



Fenceless grazing

Kentish, N¹

¹ Low Stress Stock Handling; Resource Consulting Services; nic@kentish.biz

Key words: Livestock; Grazing; Regenerating Agriculture

Abstract

Whilst it should be a given that livestock handling and instinctive behavior is a primary skill taught to every apprentice stock-handler, the fact remains that many animals never achieve their full production potential due to poor juvenile imprinting and mishandling by humans. This human/animal interaction and primary contact that carries throughout the lives of both can strongly influence animal impact on rangelands.

Roaming livestock that are contained by random fences, or limited by their walking distance to water, can have a significant impact on soil structure, surface water quality, perennial plant root survival and leaf regeneration. These and other degradations do little to endear livestock to ecologists and with little to no management of grazing practices in vast areas of the planet's grasslands, may see the forced disappearance of introduced livestock from our ecosystems.

Yet, what if we could accurately manage productive, carbon-sequestering grasslands through training humans to teach livestock to graze better? This remains my quest as a teacher of farmers.

Introduction

I have come to understand how easily we can 'park' or place animals in specifically suitable areas of the range through Low Stress Stock Handling training and the study of human/livestock communication. The specific movements that the handler should perform to train livestock to herd in this manner through body language are complex, and the associated skills are advanced yet, once understood, easily replicated.

Methods

Within the training of livestock to 'park', we aim to encourage the herd to move and stop responsively, then take all of the movement out of them for a given time. As the herd becomes superbly trusting and disciplined, the shepherd will need to pay intense attention to the available feed and move the animals accordingly. Individual animals that are troubled by humans will need extra work or possibly be culled from the herd.

The movements and body language conveyed to the herd or mob by the shepherd, work with the training of Low Stress Stockhandling instinctive behaviors, namely that –

- 1) Animals generally move in the direction they are facing
- 2) Herding animals mostly want to follow other animals

- 3) Animals strongly want to keep an eye on that which is pressuring them
- 4) Animals will do what they can to have pressure released

Combining these instincts with a principle of animal movement that parallel movement with the animal whilst in the forward section of one or both of its eyes will tend to slow it down or stop it, enabling communication to neutralize forward movement. This will ultimately stop the leaders of a herd or mob from grazing and wandering beyond the pasture or range upon which they are being ‘parked.’ To start the movement up again, the shepherd must re-form the herd or mob from its leadership to its tail animals and gently drive them away from the pressure.

Results

10 Meaningful Outcomes of Training Livestock to ‘Park’

1. Significant reduction in overgrazing of edible plants
2. Elevated graziers ability to select areas for grazing and nutrient defecation
3. Increased on-Range decision making to avoid grazing-sensitive regions and areas
4. More specific control of animal traffic and camps on riparian zones
5. Improved and impactful grazing pressure on higher and steeper Range areas
6. Significantly reduced waste deposition in waterways
7. Improved animal production gains due to less herd movement
8. Targeted nutrient movement and dispersal uphill from water sources
9. Enacting time-controlled grazing plans for livestock
10. Herds that require less pressure to move or control

Implications

Evolution has determined that herding animals are a protein and energy source for their carnivorous predators. In the absence of these predators, most herds, great and small, rapidly become sedentary. This is extraordinarily detrimental to water points and riparian zones that were historically the domain of the predator and at which prey animals drank quickly and left, not lying around like a hotel poolside.

Historically, a balance of vegetative cover was maintained by not overgrazing due to the herds being moved on by the predators. There are thousands of hectares of degraded landscapes across the rangelands due to soil salinity escalation from the baring out of vegetation by herding animals.

Yet, if herding animals can learn to trust their handlers or shepherds’ decision-making that there will always be continual adequate feed and water provided, their demeanor will change positively by reverting to a psychology that is controlled by instinct but without predatory pressure. Thus, they can be trained to spend their non-drinking time well away from vulnerable waterways and riparian zones. These grasslands on the range have added benefits of providing a wider diversity of edible and non-edible plant species, open visibility to provide safer loafing pastures, more relaxed and complete rumination time and thus feed conversion and less competition from other herds or mobs.

Conclusions

Ultimately, heavy-handed laws may be enacted to control and restrict grazing pressure on rangelands. These would unlikely be as effective as the motivation of the shepherd, herdsman or farmer to maintain their livestock in a positive plane of nutrition whilst simultaneously regenerating their rangelands.

If it is possible to regain the skills, knowledge and experiences of the shepherds of 1925 and earlier, grazing livestock with the capacity to remain where 'parked' would certainly become best practice for the modern grazer.

Groundcover, biodiversity, soil health and functional water cycle are all indicators of rangeland health. Whilst many of these regions are designated National Parks or Conservation areas, those that are managed by grazing livestock can also be maintained with these indicators functional.

By understanding and practicing these methods of 'parking' animals, as well as effective shepherding, it is possible to decommission infrastructure such as fences on the rangelands and at the same time, regeneratively manage vast areas of the planets grass and shrublands.

Acknowledgements

Low Stress Stock Handling Pty Ltd; Resource Consulting Services; KLR Marketing

References

- Abbott EC, Smith HH (1939) 'We Pointed Them North Recollections of a Cowpuncher', (Farra & Rinehart, Inc.: New York, New York USA)
- Cote S (2019) 'Stockmanship A powerful tool for grazing lands management', (USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Boise, Idaho USA)
- Williams E. (2020) 'Smile and Mean it', (Words, etcetera: Aldrich, Missouri USA)