
Essays of a Peripheral Mind

Desperately Creative Acts

By **K. M. Havstad**

In this issue of *Rangelands* with a focus on New Mexico rangelands, this essay is devoted to some of the more progressive resource management collaborations that are at home in the Land of Enchantment. These examples can be viewed as experiments, and they are experimental in a sense that they might still fail or reform in the face of experience. These examples have several common threads, including people strongly linked to rangelands, often unusual or nontraditional alliances, and efforts often scrutinized, if not criticized. They represent collective risks, but risks seen as necessary to advance resource management beyond its current stasis. In fact, to some extent, these can be seen as acts of desperation, where some unseen threshold of necessity had been breached and the need for another management model was required. The people directly involved in these efforts might cringe, if not loudly object, to having their collaboration depicted as desperate. Yet, these creative acts each represent something other than the norm, and required considerable effort to emerge as viable resource management models against the norm. Each developed and emerged in a very different fashion. One came out of the political world, one came out of a chance encounter, and one came out of a rural community of people sitting down and talking. Obviously, experiments like these can precipitate out of many different reactants and crucibles. I would characterize the essential and common catalyst to each of these experiments as a nearly fearless or aggressive commitment to a creative vision. Of additional significance is that they embody much of the theme of the 2009 annual meeting of the Society for Range Management to be held

in New Mexico. These acts are the result of people merging, in different fashions, their cultures, and their perceptions of science in innovative manners and outcomes.

The Malpai Borderlands Group (www.malpaiborderlandsgroup.org)

In 1991, a group of ranchers who lived and worked over a ~1 million-acre expanse of private and public land in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico began to meet and talk. There were two key drivers of this effort to try and organize themselves. First, they recognized that their way of life, and the landscape where they lived, was threatened by the spread of development and subdivision from the expanding urban populations in the Southwest. During the last half of the 20th century, counties across the southwest from southern California through Arizona and New Mexico had experienced urban population increases of ~200% with concomitant declines in rural populations and grazing livestock numbers. The region, despite its vastness, aridity, and openness, had become dominated by an urbanized public looking to expand its landscape presence. Second, there was an increasing recognition that a government-driven practice of fire suppression was futile, wasteful, and probably not ecologically valid in many areas within their managed landscapes. A loss of grassland with an encroachment of shrubs, though native brush species, was seen as a result of removing a pyric element from a landscape that, at least in its semiarid climatic zones, had a value in retaining a shrub-savanna ecological structure. This structural loss was decreasing the array of ecological services that the



Scene of a landscape within the Malpai Borderlands Region (printed with permission of the Malpai Borderlands Group).



Prescribed burning of shrub-infested rangeland within the Malpai Borderland Lands (printed with permission of the Malpai Borderlands Group).

landscape could support, including forage production for grazing livestock. They understood that they couldn't just "dig in their heels" as private land owners with a professed sense of a historical right to a ranching way of life amidst a public land west, but that they had to seek and find some sort of common ground. By 1994 this collection of ranchers and landowners organized under the name of the Malpai Borderlands Group (MBG) in recognition of both a prevalent local geological feature and their proximity to Mexico. They invented the concept of "grass banks" by which neighbors could rest and/or revegetate home ranches while grazing nearby conserved areas for brief periods. They applied prescribed burning to over 69,000 acres, including one of the largest prescribed burns ever implemented on North America rangelands. They worked to maintain the integrity of their ranches and their landscapes. Nearly 15 yr

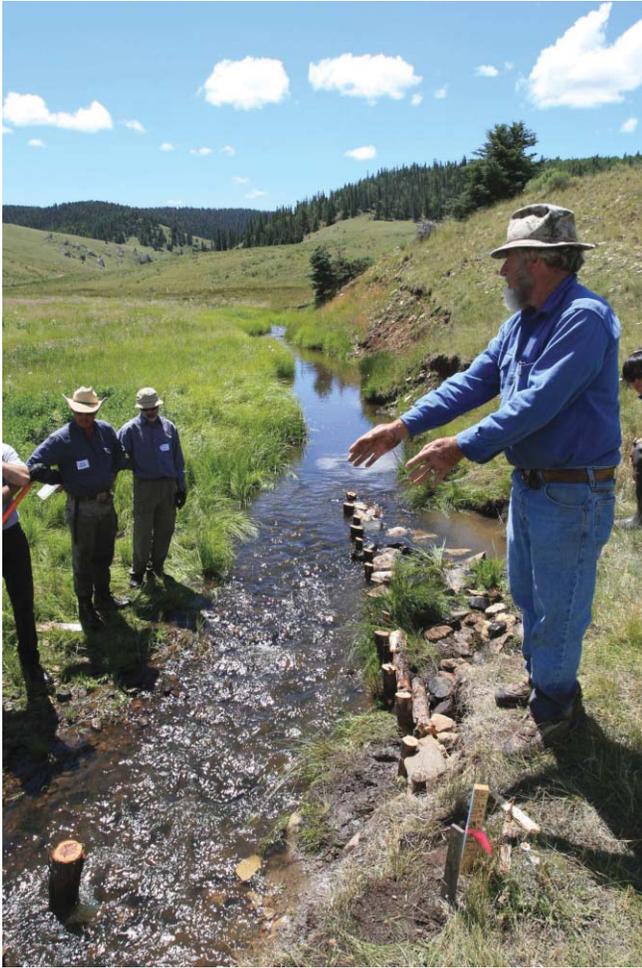
after formation, the MBG still works together, still meets to find common ground, and still attempts to maintain a way of life amidst a rapidly changing landscape. They still fight drought, they still fight doubters and antagonists, they still try to find a way for science to have some utility in a landscape shaped by the art of their management, and they still expend energies in collaborations that might not always seem to provide fair rates of return. Yet, if nothing else, they have wrestled some degree of control over the lands and resources where they live and work, and have brought an active form of resource management to these lands not often seen elsewhere in the West.

The Quivira Coalition (www.quiviracoalition.org)

Not far from the boot heel of New Mexico and the landscapes of the MBG, a chance encounter in 1997 between a third generation New Mexico rancher, albeit a non-traditional one, and two avid environmentalists led to another creative act. Although the environmentalists were not directly tied to any specific piece of land, and might not have understood which end of a cow "got up first" (a term employed to describe nonranchers by Ferry Carpenter, the first director of the Grazing Service that emerged out of the Grazing Act of 1934 and that eventually led to the creation of the Bureau of Land Management) they, like the rancher, were increasingly frustrated by the rancor and stasis of the debate about grazing in the west that had gone on for decades. They saw the debate as increasing futile, and that a third position was needed, one that also, like the MBG, sought and found common ground. Maybe even more importantly, they recognized that the debate should not be about how a landscape is used (grazed or ungrazed), but about how it functioned ecologically. They recognized that the discussion needed to be about ecological processes, and, in the end, about land health. They saw very clearly that healthy landscapes benefited everyone, ranchers and environmentalist alike, and that it took people on the ground practicing management to restore and maintain ecological



A group meeting during the 10th Annual Conference of the Quivira Coalition in Albuquerque in 2008 (printed with permission of the Quivira Coalition).



Bill Zeedyk (right) instructing a group of volunteers in a stream restoration project organized and sponsored by the Quivira Coalition (printed with permission of the Quivira Coalition).

structures and functions given the historic degradation in the West. They adopted an MBG term, “the radical center,” to reflect this third position, and promoted the concept of “the New Ranch,” to communicate the ideas and practices that they regarded as required in order to achieve these goals. Given that they were ideologically based, rather than landscape based like the MBG, in 1997 they formed their organization, called the Quivira Coalition, to promote education, communication, and demonstration of these concepts. In their over 10 yr of existence, through countless conferences, workshops, field days, demonstrations, newsletters, and volunteer-based activities, the Quivira Coalition has reached thousands of people, from landowners to the general public, in communicating the ideas of this radical center. In fact, it could easily be concluded that the Quivira Coalition has effectively and efficiently provided services that could have been, maybe even should have been, provided by the Society for Range Management across this region, but that the SRM has not been able to provide, for whatever reasons. This is not to say that the Quivira Coalition has not also, like the MBG, been demonized,

criticized, ignored, and struggled to remain viable and influential. Yet, after over 10 yr in existence, the Quivira Coalition continues to engage people in land management, thread scientifically based principles of ecology into its educational materials, bring people to the land through field-based events, and significantly contribute to our understanding of land health and its importance.

The Valles Caldera National Preserve (www.vallescaldera.gov)

At the end of the 20th Century there was an oft-expressed sense that public land management agencies, including the US Forest Service, were not able to practice on-the-ground management. A term used by bureaucrats and politicians to capture this sense of frustration, even by federal



A late summer view of the east fork of the Jemez River winding across one of the valles within the Valles Caldera National Preserve (USDA Jornada Experimental Range file photograph).



A crew of volunteers and professional technical staff taking a lunch break from vegetation sampling during a late spring rangeland monitoring field campaign (USDA file photograph).

management agency personnel, was “analysis paralysis,” and there was much written about causes and resulting symptoms of the problem. One proposed general type of solution, pushed within certain circles, was the idea of the creation of “charter forests” where management would, to an extent, be more explicitly in the hands and at the expense of local users and public living and working within or adjacent to these public lands. During this same time period, Congress passed the Valles Caldera Preservation Act in 2000, which led to the purchase from private ownership of a 95,000-acre tract of land within the Jemez Mountains of northern New Mexico, and embedded within National Forest public lands. Yet, this former Spanish land grant, renamed the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), was not transferred to the Forest Service, but set up as a separate entity, run by a board of directors appointed out of the White House, and looking much like the charter forest concept. Much has been written about the VCNP (for one interesting analysis, see www.coloradocollege.edu/Dept/EC/Faculty/Hecox/CPWebpage/issuespageValles.htm), including the point that by 2015 it needs to be generating, or at least have made substantial progress towards generating, its annual operating budget (currently about \$3 million in 2008) from an array of user fees. Needless to say, the VCNP is a closely scrutinized, oft-criticized operation that is being viewed as an experimental test of the validity of an alternative management model for public lands. Like both the MBG and the Quivira Coalition, the VCNP represents a creative effort. It is quite different from these other experiments, however, in that it is a single landscape managed by a single entity, where active science programs are trying to strongly inform management. There are many arguments about legitimate uses, user capacities, user fees, and user

impacts on the VCNP. Yet, by 2015, we should be in a position to clearly assess the key questions regarding whether this experiment has succeeded or failed in the one criterion that trumps all others—is this landscape healthy and well-managed? All other agendas, whether they are politically, ideologically, culturally, socially, and/or economically driven, will have to step aside and let the experiment first be judged based on its ecological effects.

It would be naïve to think that these three creative experiments should be left to run their course without the extra burden of constant scrutiny, criticism, and agenda-driven analyses. Those are elements of natural resource management today, and as experiments they need to be conducted within that environment if they are going to be valid tests as alternative models of landscape management in various forms. I have been fortunate enough to have been around each of these experiments and the people involved in them for some time. I don’t know if they will succeed or not in the end, but they each have the best possible people engaged in their experimental processes. The encouraging point, backed by our history, is that whether they succeed or fail, we will again see talented people reach a threshold of desperation of sorts on other landscapes, and create other new experiments that will move us away from the stasis of the norm, and push us towards more reasoned and effective management of our natural resources.

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