

The New Ranch

“Ranching is one of the few western occupations that have been renewable and have produced a continuing way of life.” – Wallace Stegner

It was a bad year to be a blade of grass.

In 2002, the winter snows were late and meager, part of an emerging period of drought, experts said. Then May and June exploded into flame. Catastrophic crown fires scorched over a million acres of evergreens in the Four Corner states – New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah – making it a bad year to be a tree too.

The monsoon rains then failed to arrive in July and by mid-August hope for a ‘green-up’ had vanished. The land looked tired, shriveled, and beat-up. It was hard to tell which plants were alive, dormant or stunned, and which were dead. One range professional speculated that perhaps as much as sixty percent of the native bunch grasses in New Mexico would die. It was bad news for the ranchers he knew and cared about, insult added to injury in an industry already beset by one seemingly intractable challenge after another.

For some, it was the final blow. Ranching in the American West, much like the grass on which it depended that year, has been struggling for survival. Persistently poor economics, tenacious opponents, shifting values in public-land use, changing demographics, decreased political influence, and the temptation of rapidly rising private land values have all combined to push ranching right to the edge. And not just ranching; according to one analysis the number of natural resource jobs, including agriculture, as a *share* of total employment in the Rocky Mountain West has declined by two-thirds since the mid-1970s. Today, less than one in thirty jobs in the region is in logging, mining, or agriculture. This fits a national trend. In 1993, the U.S. Census dropped its long-standing survey of farm residents. The farm population across the

nation had dwindled from 40% of households in 1900 to a statistically insignificant 2% by 1990. The Bureau decided that a survey was no longer relevant.

If the experts are correct – that the current multi-year drought could rival the decade-long ‘megadrought’ of the 1950s for ecological, and thus economic, devastation – the tenuous grip of ranchers on the future will be loosened further, perhaps permanently. The ubiquitous ‘last cowboys,’ mythologized in a seemingly endless stream of table-top photography books, could ride into their final sunset once and for all.

Or would they?

After all, for millions of years grass has always managed to return and flourish. James Ingalls, United States Senator from Kansas (1873-1891) once wrote:

“Grass is the forgiveness of nature – her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and carnage is forgotten. Streets abandoned by traffic become grass grown like rural lanes, and are obliterated; forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal.”

Few understand these words better than ranchers, who, because their cattle require grass, depend on the forgiveness of nature for a livelihood while simultaneously nurturing its beneficence. And like grass, ranching’s adaptive response to adversity over the years has been patience – to outlast its troubles. The key to survival for both has been endurance – the ability to hold things together until the next rain storm. Evolution favors grit.

Or at least it used to.

Today, grit may still rule for grass, but for ranchers it has become more hindrance than help. “Ranching selects for stubbornness,” a friend of mine likes to say. While admiring ranching and ranchers, he does not intend his quip to be taken as a tribute. What he means is this:

stubbornness is not adaptive when it means rejecting new ideas or not adjusting to evolving values in a rapidly changing world.

This is where ranching and grass part ways ultimately – unlike grass, ranching may not be immortal.

Fortunately, a growing number of ranchers understand this and are embracing a cluster of new ideas and methods, often with the happy result of increased profits, restored land health, and repaired relationships with others. I call their work The New Ranch – a term I coined years back in a presumptuous attempt to describe a progressive ranching movement emerging in the region. A New Ranch for a New West, that sort of thing.

But what did it mean exactly? What were the ‘new’ things ranchers were doing to stay in business while neighboring enterprises went under? How did they differ from ‘new’ ranch to ‘new’ ranch? What were the commonalities? What was the key? Technology, ideas, economics, increased attention to ecology, or all of the above?

During that summer of fire and heat I decided to take a 1400-mile drive from Santa Fe to Lander, Wyoming and back, to see the New Ranch up close. I visited four families and was so inspired by what I saw and learned that I kept driving, in a sense, upon my return home. I needed to keep looking, listening and learning. Since that summer, I have visited more ranchers, as well as environmentalists, scientists and others, and asked more questions, all in a continuous quest for pieces to a jigsaw puzzle that eventually grew bigger than the New Ranch – a puzzle, I quickly discovered, without a cover. Lacking guidance, I worked by shape and color, slowly sensing patterns, eventually making linkages.

Initially, I wanted to know if ranching would survive this latest turn of the evolutionary wheel. Was it still renewable, as Stegner once observed, or is the New West destined to redefine

a ranch as a mobile home park and a subdivision? But I also wanted to discover the outline of the future, and, with a little luck, find my real objective – hope – which, like grass, is sometimes required to lie quietly, waiting for rain.

The James Ranch
north of Durango, Colorado

One of the first things you notice about the James Ranch is how busy the water is. Everywhere you turn, there is water flowing, filling, spilling, irrigating, laughing. Whether it is the big, fast-flowing community ditch, the noisy network of smaller irrigation ditches, the deliberate spill of water on pasture, the refreshing fish ponds, or the low roar of the muscular Animas River, take a walk in any direction on the ranch during the summer and you are destined to intercept water at work. It is purposeful water too, growing trees, cooling chickens, quenching cattle, raising vegetables, and, above all, sustaining grass.

All this energy on one ranch is no coincidence – busy water is a good metaphor for the James family. The purposefulness starts at the top. Tall, handsome and quick to smile, David James grew up in southern California, where his father lived the American dream as a successful engineer and inventor, dabbling a bit in ranching and agriculture on the side. David attended the University of Redlands in the late 1950s where he majored in business, but cattle got into his blood, and he spent every summer on a ranch. David met Kay, a city girl, at Redlands and after getting hitched they decided to pursue their dream: raise a large family in a rural setting.

In 1961, they bought a small ranch on the Animas River, twelve miles north of the sleepy town of Durango, located in a picturesque valley in mountainous southwestern Colorado, and got busy raising five children and hundreds of cows. Durango was in transition at the time from a

mining and agricultural center to what it is today: a mecca for tourists, environmentalists, outdoor enthusiasts, students, retirees, and real estate brokers. Land along the river was productive for cattle and still relatively cheap in 1961, though a new crop – subdivisions – would be planted soon enough.

Not long after arriving, David secured a permit from the United States Forest Service to graze cattle on the nearby national forest. The permit allowed him to run a certain number of cattle on a forest allotment. Once on the forest, he managed his animals in the manner to which he had been taught: uncontrolled, continuous grazing.

“In the beginning, I ranched like everyone else,” said David, referring to his management style, “which means I lost money.”

David followed what is sometimes called the ‘Columbus school’ of ranching: turn the cows out in May, and go discover them in October. It’s a strategy that often leads to overgrazing, especially along creeks and rivers, where cattle like to linger. Plants, once bitten, need time to recover and grow before being bitten again. If they are bitten too frequently, especially in dry times, they can use up their root reserves and die – which is bad news for the cattle (not to mention the plant). Since ranchers often work on a razor-thin profit margin, it doesn’t take too many months of drought and overgrazing before the bottom line begins to wither too.

Grass may be patient, but bankers are not.

Through the 1970s, David’s ranchlands, and his business, were on a downward spiral. When the Forest Service cut back his cattle numbers, as they invariably did in years of drought, the only option available to David was to run them on the home ranch, which meant running the risk of overgrazing his 400 acres of private land. Meanwhile, the costs of operating the ranch kept rising. It was a no-win bind typical of many ranches in the West.

“I thought the answer was to work harder,” he recalled, “but that was exactly the wrong thing to do.”

Slowly, David came to realize that he was depleting the land, and himself, to the point of no return. By 1978 things became so desperate the family was forced to develop a sizeable portion of their property, visible from the highway today, as a residential subdivision called, ironically, “The Ranch.” It was a painful moment in their lives.

“I never wanted to do that again,” said David, “so I began to look for another way.”

In 1990, David enrolled in a seminar taught by Kirk Gadzia, a certified instructor in what was then called Holistic Resource Management – a method of cattle management that emphasizes tight control over the timing, intensity, and frequency of cattle impact on the land, mimicking the behavior of wild herbivores, such as bison, so that both the land and the animals remain healthy. ‘Timing’ means not only the time of year but how much time, measured in days rather than the standard unit of months, the cattle will spend in a particular paddock. ‘Intensity’ means how many animals are in the herd for that period of time. ‘Frequency’ means how long the land is rested before a herd returns.

All three elements are carefully mapped out on a chart, which is why this strategy of ranching is often called ‘planned grazing.’ The movement of the cattle herd from one paddock or pasture to another is carefully designed, often with the needs of wildlife in mind. Paddocks can range from a few acres in size to hundreds of acres, depending on many variables and are often created with permanent, two-strand, solar-powered electric fencing, which is lightweight, cost-effective, and easy on wildlife. It works too. Once zapped, cattle usually don’t go near an electric fence again (ditto with elephants in Africa, as I understand it!). Alternative methods of control include herding by a human (an ancient activity) and single-strand electric polywire (very new),

which is temporary and highly mobile. In all cases, the goal is the same: to control the timing, intensity and frequency of the animal impact on the land.

Planned grazing has other names – timed grazing, management-intensive grazing, rapid rotational grazing, short duration grazing, pulse grazing, cell grazing, or the ‘Savory system’ – after the Rhodesian biologist who came up with the basic idea.

Observing the migratory behavior of wild grazers in Africa, Allan Savory noticed that nature, often in the form of predators, kept herbivores on the move, which gives plants time to recover from the pressure of grazing. He also noticed that because herbivores tended to travel in large herds, their hooves had a significant ground-disturbing impact (think of what a patch of prairie would have looked like after a million-head herd of bison moved through) which he observed to be good for seed germination, among other things. In other words, plants can tolerate heavy grazing, perhaps even require it in certain circumstances. The key, of course, was that the animals moved on – and didn’t return for the rest of the year.

Savory also observed that too much rest was as bad for the land as too much grazing – meaning that plants can ‘choke’ themselves with abundance in the absence of herbivory and fire, prohibiting juvenile plants from getting established (not mowing your lawn all summer is a crude, but apt, analogy). In dry climates one of the chief ways old and dead grass gets recycled is through the stomachs of grazers, such as deer, antelope, bison, sheep, grasshoppers or cattle. Animals, of course, return nutrients to the soil in the form of waste products. Fire is another way to recycle grass, though this can be risky business in a drought. If you’ve burned up all the grass, exposing the soil, and the rains don’t arrive on time – you and the land could be in trouble.

The bottom line of Savory’s thinking is this: animals should be managed in a manner consistent with nature’s model of herbivory.

David and Kay James did precisely that – they adopted a planned grazing system for both their private and public land operations. And they have thrived ecologically and economically as a result. They saved the ranch too – and today the 400-acre James Ranch is noteworthy not only for its lush grass, and busy water, but for its bucolic landscape in a valley that is dominated by development.

David and Kay insist, however, that adopting a new grazing system was only part of the equation, even if it had positive benefits for their bank account. The hardest part was setting an appropriate goal for their business. This was something new to the Jameses. As David noted wryly: “We really didn’t have a goal in the early days, other than not going broke.”

To remedy this, the entire James clan sat down in the early 1990s and composed a goal statement. It reads:

“The integrity and distinction of the James Ranch is to be preserved for future generations by developing financially viable agricultural and related enterprises that sustain a profitable livelihood for the families directly involved while improving the land and encouraging the use of all resources, natural and human, to their highest and best potential.”

It worked. Today David profitably runs cattle on 220,000 acres of public land across two states. He is the largest permittee on the San Juan National Forest, north and west of town. Using the diversity of the country to his advantage, David grazes his cattle in the low (dry) country only during the dormant (winter) season; then he moves them to the forests before finishing the cycle on the irrigated pastures of the home ranch.

That’s enough to keep anybody incredibly busy, of course, but David complicates the job by managing the whole operation according to planned grazing principles. Maps and charts cover a wall in their house. But David doesn’t see it as more work. “What’s harder,” he asked rhetorically, “spending all day on horseback looking for cattle scattered all over the county, like

we used to, or knowing exactly where the herd is every day and moving them simply by opening a gate?”

It’s all about attitude, David observed. “It isn’t just about cattle,” he said, “it’s about the land. I feel like I’ve finally become the good steward that I kept telling everybody I was.”

Recently, the family refined their vision for the land and community 100 years into the future. It looks like this:

- “Lands that are covered with biologically diverse vegetation”
- “Lands that boast functioning water, mineral and solar cycles”
- “Abundant and diverse wildlife”
- “A community benefiting from locally grown, healthy food”
- “A community aware of the importance of agriculture to the environment”
- “Open space for family and community”

And they have summarized the lessons they have learned over the past dozen years:

- “Imitating nature is healthy”
- “People like to know the source of their food”
- “Ranching with nature is socially responsible”
- “Ranching with nature gives the rancher sustainability”

But it wasn’t all vision. It was practical economics too. For example, years ago David and Kay told their kids that in order to return home each had to bring a business with them. Today, son Danny owns and manages a successful artisanal dairy operation producing fancy cheeses on the home ranch that he began from scratch; son Justin owns a profitable BBQ restaurant in Durango; daughter Julie and her husband John own a successful tree farm on the home place; and daughter Jennifer and her husband grow and sell organic vegetables next door and plan to open a guest lodge across the highway. Only one child, Cynthia, has flown the coop.

In an era when more and more farm and ranch kids are leaving home, not to return, what the James clan has accomplished is significant. Not only are the kids staying close, they are diversifying the ranch into sustainable businesses. Their attention is focused on the New West, represented by Durango's booming affluence and dependence on tourism. Whether it is artisan cheese, organic produce, decorative trees for landscaping, or a lodge for paying guests, the next generation of Jameses has their eyes firmly on new opportunities.

This raised a question. The Jameses enjoy what David calls many "unfair advantages" on the ranch – abundant grass, plentiful water, a busy highway right outside their front door, and close proximity to Durango – all of which contribute to their success. By contrast, many ranch families do not enjoy such advantages, which made me wonder: beyond its fortunate circumstances, what can the James gang teach us?

I posed the question to David and Kay one evening.

"The key is community," said Kay. "Sure, we've been blessed by a strong family and a special place, but our focus has always been on the larger community. We're constantly asking ourselves 'what can we do to help?'"

Answering their own question, David and Kay James decided ten years ago to get into the business of producing and selling grassfed beef from their ranch – to make money, of course, but also as a way of contributing to the quality their community's life.

Grassfed, or "grass-finished" as they call it, is meat from animals that have eaten nothing but grass from birth to death. This is a radical idea because nearly all cattle in America end their days being fattened on corn (and assorted agricultural byproducts) in a feedlot before being slaughtered. Corn enables cattle to put on weight more quickly, thus increasing profits, while also adding more "marbling" to the meat – creating a taste that Americans have come to

associate with quality beef. The trouble is cows are not designed by nature to eat corn, so they require a cornucopia of drugs to maintain their health.

There's another reason for going into the grassfed business: it is more consistently profitable than regular beef. That's because ranchers can direct market their beef to local customers, thus commanding premium prices in health-conscious towns such as Durango. It also provides a direct link between the consumer and the producer – a link that puts a human face on eating and agriculture.

For David and Kay this link is crucial – it builds the bonds of community that hold everything together. “When local people are supporting local agriculture,” said David, “you know you're doing something right.”

Every landscape is unique, and every ranch is different, so drawing lessons is a tricky business, but one overarching lesson of the James Ranch seems clear: traditions can be strengthened by a willingness to try new ideas. Later, while thumbing through a stack of information David and Kay had given me, I found a quote that seemed to sum up not only their philosophy, but also that of the New Ranch movement in general, and the optimism it embodies. It came from a wall in an old church in Essex, England:

A vision without a task

Is but a dream.

A task without a vision

Is drudgery.

A vision and a task

Is the hope of the world.

The Allen Ranch
south of Hotchkiss, Colorado

Stand on the back porch of Steve and Rachel Allen's home on the western edge of Fruitland Mesa, located 150 miles north of the James Ranch, in the center of Colorado's western slope, and you will be rewarded with a view of Stegnerian proportions: Grand Mesa and the Hotchkiss valley on the left, the rugged summits of the Ragged Mountains in the center, and on the right the purple lofts of the West Elks, a federally-designated wilderness where Steve conducts his day job. Like the James Ranch, the Allens are permittees on the national forest, but what made them unique was *how* they grazed on public land – they herded.

I met Steve three years earlier at a livestock herding workshop I organized at Ghost Ranch, in northern New Mexico. I knew that his grazing association, called the West Elk Pool, had recently won a nation-wide award from the Forest Service for its innovative management of cattle in the West Elk Mountains. The local Forest Service range conservationist, Dave Bradford, had won a similar award for his role in the West Elk experiment. Intrigued, I invited them both down to speak about their success.

Steve began their presentation that day with a story. Driving to the workshop, he said, he and Dave found themselves stuck behind a slow-moving truck on a narrow, winding road. At first they waited calmly for a safe opportunity to pass, but none appeared. Then they grew impatient. Finally, they took a chance. Crossing double yellow lines, they hit the accelerator and prayed. They made it – luckily there had been nothing but open road ahead of them, he said. It was meant as a metaphor – describing Steve's experience as a rancher and Dave's experience with the Forest Service. The slow-moving obstacle, of course, was tradition.

In the mid-1990s, Steve and Dave convinced their respective peers to give herding a chance in the West Elks. They proposed that six ranchers on neighboring allotments, each of whom ran separate operations in the mountains, combine their individual cattle herds into one

big herd and move them through the wilderness in a slow, one-way arc. By allowing cattle to behave like the roaming animals that they are (or used to be), Dave and Steve argued, the plants would be given enough time to grow before being bitten again, which in the case of the cattle of the West Elk Pool wouldn't be until the following summer.

There were other advantages, as they discovered. From the Forest Service's perspective, having one herd on the move in the West Elks rather than six relatively stationary herds was attractive for ecological and other reasons, including reduced conflicts with wildlife. For the ranchers, one big herd cut down on the costs of maintaining fences and watering troughs. It was also less labor-intensive, though it didn't seem that way initially. On the first go-around, Steve recounted, they had twenty people working the herd, which proved to be about twelve too many. Today, they move the herd with two to six people, and a bevy of hard-working border collies.

So why was all this so unusual? It is customary practice for ranchers to spread their cattle out over a landscape, especially in times of drought, not bunch them up. It's the 'Columbus' school again – less management is the norm, not more. And herding means more management, even if it requires less people, which might seem counterintuitive. Herding is different because it is less dependent on *things* – fences, troughs, and other infrastructure – and more dependent on *people*. Not only is it an ancient human activity (think Persian nomads), but it dominated the early days of the Old West as well (think *Lonesome Dove*). Herding faded away, however, with the arrival of the barbed wire fence and, later, the federal allotment system for grazing permits, both of which splintered the wide open West into discrete units that lent themselves to a less intensive management style. The rest, as they say, is history.

Dave and Steve had turned the clock back – or forward, depending how one looked at it. At the workshop they described the pattern of the herd's movement as looking like a large

flowing mass, with a head, a body, and a tail, in almost continuous motion. Pool riders don't push the whole herd at once; instead, they guide the head, or the cattle that like to lead, into areas that are scheduled for grazing. The body follows, leaving only the stragglers - those animals who always seem to like to stay in a pasture, to be pushed along.

The single herd approach allows the permittees to concentrate their energies on all of their cattle at once, they reported, as well as allowing the Forest Service to more easily monitor conditions on the ground.

In fact, the monitoring data showed such an improvement in the health of the land over time that the West Elk Pool asked for, and was granted, an increase in their permitted cattle numbers from the Forest Service. In other words, since the data supported their contention that herding was improving the health of land which had been beaten up historically by livestock, the ranchers of the West Elk Pool felt it was time to gain financially from their good work. This was significant because the trend in cattle numbers on public land was mostly the other direction – down – for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was pressure from environmentalists who saw cattle as simply destructive of land. But the West Elk Pool was different in this regard as well. In the planning process they involved a local environmental group and ultimately got its blessing for the herding experiment.

It was a strategy that paid off, literally.

Once again, as with David and Kay James, it was about a vision. After the workshop, Dave sent me the goal statement for the West Elk allotment, which read in part:

Our goal is to maintain a safe, secure rural community with economic, social, and biological diversity...that respects individual freedom and values education, and that encourages cooperation... Our goal is to have a good water cycle by having close plant spacing, a covered soil surface, and arable soils; have a fast mineral cycle using soil nutrients effectively; have an energy flow that maximizes the amount of sunlight converted to plant growth and values the seclusion and natural aesthetics of the area.

Standing on the Allens' back porch, I asked Steve the question that had been on my mind since the workshop: what set him up for crossing those double yellow lines? A slight, quiet, but affable man, Steve didn't strike me at first as the ringleader type. Spend time with him, however, especially as he gently but firmly works his beloved border collies – he is a well-known trainer in the area – and you get the sense that a strong will is at work. Still, what leads someone to step out of the box like that?

Steve grew up in Denver, he said, where his father was an insurance salesman. He met Rachel at Western State College in Gunnison where they discovered that they both liked to ski – a lot. Steve joined the ski patrol in Crested Butte and eventually both of them became ski instructors. It was 1968. They were young and living the easy life. But restlessness gnawed at Steve. “The ski industry is designed to make ski bums, not professionals,” he said with his easy smile. “It was fun, but we wanted more.”

They were also restless about the changes happening in Crested Butte. Even in those early days, signs of gentrification were visible in town. Although not yet affected by the scale of change that transformed nearby Aspen into a playground for the rich and famous – a process sometimes called the ‘Aspenization’ of the rural West – Steve and Rachel could see the handwriting on Crested Butte's wall. By the early 1970s, they decided to join the back-to-the-land movement, trading their skis for farm overalls.

“We weren't hippies, mind you,” interjected Rachel, laughing. “We took farming seriously. I just want to get that on record.”

They moved west, over the West Elks, to the small village of Paonia, where they planted what eventually became a large garden. They grew vegetables, raised chickens, produced hay – and learned from their farm neighbors.

“Because we admitted we didn’t know very much,” said Steve, “and because we were willing to learn, people were willing to teach.”

Which could be a motto for the New Ranch.

In 1977, restlessness struck again. They traded the garden for a run-down farm on the edge of Fruitland Mesa, where the hay was so bad the first few years they had to give it away. Eventually, they bought a few cattle and decided to try their hand at ranching. In 1988, Steve purchased a Forest Service permit in the nearby West Elks, mostly as a forage reserve for his animals in times of drought. His interest was not purely economic, however. Steve had always been attracted to mountains, and soon he had a chance to work in them daily.

Eager to learn more, Steve took a Holistic Resource Management course the same year that Dave James did and that led him to give herding a try. With the arrival of Dave Bradford to the Forest Service office in Paonia a short while later, the opportunity to cross the yellow lines suddenly presented itself.

As part of the process of pulling the West Elk experiment together, Steve also became a student of a new method of low-stress livestock handling sometimes called the ‘Bud Williams school’ – after its Canadian founder. Its principles fly in the face of traditional methods of cattle handling, which are full of whooping, prodding, pushing, and cursing. Putting stress on cattle is as customary to ranching as a lasso and spurs.

But that was Steve's point: customary, yes: natural, no. And that's where herding comes in: pressure from predators in the wild made grazers bunch in herds naturally. Unfortunately, on many ranches today, the herd instinct has been prodded out of most cattle.

The whole idea of low-stress handling is to use a "law of nature" to positive effect.

"Nature," Steve said simply, "has the right ideas, but we keep messing them up."

It is this return to what's seen as closer to nature's original model – such as grassfed livestock and low-stress herding – that defines the progressive ranching movement underway today.

Ranching needs good students, but it needs good teachers too. It needs people like Steve Allen. Grass may lie patiently for rain, but people need inspiration.

Twin Creek Ranch
south of Lander, Wyoming

A few hours north of Fruitland Mesa I entered the dry heart of that summer's drought, which was centered on southern Wyoming. After crossing Sweetwater River on the old Mormon Trail, I knew the precise moment when I had reached Tony and Andrea Malmberg's ranch. Rounding a big bend in the road, I was suddenly confronted with the sight of green grass, tall willows, sedges, rushes, and flowing water.

I had arrived at Twin Creek. I was here not only because I knew the Malmbergs to be first-rate land stewards, but also because of their experiences in diversifying their business, which seemed to be to be a requirement for success these days as a rancher.

Following the lush creek on the road toward the ranch headquarters, I recalled an anecdote Tony had included in an article titled "Ranching For Biodiversity," that he had recently

written for The Quivira Coalition's newsletter. It detailed an experience of his youth when he and a brother-in-law decided to blow up a beaver dam on the creek:

Jim and I crawled through the meadow grass under his pickup giggling. Jim pulled the wires in behind him, leading to the charge of dynamite.

"This will show that little bastard," I said. Jim touched the two wires to the battery. WOOMP! The concussion preceded the explosion. Sticks and mud came raining down on the pickup. As soon as it stopped hailing willows and mud, we scrambled out from under our shield.

"Yeah!" I hollered as we ran down the creek bank. "I think we got it all."

Water gushed through the gutted beaver dam and we could see the level dropping quickly. The next morning I rode my wrangle horse across the restored crossing. The water behind the beaver dam had gotten so deep I couldn't bring the horses across. But that was taken care of now. I galloped down the creek. The water ran muddy and I couldn't help but notice creek banks caving into the stream.

I wondered.

It was another story about tradition, this time about conventional attitudes toward wildlife. But it was also an allegory. Years later, when Tony was a young man, his family ranch 'caved in' too – forced into bankruptcy by high interest payments on loans and tumbling cattle prices, costing Tony's family the entire 33,000-acre property. Suddenly homeless, Tony began to wonder what had happened. Two years later, he leased the ranch back from the new owner, before eventually buying it. But he knew things had to be different this time if he wanted to stay.

Like David James and Steve Allen, Tony attended a course on Holistic Resource Management and he began to realize that biodiversity was a plus on his ranch, not a minus. "I shifted my thought process to live with the beaver and their dams," he wrote in his article. "With this commitment, I viewed the creek as a fence rather than something I could cross. This attitude

gave me an extra pasture, a higher water table, less erosion, and more grass in the riparian area. The positive results energized me, and I began to curiously watch in a new way.”

What he noticed as a result of his new land management was an increase in biodiversity. Moose, previously a rare sight on the property, began to appear in larger numbers. He even began to appreciate the coyotes and prairie dogs on the ranch and the role they played in the health of his land. Later, a University of Wyoming study found a fifty percent increase in bird populations over the span of a few years.

All of which led him to formulate two guiding principles:

First, I avoid actively killing anything, and notice what is there. Whether a weed or an animal, it would not be here if its habitat were not. I plan the timing, intensity, and frequency of tools (grazing, rest, fire, animal impact, technology and living organisms) to move community dynamics to a level of higher diversity and complexity.

Second, I ask myself what is missing. Problems are not due to the presence of a species but rather the absence of a species. The absence of moose meant willows were missing, which meant beaver were missing and the chain continues.

If I honor my rule of not suppressing life, I will see beyond symptoms to address problems. If I continue asking “What is missing?” I will continue to see beyond simple systems and realize the whole. When I increase biodiversity I improve land health, I improve community relations, and I improve our ranch profitability.

To accomplish his goals, Tony employs livestock grazing as a land management tool. To encourage the growth of willows along the stream and ponds, for example, he grazes them in early spring to assist seedling establishment. By concentrating cattle for short periods of time in an area Tony breaks up topsoils and makes the land more receptive to natural reseeding and able to hold more water.

What brought me to Twin Creek, however, wasn't just the tall grass, the flowing water or even the progressive ranch management practiced by Tony and Andrea, though these were important. What I wanted to see was the very nice Bed and Breakfast they operated.

As I pulled up to the spiffy, new three-story lodge, I was greeted with a sunny wave by Andrea. A child of the Wyoming ranching establishment – her father traded cattle for a living – Andrea heard Tony speak passionately some years earlier about the benefits of planned grazing at a livestock meeting (where his talk was coolly received) and wrote him an equally passionate letter challenging his beliefs. They corresponded back and forth until she accepted his dare to come to the ranch and see the proof herself.

Tony joined us inside the sunny lodge. Bearded, deep-chested and sporting a leather vest, Tony looks the part of the cowboy. He is also cheery and garrulous, in print and in person.

Over a glass of wine later that evening, I learned that the lodge is the happy ending to a story that had its roots in anger. “When my family lost the ranch,” recalled Tony, “I blamed everyone but ourselves. I blamed consumers, environmentalists, liberals. But most of all, I blamed our new neighbors.”

In 1982, as the family was slipping into bankruptcy, a man from California bought a neighboring ranch for twice what a cow would generate per acre. Although this fact didn't directly affect his family's pending insolvency, it angered Tony because it suggested the end of an era. Ranch land had more value to society, he saw suddenly, as an amenity than as a working landscape. Recreation trumped ranching. The Old West was giving way to the New. And Tony didn't like it.

But then Tony had a revelation: markets don't lie. Upon returning to the ranch, he decided that in addition to the cattle operation he would start a ranch-recreation business and

market stays directly to people who wanted the cowboy experience. He quickly learned, however, that paying guests wouldn't tolerate dirt or mice as much as he did, so he and Andrea took the plunge and built a pretty lodge with a capacity for fourteen guests at a time.

But they didn't stop there. Making it economically meant exploring as many diverse business enterprises as possible. Andrea convinced Tony that the next step was to "go local" and find ways to tap local markets, including their new neighbors, for their beef and other services. They hosted a class on weed control for local ranchette owners and focused on the positive role of goats – which will eat every noxious weed on the state list. It was a big hit.

That was followed by a seminar on rangeland health, which proved popular with their ranching friends. Then came a foray into the grassfed beef business, which has been successful too.

Next in their efforts at economic diversification was Andrea's decision to start teaching yoga. A recent winter solstice party packed the lodge with what Tony called the "strangest assortment of people I'd ever seen together."

"The hodge-podge appeared to be a demographic accident," he continued, "yet they all ended up in central Wyoming because they wanted the same things we want: a beautiful landscape, healthy ecology, wholesome food and a sense of community." In this, Tony drew a parallel with the benefit of increased biodiversity on the ranch.

"In the old days, I didn't have to deal with people different from me," he said. "But this is better."

Tony went on to explain to me how his indicators of success have changed over the years. In 1982, his primary measure of success was a traditional one: increased weaning weights of his calves. By 1995, Tony's measure had shifted to the stocking rate of cattle (the number of

cattle per acre on the ranch – more cattle, managed sustainably, equals greater profitability) which, thanks to planned grazing, was up 75% from years prior due to their planned grazing. By 1998, his indicator had shifted to monitoring – data produced by a detailed study of plants on the ranch – and what it said about trend. In his case, the trend was up – which was a good sign. By 2000, Tony used the diversity of songbirds on the property as his baseline (over sixty species currently). By 2002, however, the main measure of success had changed to an economic one: how many activities generated income for the ranch in a year. At the time of my visit, they were up to three.

Tony attributes this success to their ability to speak different languages to different audiences, including recreationalists.

“I realized that if I’m going to survive in the 21st century, I need to be trilingual,” Tony explained. “Ranchers tell stories. The BLM wants to talk data. And then we’ve got the environmentalists. Lander has a lot of them. To connect with them you need to use poetry.”

In other words, success in ranching today is as much about communication and marketing as it is about on-the-ground results. As Tony and Andrea’s story suggests, it is not enough simply to *do* a better job environmentally, even if it brings profitability. One must also *sell* one’s good work, and do so aggressively in a social climate of rapid change and the general population’s increasing detachment from our agricultural roots.

From all the indicators that I saw, Tony and Andrea are on the right track. The lodge was clean, comfortable and airy; the food wonderful; and the visitors happy. But this is no dude ranch. Tony makes his guests work. According to his planned grazing schedule, his cattle need to be moved almost every day – so he has paying guests do it. They love it, of course, and since his

cowboy does the supervisory work, Tony is free to explore other business ideas. And the ideas keep coming.

Red Canyon Ranch
west of Lander, Wyoming

When I met Bob Budd at The Nature Conservancy office in Lander, a short drive north from the Malmberg's Twin Creek Ranch, he was pacing the floor, waiting for my arrival.

“The ranch is on fire,” he said quickly, “let's go.”

And go we did. Despite being a foot taller than Bob, I had to hustle to keep up with him as we headed outside. A Wyoming native son, a member of a well-known ranching family, and former executive director of the state's cattlemen association, Bob managed the Red Canyon Ranch for The Nature Conservancy's Wyoming office when I met him. He also served as their Director of Science. Bob had earned a Masters Degree in Ecology from the University of Wyoming and was in line to become president of the Society for Range Management, a highly respected national association of range professionals.

Without a doubt, he was a man on the move.

I jumped into my truck and followed Bob rapidly to the headquarters of the 35,000-acre Red Canyon Ranch, which borders Lander on the south and west. The Nature Conservancy, Bob said, had purchased the property for three reasons: to protect open space and the biological resources held there; to demonstrate that livestock production and conservation are compatible; and to work at landscape-level management and restoration goals.

The first two goals have more or less been achieved, more or less, he said as I climbed into his truck in the parking lot. It is the third goal that motivated him now. What Bob wants is

fire back on the land, brush and trees thinned, erosion repaired, noxious weeds eradicated, perennial streams to flow fuller, riparian vegetation to grow stronger, and wildlife populations to bloom.

And judging by the speed at which we traveled, he wanted them all at once.

Bob was thrilled about the lightning-sparked fire that was burning a chunk of forest and rangeland right where he had been encouraging the Forest Service to light a prescribed burn for years. That's because fire is a keystone ecological process, meaning a process that is fundamental to the health of the ecosystem over time. Research shows that 'cool' fires happened frequently in western forests, perhaps as often as every ten years in some stands. But for much of the 20th century, humans suppressed all fires in our national forests, mostly to protect the monetary value of the timber, and as a consequence the forests have become overgrown and dangerously prone to 'very hot,' destructive fires, as 2002 demonstrated. To reverse this condition and restore forest health, ecologists and others have encouraged the Forest Service to light controlled burns. To many, however, the pace of bureaucracy has been frustratingly slow.

"I love lightning," Bob said with a twinkle in his light blue eyes, "because there's no paperwork."

As we sped into the mountains in search of a suitable vantage point to observe the progress of the fire, talking energetically about ecological theories that I had only recently begun to study, I recalled Bob's essay in a book titled *Ranching West of the 100th Meridian*. He wrote: "I am an advocate for wild creatures, rare plants, arrays of native vegetation, clean water, fish, stewardship of natural resources, and learning. I believe these things are compatible with ranching, sometimes lost without ranching. Some people call me a cowboy. A lot of good cowboys call me an environmentalist."

Bob has strong words for both, especially about their respective defense of myth. He likes to remind environmentalists in particular that nature is not as pristine as many assume. For thousands of years, he observed, Wyoming has been grazed, burned, rested, desiccated, and flooded. In saying so, he consciously tilts at an ecological holy grail called the ‘balance of nature.’ This is the long-standing theory that says nature tries hard to hold things in balance; in other words, when a system gets ‘out-of-balance’ nature works to right the ship, so to speak. Predator/prey populations are a good example. According to this theory, too many coyotes and not enough jackrabbits, say, mean nature will bring the coyote population back into ‘balance’ over time (by starvation).

Today, most professional ecologists reject this theory in favor of one called the ‘flux of nature’ which views nature as dynamic, chaotic, and rife with bouts of disturbance – such as forest fires and floods. Unfortunately, the ‘balance of nature’ theory persists among nonprofessionals, especially environmentalists, resulting in a great deal of conflict with rural residents over ideas of proper stewardship.

“In landscapes where the single ecological truth is chaos and dynamic change,” Bob wrote, “we seem obsessed with stability. Instead of relishing dynamic irregularities in nature, we absorb confusion and chaos into our own lives, then demand that natural systems be stable.”

He likes to explain to both environmentalists and ranchers that grazing, like fire, is a keystone process. “Like fire, erosion, and drought, grazing is a natural process that can be stark and ugly,” he wrote. “And, like fire, erosion, and drought, grazing is essential to the maintenance of many natural systems in the West...And because adults tend to overlook other grazing creatures, we forget the impact of grasshoppers, rodents, birds, and other organisms that have long shaped the West.”

Just as prescribed fire, once controversial, was now widely accepted, Bob observed, it is simply a matter of time before the same change of thinking happens to grazing.

As we sped through the forest, still searching for a spot to view the fire, I asked him if he thought environmentalists would ever embrace ranching.

“I think they’ll have to,” he replied, “if they want to protect open space.”

Bob explained that in Wyoming, like much of the West today, unbridled development on private land has resulted in habitat fragmentation and destruction. When land is subdivided, the new roads and homes often interrupt wildlife migration corridors, decrease habitat for rare plants and animals, and make ecosystem management difficult. The open space ranches provide are the last barrier to development in many places. “The economic viability of ranching is essential,” he said, “in maintaining Wyoming’s open space, native species and healthy ecosystems.”

“Even on public lands?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “That’s because it’s all about proper stewardship. I don’t care where you are.”

Bob pointed to the trees outside the truck window.

“Our common goal must be to provide the full range of values and habitat types that a variety of species need, including us,” he said. “And ranchers can help.”

What he meant, I’ve come to understand, is that ranchers can become restorationists because they are uniquely positioned to deliver ecological services – food, fuel, fiber, and other ecological benefits that society requires – as landowners, as livestock specialists, and as hard-working sons (and daughters)-of-guns. This will become increasingly important, I’m convinced, as the 21st century wears on and we come to realize just how much restoration work is required – not to restore the ‘balance of nature’ but to get nature back into a position where it can operate

according to natural principles, including disturbance. Cows can have a role here too. As domesticated animals they can be used effectively to recreate certain kinds of animal impact on the land – a point Allan Savory made years ago.

Suddenly, we stopped. The fire we sought had proved elusive, and it was time to head back to headquarters. It seemed symbolic. While landscape-scale opportunities for ranchers may be plentiful, as Bob suggested, many are elusive, especially on public land, where every action seems to engender an opposite reaction by someone. Even the smallest restoration project, whether it involves livestock or not, can quickly become mired in red tape and conflict. Bob remained optimistic, however. He admitted that he had to be.

Returning to the ranch headquarters, Bob kept moving. He needed to take his son to baseball practice. I followed him into the house for introductions to the family. We talked for a while longer, shook hands, and before I knew it, he was gone.

Rather than drive off immediately too, I walked down to a bridge that spanned a burbling creek. Enjoying a momentary respite from the dust, driving and cascade of ideas, goals, and practices that dominated conversation for the entire trip, I leaned on the wooden railing and listened to the wind.

One thread that tied Bob Budd to the Jameses, Allens, and Malmbergs, it occurred to me, was the desire to make amends with nature. To paraphrase President John Kennedy, each asked ‘not what the land could do for them, but what they could for the land.’ Whether it was restoring land to health, bridging urban-rural divides, teaching, feeding, or peace-making, every person I encountered was engaged in an act of redemption, mostly by trying to heal damaged

relationships, particularly our bond with the land. This is good news for grass, especially in these dry times. It is probably good news for us all as well.

Which led to a second thread: grass may seem immortal, but in reality it needs water, nutrients, animals, and fire to stay vigorous. The health of the whole depends on the health of its essential parts. This is important, as Bob Budd explained, because disruption is inevitable in nature; sooner or later, a calamity of some sort will strike and those plant and animal populations which are not functioning properly at basic levels will be in jeopardy. Communities of people are no different. Whether it is a ranch, village, small town or city, every community needs to be diverse, resilient, opportunistic, and self-reliant if it is to survive unexpected challenges.

For example, by setting water to work with a purpose – to earn a living within nature’s model – the James family has buffered themselves well against uncertainty; and in the process protected 400 acres of prime land along the Animas River from subdivision. The potential financial gain from busting their land into small lots for houses is astronomical – but they won’t do it, because it doesn’t fit their goal for their family, their land, or their community.

Or take Steve Allen. Not only did he come to realize that herding is an ancient form of sustainability, he took the unusual step of crossing yellow lines to achieve his goal. How many of us city folk are willing to take a risk like that? Do we even know where the yellow lines are? Are *we* resilient in our own lives? Or are we in spiritual (as well as practical) danger of supposing, as Aldo Leopold warned, that “breakfast comes from the grocery, and heat comes from a furnace.”

The third thread was Tony Malmberg’s question about the sanctity of life – when might we stop killing things we don’t understand, as he did, and start inquiring instead about what might be missing from our lives? And once the outlines of answers become perceptible, what language do we speak so the lessons we’ve learned can be clearly understood? Must we be

trilingual, or at some point will one vocabulary suffice – the language, say, of grass? Or food? And if we can figure all that out, how do we make it *pay* – as in paychecks – without which little can be accomplished.

I leaned wearily on the railing above the burbling creek.

The fourth thread involves the big picture. How do we work at scale, as Bob Budd advocates – and not just on ranches and farms, but all over the West, the nation, the globe? How do we take a landscape perspective in a world balkanized into countless, and often feuding, private, state, tribal, and federal fiefdoms? How do we overcome the paperwork, the lawsuits, the power struggles, and the politicking necessary to get the big work done in a century that will likely be roiled by climate change, energy instability, water shortages, and a host of other potential challenges?

I wasn't sure I had a clue. No wonder mankind invented alcohol.

But I did have a clue, of course. I found it at nearly every stop along this trip. Stegner was right, ranching *is* renewable – in fact, it feels very much like it's being reborn, one ranch at a time. This is good news. Grass and grazers, after all, are the original solar power. Moreover, humans have been living and working with livestock for a very long time and through a great deal of historical change. The human desire to be near animals, and be outdoors, hasn't altered much over the centuries, though it has recently shrunk, hopefully temporarily, as a result of industrialization. We need ranching, I came away thinking, because it can be regenerative, not only for the food and good stewardship it can provide, but also for the lessons it can teach us about resilience and sustainability. All flesh is grass, as the Bible reminds us, though it has often been forgotten.

Perhaps it was time to consider it again.