

Letters/Opinions

Spirituality mixes with sustainability




By THAD BOX

It was 90 degrees in the shade. Jenny packed a picnic. We drove into Logan Canyon, took a side road along a stream. We hiked a ways and spread our blanket amid lush grass. We spent the heat of the day shaded by an aspen like the elk who left his tracks after snowmelt. That was in July. But it was a replay of many impromptu family trips over five decades.

Forty-seven years ago, I arrived in Utah with Jenny, a job, big car payments and a son in diapers. Dr. Laurie Stoddart loaded us in his car and took us up Logan Canyon. I expected my hero, an icon of range management, to take us to sites where he and Art Smith had done pioneering work on grazing. Instead, he took us to picnic places. He pointed out trails where our son could toddle along after butterflies. He showed me fishing holes where I could teach my son to fish. He talked about the canyon as if it were more than a place. He was sharing his soul, offering us a gift of his spirit.

Later, Stoddart showed me how common-use grazing improved those canyons. Smith demonstrated how sheep grazing could be used to improve deer winter range. Range management scientist Wayne Cook taught me the value of science and research. Together, they gave me a crash course in science, duty and professionalism.

Renewing the spirit

These giants also made me aware of a special quality of rangelands — their amazing gift of renewal. I had expected my heroes to teach me more about succession and biological processes of renewal. What I had not expected was their spiritual tie to the land along with their dedication to using science to make the human condition better and more humane.

Utah State University has long been known as an important school in land management. In 1959, the year I joined, it appointed the first full-time faculty member in recreation: a converted wood-products forester from California, Ross Toscher.

New professors had no technicians in those days. I helped Toscher stake out campgrounds. He helped me with grazing studies. His recreation program centered around facilities. His passions

dealt with aesthetics, psychology and inner peace. One day as we ate lunch, Toscher said something like, "You know, Thad, the greatest value of this landscape is not to grow trees or deer or cows. It is not for campgrounds. It is for spiritual renewal."

I, a churchgoing kid from Bible-quoting Texas stock, was shocked to find my new atheist, agnostic, Jack Mormon, wishy-washy Presbyterian colleagues professing and living a spirituality I had never encountered. I had grown up in the Great Depression scratching a bare living from hard land. I knew how to make land feed me. Land, like a horse, was to be worked for human survival. Reverence was paid to God and country. Faith in God, not mountain land, brought spiritual renewal. I came to Utah to work with giants who would teach me to manage ranges. They taught renewal of both land and spirit.

Rebirth of the system

Sustainable communities are not developed solely with ecology and traditional biology. They don't come just from good agricultural practices. Sustainability also includes transfer of genes, memes, values and opportunities to the next generation.

Sustainability is about constant renewal involving health and fairness in this generation, then transferring to a new generation values consistent with new conditions. Each generation dies, but as the system is reborn, community is sustained. Sustainability suggests a spiritual connection of people to the land and to future generations.

The giants who trained me were firmly rooted in economic survival. They came of age in the Great Depression where a job and enough to eat were crucial; aesthetics represented luxury. They spent their careers finding ways to make land produce more goods, more income. As they learned to get more things from the land, they became one with the land. Its spirit was their spirit.

They worked hard and kept emotions in check. Those same heroes took time to show me how land renews the spirit. They always included children. They understood the need to transfer spiritual values to the next generation — and anticipate resurrection.

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YOUR SAY

Article hit mark

Stan and I would like to thank you for such a great article [July's cover story on weed-eating goats]. We received lots of replies from our friends, and some will be contacting you for subscriptions.

Bonnie (and Stan) Jensen, ranchers, Salmon, Idaho

Thanks for coverage

Thank you for allowing us to share our story about the Big Sandy project at Farson, Wyo., through your August edition of the *Western Farmer-Stockman*.

Nancy Atkinson, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Casper, Wyo.

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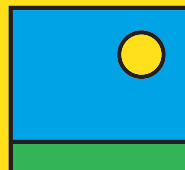
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