

Anticipating Future Landscape Conditions: A Case Study

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Abstract.—Anticipating landscape conditions in the 21st century is a difficult, if not impossible task. Different people have different perceptions of what future landscapes should look like. One group of people, a group of ranchers in the Malpai Borderland Region of the southwestern United States, have come together to work with government agencies, universities, and environmental groups in attempting to reduce the threat of property and ecosystem fragmentation in the region. These collaborative efforts are also finding ways to increase the productivity and biological diversity of the area's rangelands.

Introduction

The Malpai Borderlands Region of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico covers approximately one million acres in the San Bernardino and Animas Valleys east of Douglas, Arizona. The region ranges from 4,500 to 8,500 ft in elevation and contains a variety of ecosystems extending from low elevation desert shrub and tabosa grasslands to high elevation ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir stands. The mountains and valleys are home to diverse plant and wildlife populations, including some species that are rarely found within the United States. Land ownership is divided between private individuals and state and federal agencies. The Malpai Borderlands Region is home to a viable ranching community. Property and ecosystem fragmentation, which is obvious in many adjacent valleys, has not reached the area. We are endeavoring to make sure that it never does.

Malpai Borderlands Group

A group of ranchers, known as the Malpai Borderlands Group, organized themselves in 1992 to find ways to reduce the threat of property and ecosystem fragmentation and to increase the productivity and biological diversity of the area's rangelands (McDonald 1995, 1996). The Malpai Borderlands Group felt that their efforts should be based on good science, contain a strong conservation ethic, be economically feasible, and be initiated and led by

the private sector with government agencies, universities, and environmental groups as partners.

Land management based on good science has been a key part of efforts in the Malpai Borderlands Region. The Malpai Borderlands Group and affiliated organizations have sponsored many research studies and inventory activities. The Rocky Mountain Research Station, USDA Forest Service, became involved in these studies in 1994 when it was awarded a national ecosystem management grant to conduct a research program within the Borderlands. The objective of this project is to achieve sound ecosystem management in the Borderlands area through coordinated research-management partnerships. The Rocky Mountain Research Station has initiated studies, but more importantly, has developed research partnerships with scientists and managers from many state agencies, universities, and conservation organizations, and independent investigators (Gottfried et al. 1999). These collaborations have provided expertise to address the wide variety of questions that are basic to good ecosystem management to sustain and create healthy, productive ecosystems into the future.

One Rancher's Perspective of the Future

Ranchers do have economic interest in their land (McDonald 1999). But, newspapers give the view that ranchers have only economic interest in their land. I submit to you that anyone who gets into ranching for only economic reasons is an idiot. Yes, ranchers have to make a living, but that is not why we get into ranching. There are many easier ways to make a living. You can take the same amount of money, put it into almost anything else, and get a better return on your investment. Ranchers started ranching for the same reasons that scientists and managers got into research or management; it was not to become millionaires. If you are a scientist or work for a management agency, you likely did not get into it to submit to the kind of grief you get for what you are being paid. You have a feeling for the land; there is a pull there you cannot resist. I love everything about the land. I do not like being compelled to defend my way of life. But, I thoroughly enjoy learning, as I am at this conference, more about the

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land that I have lived on and hope to live on the rest of my life. I enjoy the insights and being able to share mine with folks who look at things differently. I think it gives us all something that we can hand down to the next generation so they can do an even better job of living with this landscape, if it is still here.

There is another side to ranching. It is a business, an unforgiving business. If you get caught up in the cattle price cycle and are on the wrong side of it, it can be devastating. The last boom to make money in ranching was during and after World War II. There was good money to be made until the middle 1950s, when there was a devastating drought in the region. There was a tremendous die-off of mesquites in the 1950s; that is how bad it was. My grandfather sold off all of his cattle. My grandmother went into the hospital with what would be called severe depression now.

The 1960s were not a profitable time to be in ranching either. The 1970s were a good time to get yourself in debt. Land prices went up, banks were willing to lend money, and in the farm sector a lot of people crashed. The 1980s were a relatively good period. We had the weather patterns that helped to improve forage production that was good for cattle weights, and the prices stayed high. Unfortunately, the 1990s have been very bad for ranching. We have had uneven weather patterns and depressed prices. In 1995, the price fell 35% from the year before, and last year it fell almost 40% from the year before.

Imagine trying to live and plan on this uneven flow of income. This is one of the factors working against small and medium-sized outfits. This is the way America is going. I believe that big government and big corporations tend to like each other, and a small entrepreneur has to figure it out on his own. The feedlots are becoming more and more consolidated. Ranchers are tenacious sons-of-guns, and they have not figured out how to get rid of us yet, but they are trying.

I think ranchers are going to have to get into niche marketing. The Malpai Borderlands Group offers a good possibility to find a way to niche market beef to people who have the same concerns we do and would like to support us. But, we have not figured out how to do that yet. Attempts at niche marketing have failed miserably, so we have to be very careful. On the cost side, the weather has always been the major factor in the Southwest. Drought is the main thing we have had to worry about. It is difficult because you do not know when it starts until you are well into it, and you never know when it is going to end. Consequences for a cattle herd are huge. You try to hang on without destroying the resources you depend on. We spent \$30,000 on supplemental feed in 1996 in six months trying to hang on to our cattle herd. On the other hand, you

will get a year where the rains come at the right time. There was low average rainfall in 1998, but fortunately the rain fell at the right time, so the cattle herd is in good shape.

There are so many things out of our control. If ranchers seem standoffish, rigid, and conservative, it is because we have had to take a lot of shots, and people have often tried to take advantage of us for one reason or another. So, we are reluctant to jump into the newest idea. On the other hand, we are very flexible. We are the epitome of adaptive management, because we will not survive if we do not adapt. We have to deal with these factors that we cannot control.

One thing we have some control over, but not a lot, is government regulations, which more and more are coming into play in ranching. I do not like to get hit with surprises. It bothers me more than anything else does. Government agencies have kept ranchers in a reactive mode. We do not know what is happening until it hits us in the form of a letter or a paper, and then it is already a done deal. When you have to react to a crisis situation, your decision making is not the best, your social skills do not rise to the top, and it makes for a bad scene. That is how business has been done on public lands for years, and it needs to change. I think the Malpai Borderland Group offers a forum for the types of communication that, hopefully, will allow us to avoid that sort of thing. We are not there yet, but we are getting there. When you have a large organization, you are used to running things a certain way and have laws to follow, and it is hard. But, we might be able to use the Malpai Borderlands Group as an example of how we can make things work.

Inheritance taxes and estate planning present big challenges. This is where many ranches bite the dust and become developments. It is tough changing from generation to generation. Grandpa does not want to let go of it. I know men in their sixties who have not made a major decision on the ranch yet because their parents are still making the calls. Many young people leave ranches in frustration over that sort of thing. Also, many people do not do estate planning. It is complicated. You do not really know for sure until the owner dies whether the next generation will be able to keep that ranch or not.

These things all have great significance for what everyone in the Malpai Borderlands Region cares about, which are the area's habitats and landscapes. And, if we are not talking to each other, if we are pointing fingers at each other, we will all lose. The first thing to suffer will be the habitats and the landscape. A viable ranching economy is still an important piece of this puzzle, and if it becomes a moot point, you will be dealing with a landscape that is very different from what it is today.

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