



Conserving Grazing Lands

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The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition is a landowner-led partnership of grazers, organizations, federal and state agencies, and university staff that understand and work toward the enhancement of privately owned grasslands and grazing lands in Nebraska.

In an effort to conserve and improve those grasslands, coordinate cooperative assistance to landscape managers, and promote a stronger understanding of the value of grassland, this factsheet will discuss principles and practices that enhance the ecological and social strength of grazing lands.

STEWARDSHIP

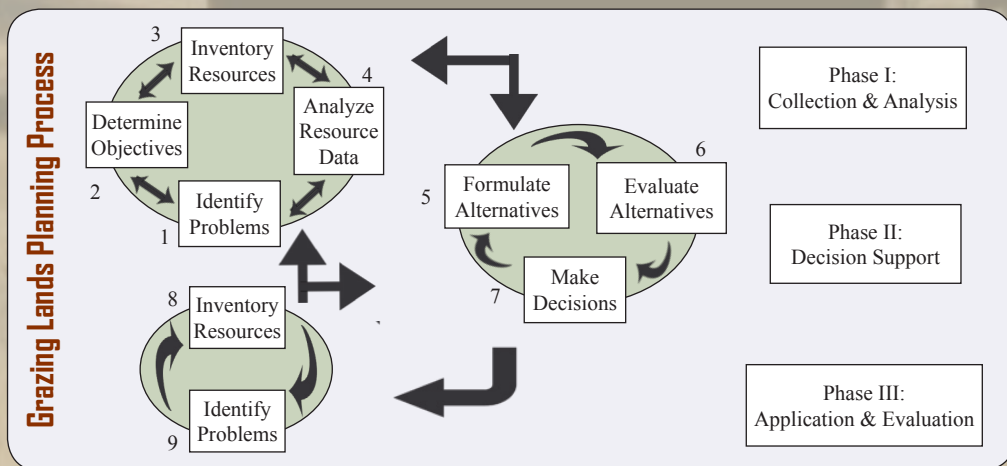
History and scientific research have documented the immense value of having a dedicated resource steward involved in making management decisions on grazing lands. A steward is a caretaker who has a deep emotional investment to the health of a landscape, is economically tied to its welfare, and is also “in-situ,” or on site, so that he/she can closely observe all of the management factors and issues concerning a grazing parcel.

This “dedicated presence” on grazing lands is one of the most intense levels of interaction between ecology and man in the entire world. The landscape and the steward are tied directly to each other in times of bounty and hardship both. Stewards often spend decades on one parcel of land, lending a broad set of historic reference points to their decision base and knowledge that is not always obvious to others with less experience.

Few true stewards will make decisions to negatively impact the health of grazing lands because they understand that their welfare is tied directly to that landscape.

LANDSCAPE AWARENESS

The first principle of stewardship is managers should learn the plant communities and soils on their grazing lands. Only by knowing and recognizing native plants and desirable introduced species will a manager be able to set goals for a “desired condition” on grazing land. In addition, managers must understand the growth phases of these plant communities to effectively schedule and plan grazing actions. The following diagram helps explain thought processes to improve landscape awareness and conservation planning.



RANGELAND MONITORING

Once a manager becomes familiar with his/her grazing lands plant community, he/she must learn how to watch it for annual phases and trends, or dramatic impacts or improvements. This requires a “monitoring” program. Utilizing a monitoring program can be compared to learning to read gauges on a vehicle. Monitoring practices can provide feedback on how to interpret the fuel, water temperature, and oil flow gauges on land – but they will be named things like utilization, growth stage, readiness, and production level instead.

Monitoring rangelands can be done using a variety of methods. However, the most effective approaches include vegetation transects, photo-points, and production estimates. These can be easily correlated with the amount of grazing herbage, wildlife food/cover or carbon sequestered on each landscape.

The most important practice for managers to follow is to measure and watch (monitor) so they know what condition their grazing lands are in and which direction they are headed. A good grazing lands manager is always watching and learning so he/she can make informed decisions.

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PRESCRIBED GRAZING

The term prescribed grazing is the practice of grazing using a controlled manner and timing so that the condition of the landscape and the condition of the grazing species (whether domestic or wild) move toward a determined goal to benefit both. This often relates directly to the timing of the grazing action as well as the specific location.

The correct grazing prescription will also depend on topography, available water supplies, economics, grass conditions, kinds and classes of livestock, long-range goals for grassland improvement and the time necessary to supervise the operation.

Prescribed or targeted grazing can use the herbivory of grazing animals to accomplish a number of beneficial goals on grasslands, including reducing weed populations, invigorating old grass stands, and recovering erosion sites to name a few.

ROTATION & REST

By conducting prescribed grazing a manager can control when and to what extent plants are used by animals. Key principles in this practice are rotation and rest.

Rotation is the practice of grazing different parcels so that grazing pressure is never continuous on one grassland segment. If possible managers should change their rotation pattern each year to provide opportunities for development of diverse species and seed banks within grazing lands. This aids the grasslands in becoming more resilient to disturbance.

Rest is the practice of allowing a plant community to recover from grazing pressure after use. This can be done each rotation or each year with the understanding that most plant communities need a growing season rest or deferment on an intermittent basis. It is also important to understand that as plant growth slows due to seasonal changes or shortage of precipitation, then the rest period will need to be extended.

RESPONSIBLE STOCKING

A key principle of responsible management of grazing lands is to always leave enough root mass, leaf mass and carbohydrate reserves to allow for effective re-growth and maintenance of desirable native plant communities. At the same time, it is important that grasslands be utilized enough that they do not turn decadent and allow for the invasion of undesirable plants.

This combined with a manager's need to generate enough income to effectively manage the landscape leads to the delicate balance of responsible stocking rates.

A stocking rate is a function of the number of grazing animals present on a landscape for a specified period of time, and how much of the forage they remove (when it is removed is also crucial).

When stocking rates are "heavy" the resources on the land begin to feel a negative impact. When stocking rates are "moderate" or "low" the landscape benefits.

Recommended stocking rates will vary from site to site, manager to manager, year to year, and goal to goal. It is important that managers continually monitor the status and health of their grazing lands and regularly re-evaluate and adjust use.



Photo by Tamara Choat

MANAGEMENT MENTORS

One of the most effective methods for a grazing lands manager to learn sound practices is to see them implemented on another landscape, and have an opportunity to visit with the manager of that landscape. Rancher-to-rancher education and sharing allows both parties to expand their understanding of and skills at managing grazing lands. The Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition, in partnership with UNL and the Nebraska NRCS, offers the Cowboy Logic program – a sharing network of experienced grazers and land managers who have offered to work with others to exchange knowledge. Costs associated with travel and exchange visits through the Cowboy Logic program are often available from the NGLC. To learn more, visit www.cowboylogic.org or www.nebraskagrazinglands.org.

For more information on conserving grazing lands contact the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition or your local University of Nebraska Extension educators or USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service representatives. These professionals can provide valuable information, resources and often cost-share funds to help you become a better grasslands steward.