

# Sustainability, Working Landscapes and Living on the Land

George Ruyle, Ph.D., Range Management Extension Specialist, School of Natural Resources, University of Arizona

Having lots of open space around us is one reason for moving to the country. But maintaining zoning restrictions alone often will not protect as much open space as most rural resident's desire. Additionally, wildlife habitat and watershed requirements may call for larger blocks of undeveloped land than even the most well planned development may provide. One way to keep large contiguous areas of open space is to maintain working ranches, often called working landscapes. Such ranches, supported by range livestock production, can be the foundation of open space planning as seems to be the case in Pima County. The Malpai Borderlands Group is often cited as an exemplary effort of local ranchers to organize around the concept of conserving open, working landscapes. Other efforts to conserve ranches and open space are led by organizations such as the Arizona Open Land Trust (<http://www.aolt.org/>) and the California Rangeland Trust (<http://www.rangelandtrust.org/>). But there is much more to it than just keeping open space open.

Maintaining working landscapes implies sustainability of the basic resources and of the people living on the land; a complex system that includes resource conservation, economic and social considerations. This complexity is encompassed in the concept of sustainability, now widely embraced as a mainstream societal goal. A recently published newspaper article defined sustainability as the ability to provide for the needs of the world's current population without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves (*Arizona Daily Star* 10/10/2007 Tom Beal). All three Arizona Universities have active programs specifically dedicated to study the concept. These include the ASU Global Institute of Sustainability and the NAU Center for Sustainable Environments. At the UA, sustainability issues are a rally point where various science and education units find common ground for collaboration.

Ranching focuses on the sustainability of livestock grazing as a land use and therefore depends on the land's continued capacity to produce plants that can be grazed by livestock. To do this requires consideration of ways to use range forage without reducing the lands potential to produce vegetation and without jeopardizing future uses.

Some time ago I had the opportunity to study with Dr. Thad Box who at that time held the Gerald Thomas Endowed Chair for Sustainable Agriculture at New Mexico State University. The many definitions of sustainability we discussed nearly always included four concepts: equity for today's land stewards, because without some level of profitability, conservation objectives are often overlooked; maintaining future options for the land by maintaining or improving the basic productive potential of the resource; an emphasis on long-term returns over short-term profits; and finally, environmental enhancement by trying to leave the land in better shape than when you took it over.

Over the long term, decades at least, providing support for sustainable working landscapes through ranching is easier said than done. A number of requirements must be met and others at least considered for supporting a long term goal of sustaining open space. First of course is the need for the open space to begin with and this is where current, active ranches come in. Beyond the land itself, there are additional requirements for maintaining working landscapes. There is the need to maintain the physical infrastructure of the ranches, including fencing, water developments, and corrals. There is also a need for people with the knowledge, skills and desire to run the business and do the work. These abilities are often overlooked or undervalued in my opinion. There is also a need for local and regional business networks; ranch equipment and supplies, livestock sales, feeding facilities, trucking, veterinarian services, skilled labor and of course, consumers of ranching products. Finally there is the need for a social infrastructure to provide interaction on the level of common values and experiences.

These themes may be applied to large and small parcels alike but to look at these separately indicates a false dichotomy because they are all part of the whole. Your 5 acres should be viewed as integral to your neighbors 40 acres which are part of the working landscape of 10,000 acres. Living on the land carries the responsibility of living with the land, in a sustainable manner.

Remember, sustainability has four themes, simplified by Dr. Box: equity for today's generation, a better life for our grandkids, leave options open for those who follow us, and leave the world better than we found it.