Africa:

"The year 1896 saw the last of the great migrations," a Mr. Gert Van der Merwe writes. "At last the sound of a faint drumming could be heard. The cloud of dust was dense and enormous, and the front rank of the springbok running faster than galloping

horses could be seen. They were in such numbers that I found the sight frightening. I could see a front line of buck at least three miles long but could not estimate the depth. All night long the buck passed. The morning air was clear, the day bright. Then I saw the landscape which had been covered with trees of a fair size were gaunt stubs and bare branches. The buck had brushed off the herbage in their passing and splintered the young trees so they would not grow again."

How sadly rancher fear and persecution of wolves contrasts with our running livestock in a predator-friendly manner with insignificant loss to lions, wild dogs, leopards, cheetah and hyena because we realize these predators are vital to running more livestock and enjoying more wildlife, just as they should be in America. We have achieved harmony through herding and overnight holding of livestock. Ranchers all over Africa, like their American counterparts, said this could

not be done because labour is too expensive. We found that employing a few cowboys (herd boys in our language) costs far less than buying three more ranches to run the animals and proper herding enables far more animals to be run with far better results for land, profit and wildlife. Now ranchers as far afield as northern Kenya are adopting our methods, as will happen one day in America if the western culture is to be saved.

RANGE magazine and its feisty editor C.J. Hadley have done as much as anyone to try to keep the western culture alive but all are losing the battle. Many explanations can be put forward for the failure of a culture or civilization, and are, but in the end it seldom differs from the failure of more than 20 civilizations through history around the world because of environmental degradation.

Some time ago I extended an invitation to CJ to visit Zimbabwe where I had donated my last ranch for the benefit of the people and the nation and on which we would demonstrate Holistic Management and its holistic planned grazing in action. To my delight, CJ actually came, despite the cost and close to two days en route, because of her deep concern for the western culture she is striving so hard to preserve.

On Dimbangombe—meaning the place where the people hid their cattle in the long grass (in this case, hiding them from raiding Matabele warriors in earlier centuries)—we have taken a seriously deteriorating ranch and simply turned it around by using Holis-



Allan Savory near the edge of the Dimbangombe River. Perennial grass has replaced less dependable annual grasses and covered most of the bare ground with the help of the herd. The cattle will come through this spot in the dry season to make sure these plants are grazed and trampled down before the rains start.



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Dimbangombe herders move the land management herd along the river to create the desired riparian habitat for wildlife. This treatment is repeated when necessary, usually after months of recovery for grazed plants. Small stock like goats generally graze to one side of the main herd of cattle.

tic Management and its holistic planned grazing at almost no expense and to the benefit of people, the economy, the environment and wildlife.

Holistic Management means managing the complexity involved in environmental, economic and social situations (such as a ranch), using a new framework for all significant actions and decisions made. If you think about it, everything we *make* is an amazing success—computers, television, planes, bombs, artificial organs, homes, bridges, et cetera—but everything we *manage* is proving increasingly difficult and now globally threatening—economies, agriculture, rangelands,

oceans, human relations, organizations, governments, et cetera.

The holistic framework, on which Holistic Management is based, ensures that social, economic and environmental aspects on any ranch are accorded equal consideration. Everything done is in line with that family's deepest cultural and spiritual values. Every step taken increases profitability—if prosperity is important to the family. And every step leads toward a more healthy and increasingly productive landscape with more forms of life that are more resilient to weather variations. If livestock is involved, either because essential to people's livelihoods and culture, or if

communities including large herds of herbivores and their pack-hunting predators with livestock, was somehow leading to accelerated desertification. Investigating livestock, I came to realize that all the countless ways people had run livestock over thousands of years had contributed to desertification—herding in many ways and increasingly a plethora of rotational and other grazing systems of which the mob grazing fad is the latest—because none had ever dealt with the daily complexity that in practice cannot be avoided.

No matter how knowledgeable ancient pastoral cultures were or modern range scientists are, none had ever recognized the daily complexity of weather, soils and soil slopes, plant communities, poisonous plants, wildlife breeding, cover and feed requirements, livestock differing needs and the necessity of planning continually for droughts in time, not area of land. And none had simultaneously dealt with the social and economic complexity.

Accordingly, I developed the holistic planned grazing process by simply adapting a British army plan applied by the Rhodesian army to this biological situation. If the British army had spent 300 years perfecting simple planning to deal with very complicated situations, in great stress and likely to change hour to hour, why reinvent the wheel? Not surprisingly, because of its origin, holistic planned grazing always results in the best possible plan at that time on any ranch and does this



Savory Institute founders, staff and friends. From left: Zachary Jones (Grasslands Northern Plains manager), Jim Howell (Grasslands CEO), Daniela Howell (chief operating officer), Allan Savory (president), Jody Butterfield (Southern Africa Programs manager), Tony Malmburg (co-founder), Sue Probart and Shannon Horst (Consulting & Training director).

entirely from the heads of the people who know the ranch and animals best—the ranchers—supplemented by continually ongoing wildlife and other basic research. What sounds formidable is, once learned, routinely done in under two hours spent twice a year on an average ranch.

Just as riding a bicycle is a little clumsy for the first few days, so too is Holistic Management and its planned grazing. Once mastered however, all decisions and particularly those extremely difficult ones to make in our lives become so much easier and faster to make and ranchers find it relaxing to enjoy the confidence that simple planning produces. I have had an uneducated African learn and practice holistic planned grazing extremely well in less than two hours. Years of helping people have taught me that ignorance does not block learning, but egos and knowledge do.

The American West and its cattlemen with their rich culture as well as government



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frankly came to a fork in the road in the early 1980s when Holistic Management began to be practiced in the United States. Some 10,000 ranchers attended training. Ranchers began practicing and the USDA formed an interagency committee to work with me providing training in Holistic Management and particularly the use of the holistic framework in policy analysis. The aim was to form a federal government training centre once enough officials understood the process.

The Interagency Committee put 2,000 government officials (from the Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Indian Affairs) through this training. Groups brought countless policies to the sessions and none were ever found to have any chance of success when analyzed holistically by those officials. As one group of government professional land managers concluded: “We could now recognize that unsound resource management was universal in the United States.”



Allan Savory, right, discusses grazing points with Australian ranchers visiting Dimbangombe.

Demand for training increased and all was set to form a government training centre for the continued expansion of Holistic Management into U.S. life. We were in serious discussion about training 17,000 Forest Service personnel. Throughout this training, resistance mounted from major environmental organizations and academics, most of whom were not going through the training. Then the administration changed.

Through the political power of major universities, far greater than a few far-sighted USDA officials who believed Holistic Management vital to the future of the United States, all USDA personnel were banned from receiving training—which was effectively stopped.

It is never too late. That alternative road so nearly taken in the early '80s is still there unused except for some leading ranchers practicing Holistic Management on millions of acres in Canada, Mexico, the United States, Chile, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. And Africa's pastoralists, already herding cattle with AK rifles amidst violence over diminishing water and grass, are seeing Holistic Management as the first thing to offer hope of saving their ancient cultures and land. Tragically, because rangeland myths dominate over science and thus policies of all governments, most ancient pastoral cultures, from Israel's Negev to China and Africa in particular, are

being subjected to culturally genocidal development policies reducing animals, feeding remnant animals in pens and settling the pastoralists in slums. I mention others whose culture is livestock dependent so that Americans can understand that the myths so deeply held are not only destroying the western ranching culture but all livestock cultures in the seasonal rainfall environments of the world.

We are at a crossroad. We can carry on business as usual in an increasingly downward spiral, or begin rebuilding western rangelands, wildlife, communities and economies steadily, with little cost except



ABOVE: The cattle kraal fence line is obvious on this field, showing (on the right) the much greater production possible after cattle. The unimpacted portion of the field on the left produced only average yields. LEFT: The large corn cobs on the left were from impacted field and those on the right were harvested outside the impacted area.

education and training. Which road will American mainstream ranching and government take from this point on? Unfortunately, the road chosen will depend on many factors—leadership or lack of leadership in the