

# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF RIPARIAN AREA MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Discusses three reasons why rate of improvement of riparian areas has been as slow as it has and suggests methods to increase the rate of improvement. Impediments to riparian area improvement are institutional and natural resistance to change, mixed land ownership, and lack of incentives. Suggested management changes include improved career tracks, adoption of holistic philosophies, use of volunteers and consensus problem-solving techniques, and better incentives for improving management programs.*

## INTRODUCTION

I was introduced to riparian area concerns in the mid-1970's while working on the Randolph Grazing Environmental Impact Statement as an economist. I was asked to determine the costs of fencing 7 miles of stream that flowed through Bureau of Land Management (BLM) acreage. I can remember thinking of how expensive it would be to build and maintain those fences. I can also remember what was frequently the description of riparian areas in those days—sacrifice areas.

I know that my philosophies have changed, probably with those of many other range managers. However, in 1984 I can also remember discussing with the executive vice president of the Utah Cattlemen's Association on a Stewardship tour that what was acceptable in the "old days" was no longer acceptable. We can no longer accept what may have been acceptable in the "good old days."

I will outline here some of the reasons why the improvement of riparian areas has been painfully slow and unless there are some changes will probably continue slowly.

The latter-day awareness of riparian issues probably started about 1977 with the Symposium on the Importance, Preservation and Management of the Riparian Habitat in Tucson, AZ. Bill Platts did some of his earlier work in Rich County, UT, back in the 1970's. Since then, there have been numerous symposia, publications, articles, meetings or training sessions, and training modules on riparian habitats and management. In fact, we probably have much of the needed technical information at hand. This growth in information has led to an increasing awareness of the need for riparian area improvement, particularly as this knowledge is shared by the agency personnel. However, the slow rate of change has likely been related to a number of factors, including human nature.

The condition of our riparian areas was probably the first to reflect the pressures of European settlers, and for the same reasons will be the last to reflect the improved management of the upland rangelands. The natural reasons related to domestic and wild animal grazing are basic to the problems, which are increased by human resistance to change.

## INHIBITIONS TO CHANGE

Evidence of this resistance to change is shown by numerous self-help programs, such as Weight Watchers. Most people need continual and frequent meetings to change undesirable habits. We, as human, social animals have institutional and individual inhibitions to change. This resistance to change is evident in the agencies, which are now being accused of being too commodity oriented, and in the agricultural or ranching community, which is often accused of being the laggard in concern over the condition of our wildlands.

Riparian area management is or should be part of an overall rangeland management program. To quote Al Winward, "If we manage riparian areas for quality water, most other uses will be well provided for." Although the riparian areas may show improper management for all to see, it is also extremely likely that they are symptomatic of a management regime that has potential for improvement. This may mean a management philosophy that is cognizant of the whole environment—not most of it. It may mean a higher degree of commitment on the agency's part and on the grazer's part. To some extent, riparian issues have become "other duties as assigned" to the agency people, and to the grazers just something more to worry about. This has probably exacerbated the problem.

The main programs have had a strong constituency; the range, wildlife, and forestry programs all have their strong lobby groups. Unfortunately, they are all commodity oriented. The commodity and disjointed nature of funding in the agencies may have contributed to the slow nature of improvement. Riparian area management is not just a range or wildlife or forestry problem, it is a land management problem that needs a holistic approach. To increase the depth of the problem, riparian areas are found in only a few grazing allotments when many grazing allotments are in need of attention by a range staff that is often too small.

The fact that riparian concerns are "environmental" rather than commodity oriented leaves them with a comparatively divided constituency. This new constituency is contrary to what the agencies are accustomed to dealing with. Many people concerned with riparian issues are not going to concern themselves with the funding process, job titles, or grazing or wildlife issues. Often, these factors are

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only peripheral to the main issue of good-condition riparian areas. This interest group is growing in number and strength, as we saw last year in Salt Lake City at the BLM's hearing on vegetative treatment. They sometimes are not trained in the ecological sciences and processes and know little of agency complexities. They think that they know what they want, and they want it now. How often do we find ourselves in the same position on an issue, where we know what we want and we want it now? This change in demand is contrary to the funding priorities or needs as we, as agency people, sometimes see them.

This is a problem that Tom Quigley addressed in two recent articles in *Rangelands* (Quigley 1989; Quigley and Ashton 1990). Are we being shown something that we need to listen to? As noted above, agency people are not the only people that are reluctant to change their methods or philosophies. The agricultural community is one that prides itself on independent thinking. But how often have we read of or known the rancher or farmer that is willing to buy a new implement but is reluctant to try a new idea. Unfortunately, sometimes the agency staff and the agriculturalists are seeing the same reflection in the mirror.

## OWNERSHIP PROBLEMS

The mixed land-ownership pattern has also been a problem. In our work in Rich County, riparian area management has been one of our high-visibility concerns. In 1985, the Ogden Standard-Examiner interviewed a Division of Wildlife Resources biologist in Rich County. The article pulled few punches, leaving much unsaid, allowing the pictures to speak for themselves. Some of the land pictured looked devastated. Although the article did describe the difference in land ownership, the pictures left the impression that all of the land was BLM owned and managed. Later a followup article was written with more explanation on the different land ownerships and management problems. Nonetheless, I am sure some damage to reputations was done in the first article, and probably very little education was done in the followup article. In another instance, a permittee fenced his property so that cattle were forced to utilize the riparian area to an extent much higher than they would have otherwise, just in trailing to get to another part of the allotment.

Among Federal land management personnel, the fact that their agencies control only a minority of the riparian areas is well known. This is a legacy of old laws designed to encourage the settlement of the Country. In fact, the remaining riparian areas are but a remnant of what was here prior to settlement. Most riparian areas are under the plow or otherwise obligated. However, the ownership of the land is not always known to the hiking, fishing, or concerned public—some of the new and changing constituency. This means that we as managers will need to work harder to improve what we can and work harder on those skills needed to improve or sell the program to other sectors—private landholders and State, county, and local governments. This may mean that people skills, something that we in agencies may have a hard time documenting or rewarding, may take on a higher importance than they have in the past. It may also mean that we encourage—monetarily—some people to stay in place

for the good of their career and for the good of the land. Rewarding good people for staying in place, rather than discouraging them from staying in place, may be an innovative idea whose time has arrived. Obviously this may mean some changes in thinking, but the payoff could be better managed land and less money spent on transferring people about the country.

## INCENTIVES NEEDED

The reluctance to change and the mixed land ownership add up to a large disincentive to improve any riparian area; indeed maybe we should be surprised at the progress that we have made. It may take some imagination or innovation, but an incentive needs to be in place to encourage the improvement of these areas of biological and managerial diversity. We need to find incentives to change our ways of working. Economic incentives work for many people, while altruism works only for a few and only for a limited time. If the grazer could see rewards within a short period of time, or if agency people had as part of their career plans the feature that it paid them to stay in the area, or manage better, we might see faster progress on riparian issues.

Others have often written on the free-market inefficiencies in our system; those that have the legal mandate do not receive the benefits of the improved management, whether it is an agency managing a riparian area, a rancher grazing his livestock on public lands, or a Fish and Game Department managing deer and elk. Although this may be an inefficiency in our economic system, it is not to say that other systems are better, but to realize that we have something to work around. We must focus on the commonalities, and manage for them—clean water, more productive land, and more diversity within the ecological and economic constraints that we have.

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Here are some possible solutions. Regulatory or structural flexibility would assist in permitting economic or career incentives for the agency professionals to remain in an area to continue working on resource problems. Often we give employees much more incentive to leave rather than stay and be effective in their chosen field of work. Possible ideas may be a technical career track, additional job elements, or different job elements recognizing a person's expertise, or even a different job title to encourage a highly skilled person to remain on the job. While funding may be dedicated to different programs, some aspects of management may not need to be.

The increased regulatory flexibility would enable the agencies to examine other radical ideas to encourage the ownership and solution of the problem by the users or ranchers. Perhaps permittees could have some part of the grazing fee waived to avoid using the riparian area, or a conservation organization or Division of Wildlife Resources might offer a substitute for use of the riparian area. As an example, the Division of Wildlife Resources may have a particular time of use for a part of the allotment that may be of interest to the rancher and be willing to trade for some nonuse in the riparian area.

Encouraging the holistic approach to land management may also help the riparian area management problem. We need to encourage a close working relationship between disciplines and programs, rather than one that is adversarial. The tunnel-vision approach that is sometimes used in program management and planning emphasizes the differences, not the commonalities, in goals and needs. The BLM has addressed this problem in the past, but there could be improvements. As an example, the new BLM course "Interdisciplinary Activity Planning" deals specifically with this issue. Maybe the assignment of the allotment with riparian areas needs to be made to the seasoned range conservationist, riparian specialist, and wildlife biologist in combination. Obviously, it would not necessarily be a full-time job, but their work on that allotment could be in concert, as would their rewards or incentives. Riparian concerns are so important and visible that they warrant such intensity of management. We need to emphasize the commonalities, not the differences. The same approach would be used in the agricultural sector, between the grazers, the Fish and Game Department, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Extension Service.

The mixed land-ownership problem also has potential solutions. Indeed, this problem lends itself well to an interagency approach with the involvement of the Forest Service, BLM, and State agencies. It is the type of challenge that cries out for a cooperative and consensus type of approach to problem solving. Once the problem is shared, so will be the responsibility. The consensus approach needs trust and commitment (hence the need for the agency person to be around and committed to the project) to be effective. Doc and Connie Hatfield of eastern Oregon have discussed this type of management in their columns in the *Farmer-Stockman* magazines. It has also been used with some success in the Oregon Watershed Improvement Coalition.

Not only does the riparian area problem cry out for a consensus-type approach, but there is room for volunteerism also. Volunteerism is a growing factor in many projects today. The agencies now have volunteer coordinators, and many others routinely take calls from groups looking for projects to work on. As an example, on Earth Day 1991, nearly 1,000 people helped plant trees at the Emigration Canyon fire site of 1988, east of Salt Lake City. This massive effort was a cooperative project that

was the fruit of Tree Utah and others. Another example is the volunteer spring exclosure fencing work that has been done for two consecutive years by Utah State University students in Rich County. Some factors to improve the success of the projects include the fact that the project must fit the size and skills of the volunteer group, it must not appear as just busy work, and it should be something that offers pride of ownership and the commitment of management. There must be a long-term commitment on the agency's part. The agricultural and recreating public have long memories, often longer than the tenure of the area or district manager. The project or emphasis cannot be perceived as having the duration of a flash in the pan—here today, gone tomorrow.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have addressed three reasons why progress on riparian areas has been slower than we would desire:

1. Institutional and natural inhibitions to change, and the political pressures associated with this resistance to change.
2. Mixed land ownership.
3. Lack of incentives to improve or change.

These impediments to improvement can be overcome through innovative management changes, possibly including changed career tracks, holistic management philosophies, volunteer programs, consensus problem-solving techniques, and increased incentives for improved management programs. Increased regulatory flexibility to manage personnel and programs may also be helpful in improving riparian areas.

While these suggestions may not be as flashy as some proposals, they may go far to bring riparian area management to a point where the more technical aspects of riparian area rehabilitation have greater utility.

## REFERENCES

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