The Landscape of a Farm

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Aldo Leopold once said, "The landscape of a farm is the farmer's self-portrait." Ten years of wrestling with the ethical and logistical challenges of a grazing enterprise has brought me back full circle to the convictions of my youth, fueled by Leopold's philosophy of a land ethic. If we persist in trying to conquer the land we will continue to fail: economically, esthetically, emotionally. If we can accept what we are: members and citizens of the land community, as Leopold described us, then we have a chance to discover that conservation and agricultural production are not inimical, but rather intimately linked.

I came to farming late in life, like Leopold, and carrying a set of conservation convictions that set me apart from most of my fellow farmers. What I did not have was an understanding of the deep complexity of my farm landscape, nor an appreciation of the consequences of trying to dominate that system rather than work with it. For the first eight years, I struggled (and failed) to make a "standard" Australian grazing approach fit with both my ethical convictions and the vagaries of Australian climate. For the past three years, I have tried something completely different, an approach that fits Leopold's vision of a land ethic, granting equal weight to the needs of the landscape and the animals that inhabit it. And oddly enough, it is turning out to be not only ecologically sound, but economically and emotionally satisfying.

The approach is based on the behaviours of and interactions between grazing animals and the plants that they graze[2]. Not surprisingly, animals evolved with the ability to learn how to eat in their native environments. Those native environments evolved mechanisms to prevent the grazers from eating them out of existence. As a result of that evolutionary interaction, grazers can, given sufficient biodiversity, balance their diets and self-medicate (e.g. for intestinal parasites).

In order for this to work in a production system, grazing pressure has to be reduced enough that the landscape can maintain a high level of biodiversity, and animals have to be given the opportunity to learn how to take advantage of that diversity.

A startling result of implementing this system is that my production system is in fact significantly more profitable at lower stocking rate. A 30% reduction in stocking rate has resulted in a 40% increase in wool production and a 27% increase in fertility, combined with major improvements in costs (no drenching for parasites and no supplementary feeding).

Perhaps most satisfying of all, though, is that working within the natural system has allowed me to re-create a landscape that is beautiful as well as resilient: precisely the characteristics that my conservation ethics desire.

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[2] These ideas were developed by Fred Provenza, in a series of research papers spanning several decades.