Saving the World

Good management and the peculiar and beautiful blessings of bovines.
By C.J. Hadley

The future wildlife biologist had a dream of becoming a Rhodesian game warden. Even though he knew the minimum age was 25 (due to dealing with dangerous animals), he got an exception and started at age 20. "I only had a B.S. degree, majoring in botany and zoology," Allan Savory says, "but I was fanatical." He was interested in everything, but thought college a waste of time. One professor told his class, "You are useless little buggers when you come in and useless little buggers when you leave, but we will teach you how to learn."

Savory always knew how to learn and constantly explored his beloved Rhodesian bush in southern Africa. When trackers became afraid to follow man-eating lions and told him they'd lost the spoor, he learned how to track. Passionate, insatiable, relentless and sometimes annoying, he often travels barefoot. As a former soldier and statesman, he fears nothing—except, perhaps, bureaucracy and nonprofit boards of directors.

In more than 50 years of working with land and animals, he's watched constant deterioration: ever expanding bare ground, dried water sources, overgrazed plants. He wrote reports on his research, and after intense discussion and public exposure, sometimes found out he was wrong. But that never fazed him. He just read more, researched more, and tested his analyses over and over again.

His introduction to the game department in Kafue Park was driving through with park ranger Len Vaughn in a Dodge Power Wagon and flicking out matches, setting it on fire. "The result of that was bare ground." (The U.S. Forest Service seems to have the same view. A deputy chief told *RANGE* they weren't concentrating on management of overgrown forests but wanted "to let it burn.")

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Soon after starting work, Savory began to realize that what he'd been taught and what he was seeing were very different. The game wardens' lives revolved around stopping poaching. "I realized that the poachers were not as dangerous as we biologists who were destroying wildlife habitat." He began his own education and studied fields that he'd never trained in. "I was desperately seeking answers—reading books and articles on economics and statistics and range management." He was forced out of his job in the game department when his analysis went against the prevailing view and he would not back down.

"I did the research and wrote a report on what I now know was wrong, where I proved there were too many elephants and too many buffalo. I'd worked out that in the national parks we would have to cull game and that was an extremely unpopular idea. Nobody in the world had suggested culling animals in a national park and I was saying we are going to have to kill them to prevent total destruction of the game and the vegetation."

LEFT: Cattle are moved in a tight bunch, foraging only where ranch manager Shane Bartlett tells his herders to take them. They run on a strict management plan. There are eight herders, two shifts during the day of three or four. Half stay at the temporary kraals at night to protect the livestock from lions. The kraals are moved often.

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ABOVE: Woman and sons at the employees compound at Dimbangombe Ranch. It consists of mostly mud huts and a couple of taps offering community water. Water heating and cooking is done on open fires under a thatch roof. The Centre is building new ablution huts for showers. Its goal is to have a tap beside every home. "Most African men have two or three wives; one guy had 11 wives and 57 children," a farmer says. "Having children is a badge of honor. They live off very little, grow some crops. Half the country is HIV-positive." BELOW: Impala at a water hole, with a kudu in the middle. They need to get to water daily. OPPOSITE: RANGE publisher C.J. Hadley offers a snack to Dojiwe ("lost orphan"), a tame baby elephant at Dimbangombe Ranch. Her mother was killed and two herders take turns walking with her from sunup to sundown. They kraal her at night to protect her from predators.

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Savory believed the long-term survival of wildlife depended on their habitat and the habitat was deteriorating badly. His research was submitted to an expert panel that agreed. The killing went ahead with thousands of animals culled but the land got worse, not better. "They had concluded that I was right. But it turned out we were all wrong."

Good cowboys have what's called "try." Savory also has that, so when he gets intellectually bucked off, he gets back on. "If you believe in something deeply, and it was my country and I can say it in my old age now —any younger I would have been ashamed to say it—but I've sat on the banks of the Umzingwane River surrounded by bare ground, trying to work out what to do, and the river came down in flood with trees tumbling in the water and I just sat there and cried. That was my country being destroyed, so my feelings ran very, very deep. I fully sympathized with the World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy and George Wuerthner and all these people who condemn livestock because I did too. I was on public record saying I was prepared to shoot damn ranchers because of what they were doing to the land. Then I found again that I was wrong, that we had to have their livestock."

By the time he was 26, he had helped damage even more land with his conventional thinking. "We had very, very healthy land with wonderful reed beds and beautiful riparian areas and we made national parks out of those areas. There were people beating drums and firing muzzle-loading guns to keep animals away from their crop beds along the river. This was old Africa with lions roaring at night. More than once in my life I've seen 40 lions in a day just walking on foot. I watched all that deteriorating and still couldn't work out why. I concluded there were too many elephants and buffalo. As soon as we made these healthy places into national parks, immediately the damage began. The reed beds began to disappear. A lot of the vegetation along the river began to disappear. I never blamed weather or drought but attributed it to too many elephants, just like range scientists blame too many cattle. After rain, grasses green up but that's not recovery, that's just fluctuation in vegetation and the soil is still deteriorating and it's still bare ground between the plants."

As a researcher, Savory was constantly probing, spending thousands of hours sitting on his own in the bush, staring into his campfire trying to do mental experiments. "Okay, today I saw this. Why?" He finally figured out soil was the key issue and discovered that the healthiest soil was where there were the biggest populations of natural wildlife with intact pack-hunting predators.

His passion for his work and commitment to improving the world for people and animals is obvious, but endless attacks on him have bruised. "The greatest crime a young scientist can commit is to actually discover something new. What I found, particularly in America and South Africa, was that your peers tear you apart, not your work. I've been called a character, a guru, a charlatan and worse, and asked what my motives are. I have begged academics to pull my work apart, to show me where I am wrong. Instead they get personal and even criticize the English cap I wear."

One time he was so frustrated he said to an academic group haranguing him: "OK, I am a total shit and I am incorrigible and you'll never be able to change me. I've trodden all over your toes, I've hurt your egos, and I'm beyond repair, so let's leave me alone,

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Villagers wash up after working in the bush. ➤African children entertain themselves with very little. ➤A herder guides the goats and cattle to the feed he wants them to eat and the land he wants them to disturb. With the right plan, extraordinary improvement is made. Dimbangombe Ranch needs more cattle. It is running 480 head and needs to get to 800 to be self financing on the ranch side—a thousand would be better for the soil. If you'd like to help, contact asavory@savoryinstitute.com or info@achmonline.org.

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no more attacks on me. Here is the holistic framework that we are learning, there it is, up on the wall. Now I want you to tell me where that is wrong. Attack that." A highly educated group was present but there was total silence. [See p. 44.]

"When something new is discovered, everybody attacks it, everybody is against it. Then you get a period where it becomes controversial, with some praising it, some condemning it. Then you get a period where everybody says, 'Oh, we always knew that. We did that all along.' For the past five years, I've heard people say there is nothing new about this. I just thank God I lived at the time I did because at least they didn't burn me at the stake."

Savory is anxious to move beyond the destructive attacks which he realizes are not personal but simply a matter of how humans have always responded to paradigm-shifting ideas. His receipt of Australia's international Banksia Award in 2003, given to the person "doing the most for the environment on a global scale," did much to begin changing academic attitudes.

Many environmentalists still believe—as did young Savory and much proof to the contrary—that livestock are causing desertification and land degradation. "That belief is ancient," Savory says. "Hebrew texts blamed the nomads for causing the desert. They were moving their cattle in mobs, people have been herding now for over 6,000 years and the secret to what we are doing isn't the herding, it isn't mob grazing or short-duration grazing. The secret to it is the simple planning process that can deal with complexity and make socially, environmentally, and economically right decisions for the people, the pastoralists, the ranchers. It's no good herding your cattle if you go broke. It's no good herding your cattle if you are destroying the land as pastoralists have been doing for thousands of years. Those ancient herders created the great deserts of the world."

When Savory went to Pakistan for a job, he was shown a spring the nomads have been coming to for 5,000 years. "The spring had never gone dry, but officials blamed the devastation around it on too many animals. Pastoralists had arrived at this water point with sheep, goats and camels and so on, unpacking their tents, kids running around, animals milling around. It had a high level of animal impact and no rest. Almost every plant had been overgrazed. For about 100 yards away from the spring the ground was really trampled. You couldn't hide a rabbit at 200 yards. But we couldn't put our feet on the ground without touching a living plant. It was down to one species that could resist overgrazing and that was it but with tight ground cover."

As they traveled away from the water, he asked how the pastoralists behaved. "They are extremely knowledgeable," the guide said. "They herd their stock in a tight bunch and have been protecting them from wolves for thousands of years." Savory coined a new phrase and calls that "partial rest" because the stock are there but the predators that once kept them bunched are not and thus there's not enough disturbance to benefit or improve the soil. They agreed to stop every mile and sample, and as they got farther from the spring, the taller the grass became. "There were more species in it, but the spaces between the plants got wider and wider. We took the last picture 16 miles from the spring and you could have built one of my mud huts on that bare ground and not touched a plant. The ground was hard, black and capped with algae. It would shed moisture, evaporate moisture—in other words, severe desertification. There were not enough animals so they had been minimizing overgrazing but they had not been maximizing disturbance."

In 1979, Rhodesia became an independent Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe. Over the next 20 years, it became known as the breadbasket of Africa. Then, a decade ago, agriculture production plummeted when productive white African farmers who employed thousands of families were forced to leave their properties, many of which had been in the family since the 1800s. Over 60 percent of the farms had been

bought after independence with the government's assurance that the land was not needed to settle people. More than 4,000 ranches and farms were taken, mostly for politicians, heads of army, police, civil servants and presidential cronies.

Prior to political unrest, Savory gave his ranch, Dimbangombe, to the Africa Centre for Holistic Management in 1992. Earlier he had deeded a larger ranch to the people of Zimbabwe as a national park because he did not value ownership as deeply as working with people and wildlife for the nation's good.

According to Savory's wife, Jody Butterfield, they lived hand to mouth at the Centre for many years, in tents. Hunting brought a little revenue to the ranch and a donor built an open-air rondavel as a meeting room and dining room. Other donors helped finance bungalows for guests. "The first students at the Centre slept under tarps," Jody says. "It was an adventure. There was no kitchen. Women from the community came and cooked and it was very rudimentary, but we got some people trained and made some progress."

The Dimbangombe Ranch is run by manager Shane Bartlet under five local chiefs and Savory as trustees. When bare ground is developing at the ranch because they don't have enough stock, herders mill their cattle around to disturb it. "We bring them on to it when it's raining to pockmark and disturb the ground," says Savory, "to add dung and urine, because the big agent of desertification is overgrazing of plants. You cannot overgraze ranges, you cannot overgraze land, you can only overgraze or graze plants."

The ranch has 480 head of cattle and a herd of goats—not enough to heal the overrested ground. But since ranch management was changed, water has come back in places it hasn't been seen for generations, and the river the ranch is named for has water yearround.

It's a common (but incorrect) belief that resting land in brittle environments and removing cattle is the answer to desertification. But when the land is resting too much there is no improvement. When there are too few animals, behaving calmly and walking gently, the soil and most plants are resting. "You are not laying litter and breaking the surface and disturbing the ground enough," Savory says. "Then the other thing is fire. So partial rest, fire, and overgrazing plants are practiced by almost every pastoralist in the world, every rancher in the world, so that's why the land keeps deteriorating and pastoralists are now fighting each other, killing each other over diminishing water. They can't sustain their families anymore, their culture is breaking down, and ranchers are going broke, selling their ranches to developers, et cetera. There's no need for any of that. And that's been going on for 10,000 years."

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ABOVE: The living room, dining room, meeting room, pipe-smoking room, reading room and kitchen at the Savory compound at Dimbangombe Ranch. Thulani Ndlovu takes care of the place and makes lots of tea while monkeys and baboons like sharing their stuff. BELOW: The Savory huts at the edge of the Dimbangombe River, which used to be dry. The office is on the right, where Allan and Jody communicate sporadically via a tall aerial from a satellite at headquarters to use their wireless computers. "We are on broadband, slow and erratic, but at least it works," Allan says. "We also have three deep-cycle 12-volt batteries that are charged by six solar panels. From those we can convert current to U.S. 110 volt to use any small U.S. devices and a 12-volt light in the study. All other lighting is from battery-operated lamps."

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Many ranchers came to Savory's Holistic Management seminars because they were going broke, with nothing else to try. They wanted to find out how to double their stocking rates. "That's what they did and there were wrecks all over the place. They thought the secret was in the wagon-wheel fencing layout and I kept saying, no, that's just a tool. There's nothing wrong with a radial fencing layout but the secret was in the planning."

Deb Steiner at Ohio State University did a study and looked at early adopters of Holistic Management across the United States. Nearly all were ranchers. They averaged 300 percent more profit. In the same time span, 600,000 American farm and ranch families went broke, in the same markets. Unfortunately, there is resistance to the decision making and planning process. "Ranchers say it's too complex, too difficult," Savory says, "but they can watch their families go broke and lose the

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ranch rather than doing an hour or two of paperwork a couple of times a year. They prefer riding horses and fixing fence before they will change and save themselves. They are human and that's what they do."

Allan Savory's drive isn't toward money. He wants to make a better world. And he's got the scars to prove it. In Africa there is deteriorating land and water and rising population—as there is in the United States and most other parts of the world. "History shows that a hungry man knows no boundary and that leads to violence, family breakdown and everything else. African men pride themselves on their number of children. The do-good world steps in with a knee-jerk reaction and provides more water by putting in bore holes. But the desertification accelerates, the land degradation accelerates, so the situation gets worse. Overgrazing of plants, more places to destroy. You can see this from space shots—where they have put in bore holes, the desert spreads. Other knee-jerk reactions are to come in as a humanitarian and feed the starving mothers and provide health care for the dying children or measures to improve the local economy. What happens is family size increases so the situation gets worse. We have been dealing with this situation for 40 years and there are now five times as many people killing each other.

"The answer lies in education of women and training people to reverse desertification because healing the land and feeding more people is imperative for our futures." Savory has often said that America's biggest export is eroding soil, outweighing all other exports every year in value. "You will never stop that until you start managing the ranges holistically. And ranchers could be doing that and every rancher would be better off, every rancher would be making more profit and would be saving their culture. The land is partially resting and it doesn't need protection. It just needs more people balancing family size with resources—and more livestock." ■

C.J. Hadley, publisher/editor of RANGE, loved Africa and the ranch, and appreciates the hospitality extended by Allan and Jody, and the many warm and gentle Africans. "Dangers are always lurking in the bush," she says, "but I was never afraid—even on a moonless black night while eating supper lit by flames of a tiny fire that heated our dinner—until I heard drums throbbing through the jungle and Allan exclaimed, 'Lions!' And I could see nothing."