

The Future of Positive Change

“Those who do not understand nature are destined to deplete it, but those who understand nature are compelled to conserve it.” These words come from Steve Nelle, a retired National Resource Conservation Service range conservationist, district conservationist, wildlife biologist and zone biologist. I have seen firsthand the impact that ecologically sound, sustainable, and positive land management decisions can and do have on the earth. Through my involvement in projects, camps, and workshops, I have met and learned from fellow Texans who are making a difference in the earth through their land stewardship practices. I have been inspired by these people and strive to share the knowledge that they have given me with others.

Land management decisions made today can make an extreme difference on the land very far into the future. A poor decision, like overstocking livestock on a piece of land during a drought, can result in depleted soil that cannot be replenished for decades. In this scenario, reducing the stocking rate can enable the land to be more productive during wet growing seasons, thus reducing soil erosion. One of the biggest challenges for land stewardship is making good management practices a commonplace. This can be achieved more easily with the implementation of youth education programs and land management and stewardship activities.

Texas 4-H has been a major part of my life for the past 10 years. To me, the most influential project has been the Range Management project, which grants youth involved the ability to understand the responsibility that people have in ensuring that management decisions are sustainable and ethical. This project teaches plant identification, values of these plants for both wildlife and livestock animals, management decisions based on specific scenarios, and

identification of poor land condition indicators through Range Evaluation and Plant Identification contests.

Each June, the Texas Section Society for Range Management hosts a week-long, hands-on workshop for youth aged 14-18, held at the Texas Tech University-Junction campus. The participants are given the opportunity to witness a variety of management practices firsthand. From assisting in a controlled burn to watershed and erosion activities, the TSSRM Youth Range Workshop inundates youth with information. Directors describe this information overflow as “trying to drink from a fire hose.” I attended this workshop during the summer of 2013 and walked away with a new, vastly expanded well of information.

Texas Brigades holds a total of seven camps each summer for youth aged 13-17. I attended Texas Ranch Brigade in July 2014. This 4 ½ day camp left me exhausted, but also with a sense of accomplishment in what I had learned and achieved. The Ranch portion of Texas Brigades focuses on beef cattle production from conception to consumer. Every cattle operation is built literally from the ground up. Healthy and productive land, resulting from good management practices, is the basis for every level of a sustainable, ecological beef industry. This information is both the opening and closing focus of Texas Ranch Brigade.

Through educational experiences like these, youth are able to see how each decision they make can make an impact on their earth. Whether a person lives in an urban or rural area, each of us can choose to have a positive influence on our earth through good management practices. These decisions are not just reserved for those who own or work on large portions of land. Management decisions are made on every scale, from window flower-boxes to huge farms and ranches.

Through my own personal experiences in these programs, I have witnessed the difference that management decisions can have on our earth. One of the most poignant moments was during my participation in the TSSRM Youth Range Workshop. Neighboring landowners had purchased their land within a year of each other. Both ran cattle operations on each of their properties. One landowner used a deferred-grazing system and kept his livestock stocking rate flexible according to rainfall and production conditions. The second kept a steady stocking rate, because it was how his own father and grandfather had run cattle on their lands. After several years, and after the 2011 drought, you could see a distinct difference between the two properties simply by glancing across the fence line.

On both sides, there was very little current-year grazing plant production due to the lack of moisture. However, that was the only similarity between the two. On one side of the fence, the grasses were sparse, short, less desirable, and had been grazed down considerably, with a large amount of bare ground exposed which led to soil erosion. On the other property, the grasses had a strong covering over the soil and were taller, more desirable species. While both properties were suffering from drought, one landowner held the potential to recover easily during a single wet year, while the other will take decades full of wet growing seasons to recover to the state he held before the drought. The decisions that are being made by those who consider themselves stewards of the land are making a positive change in the earth; the water and soil cycles of their land are functional and efficient. They are planning for the bad years, so that when they come, it will not decimate the health of the land they have so carefully built up.

Each of these experiences have left a lasting impact on me. I have been inspired to continue to learn and gain new skills that will allow me to become both a better land steward and teach others to do the same. In order to further my cause, I have sought out additional

educational opportunities. I have completed the Master of Beef Advocacy program, as well as the online program for Beef Quality Assurance. I have published an article over youth advocacy and have given multiple educational presentations about land stewardship and how good management decisions lead to positive earth changes. I have also been giving a weekly Ag Report on local radio each Tuesday morning.

In the future, I desire to become an adult leader for the Texas 4-H Range Management project. I also plan to involve the next generation in land management and stewardship by placing my own future children in programs like 4-H, Texas Brigades, and the TSSRM Youth Range Workshop. I have every intention of making sure that those around me are compelled to conserve and improve our earth through an understanding of how land management practices have effects felt well into the future – to ensure sustainable practices are continued long after my generation has passed.