Better by Working Together

Henry Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.” This act of working together for a common purpose or goal is the very definition of collaboration.  By working together, individuals ensure that they can reach a larger goal than if they had worked alone. However, working together is not always an easy path to take.

There are three major ideals or actions that are connected to one another and help strengthen the feeling of trust necessary for people to work together. I call these the three C’s. There’s the Core of people, finances, and resources, Cooperation among those involved, and Communication. All three of these cannot function properly without the others.

The core entails the three components for a healthy rangeland. In an article by Preston Sullivan, who is involved in multiple holistic management studies, he argues that in any sort of management there are three divisions. These divisions are social, environmental, and economical. In other words, the core of collaboration is about relationships, natural resources, and money. In order to encourage collaboration among everyone involved with our range lands, we must focus on ALL parts of the core. However, in the face of hardships or when times are tough, it is extremely difficult not to hyper focus on the economics portion. Many people believe that if we were to receive just a little more money, or a little more rain, then everything will be fine. Yet, in this 21st century world ignoring the social and environmental parts can only result in economic failure. Without a working relationship between agencies and agricultural businesses, collaboration cannot function efficiently.

Secondly, we have cooperation. For collaboration to be effective, cooperation is a necessity. To collaborate is to work with other people to attain a goal, while cooperation is the necessary step for people to work effectively. You can collaborate but if you are not able to cooperate, you will get little accomplished. In our world, the world of public lands, there is always talk of collaboration between those who historically have not gotten along. But, people tend to miss the fact that these different groups, while collaborating, are not cooperating. They are able to see the issue at hand, and collaborate with each other to try and work towards the common goal. Moreover, they do not cooperate along the way, often resulting in resentment and a loss of productivity. In order for collaboration to work, cooperation needs to also be a main focus.

Finally, there is communication. From communication stems trust, respect, and understanding. Everyone gets upset when they feel they are not being listened to. Those of us involved with rangeland issues are no exception. Over and over decisions are made that are not communicated to the other party, and resentment and distrust can follow because of this. Just as my sister and I started arguing that cold morning long ago, so too do the agencies and the agricultural businesses debate over a lack of communication. With better communication, comes more efficiency.

By working together, individuals ensure that they can reach a larger goal than if they had worked alone. However, working together is not always an easy path to take. When my sister and I were younger, we watched orphaned calves move in and out of our lives quite frequently. Most of the time we had one or two to take care of, but at one point I distinctly remember having three headstrong older calves. To most that seems difficult but still manageable. However, to my little sister and I, then, at six and eight, these calves were the equivalent of handling three bucking bulls with the temperament of our grandpa after waking him up from his nap.

One morning as we shrugged on our puffy winter coats, an argument got started. All that I can recall is the eye rolls and silly attitude that only sisters can truly master, and the stubbornness I felt that there was no way I would help her feed those calves. After pointedly letting her know that it was her turn to feed two calves at once, I marched off with my single bottle.

As I soon learned, feeding one calf with two others starving beside you is not the easiest job in the world. These same difficulties are experienced every day with collaboration between agricultural businesses and federal agencies in the world of rangeland management and agriculture. The difficulty I am talking about is the lack of collaboration when it comes to rangeland management.

By the time my sister Laynie showed up struggling to carry two heavy bottles, I was huffing and puffing while running in circles trying to keep the half-gone bottle out of reach of the two other calves. As she climbed the fence, I sprinted towards her begging her to hurry and work with me so I could finish feeding those stubborn calves.

Obviously, I hadn’t yet learned the value of collaborating, but the difficulties of collaboration had become clear. Many have heard stories that tell the all too familiar tale of federal agencies and agricultural businesses butting heads for what seems like an eternity. Many involved would probably like to admit defeat when it comes to working together. And others might say this lack of collaboration “is just a part of this lifestyle, this culture, isn’t it?” My answer to this, is no.

My family and I live in a remote corner of Nevada close to the Idaho border. Anyone who is familiar with “cold desert” environments can testify to the fact that we often have very limited natural resources. Every drop of water and every blade of grass is precious to both the agricultural businesses who use the land and the federal agencies who manage it. For the many families and agencies that have worked on these lands for generations, these natural resources are as vital as the bottles my sister and I gave those three orphan calves. My family and I have been running a small cow/calf operation with a rotation between three pastures as well as grazing time on our private ground for about four years. Due to the fact that we graze our livestock on land that is owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), we have worked very closely with wildlife biologists, range conservationists, and wildlife protection agencies. Nevada’s lands are 84% federally owned, the highest amount of federal land in the nation. However, much of that land is used for agricultural purposes. This results in unique relationships between multiple groups invested in the land, requiring them to collaborate.

Almost everyone in Nevada who is part of this unique relationship could tell you a personal story of how a federal agency and an agricultural business have locked horns over an issue such as project funding or cattle rotation. Just as my eight year old self struggled to collaborate with my sister and those three calves, so too do the agencies and businesses of our rangelands. That being said, it is not surprising that law suits, angry words, eye rolls, and grudges are not only possible, but commonly exchanged.

If we were to look at this problem with collaboration as a tree, we can see that the resistance to collaborate is the root of the issue. It’s a tangled mess where all of us struggle to work together, even though we know it is a necessary action. The solution to this problem we are all facing can be seen as the trunk of the tree, essential to the situation at hand. It has to be strong and sturdy in order to support everyone’s thoughts and ideas. Finally we have the desired results and the benefits, which are the leaves of the tree. These leaves symbolize the growth of relationships and cooperation. With that being said, the root of the issue in our world of rangeland management is the lack of collaboration.

In contrast to this tangled web of roots, my family and I are fortunate to be part of a working group that for the most part does not argue or harbor feelings of resentment against each other. We get to enjoy the results and the benefits, the leaves of our tree, as a result of years of many people working at the root and the trunk of our rangelands. This collaborative conservation group we are a part of, Shoesole, as it’s called, involves my family at the Home Ranch, the Cottonwood ranch, and the Boise ranch. Working with us are representatives from the BLM, state agencies, federal agencies, wildlife biologists, organizations such as Trout Unlimited, and several others. When most people think about all of these different interest groups in one room they could assume that we argue constantly. As my neighbor, Agee Smith pointed out, our Shoesole group did indeed start this way. However, relationships were encouraged and collaboration became an extension of those friendships. I can confidently tell you today that we are all working together; we are collaborating, to ensure that the rangelands we are entrusted with are well cared for, which is ultimately the goal at hand.

So, why the need for collaboration? Often it stems from a need for a solution to a problem that is too big for an individual effort. As stated in “Stitching The West Back Together” “[b]uilding alliances between local, regional, state, and national interest groups that share common goals is a strategic way to achieve large, landscape-scale conservation.” (Charnley, page 123.) My neighbor, Agee Smith, an experienced conservationist and family ranch manager explained to me how our working collaborative group helped the Cottonwood Ranch with their conservation efforts. He showed me a photo from 1996. In the photo, it is obvious that this forest ecosystem is not in the healthiest condition. After Shoesole was formed, and collaboration was encouraged, the agencies as well as the Cottonwood Ranch began to focus on conserving and reviving this area using rotational grazing and rest. The second picture showed the forest after it burned in 2000. He then showed me a third photo taken in 2014. By coming together, compromising, and listening to one another the rancher and the agency can ensure that the public lands they are entrusted with are as healthy as possible. These pictures are living proof of that. Collaboration of people, professionals and ideas has made an increase in plant diversity and overall rangeland health.

The roots of the tree and the roots of the issue are one in the same. Everyone knows that they are there, but it is often passed over due to an obsession with the outcome. You must begin at the roots in order to achieve sustainability and prosperity.

Many times in range management, we can see the problem and there should be an obvious solution. However, with so many entities, variables, and emotions invested in the issue the solution is often muddled. Without collaboration it can take months, if not years, to find a solution that will affect the people utilizing this land and those who are managing it the least negatively. Just as the trunk of the tree holds the branches through the wind and the storm, the solution can sustain everyone who relies on the rangelands. The solution ought to be a decision made through collaboration. This decision ought to be one that unites all entities.

One of the largest obstacles involving everyone in collaboration is meeting every group’s needs. There has to be a careful balance of meeting one groups needs while trying not to hurt or downplay another group. This perspective is based on the premise that everyone and everything in this world has an impact on something else later in time. It is a sociological view that sees society as being like a working machine. All parts must be operating, and collaborating in order to function. Everything that one part does will change how the rest operate. With one invested group come changes that can either benefit or hurt the effort to conserve, manage, or protect. Unfortunately, the traditional reaction by many agricultural businesses is to resist any changes being made by regulatory agencies. Similarly, when most ranchers suggest a change be made, regulatory agencies can be reluctant to listen. If all of the parts of our range management organism resist working together, how will we ever get to be healthy? While resistance is not always the case between interest groups, these sorts of reactions where we refuse to collaborate, are those that tend to stick. However, we are all a part of the larger whole of range management. We all play a role, significant or otherwise, and how we react and work together can determine the effectiveness of change. Just as every blade of grass matters to our rangelands, so does every person working for or against collaboration.

Once all of those involved with the public lands understand the people they are working with and the personal concerns that they have, we can look at issues being faced together as a whole. As collaboration is encouraged, our rangelands benefit as we look at issues that arise as a whole. By working together, the leaves of our “rangelands tree” begin to develop. We begin to respect and appreciate one another’s’ views therefore being more likely to make a balanced decision regarding our rangelands. The root of our issue is still there, but because the trunk and the new found solution the tree has been, we now have the benefits and the beauty of collaboration in the leaves.

On that disastrous day long ago, after I apologized, my sister and I were soon standing side by side, holding one bottle between the two of us, with the other hand holding the second and third bottles. With the anger forgotten and three content calves in front of us, I couldn’t help but laugh at what had just happened. I knew from that day on, that sometimes the best solution to the problems we’re facing in life comes from collaborating. We need to collaborate in order to ensure our rangelands are healthy and being managed correctly. Our focus needs to shift to bettering relationships with those around us so we can cooperate amongst our communities. To function, we must look at all parts of the whole, so that we are both efficient and effective. Whether handling three orphaned calves or managing the nation’s rangelands, everything is better by working together.

Resources:

* Bryan, Todd A. “Tragedy Averted: The Promise of Collaboration” School of Natural Resources and Environment. University of Michigan. Article. 1 June 2004.
* Charnley, Susan, Thomas E. Sheridan, and Gary P. Nabhan. “Stitching the West Back Together” *The University of Chicago Press*. Published 2014.
* Sullivan, Preston. “Holistic Management: A Whole-Farm Decision Making Framework” *ATTRA*. Article. July 2001.