



Utah range camp: helping youth value rangelands

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Abstract

In Utah, there are nearly 45 million acres of grazing land; 73 percent federally owned, 9 percent state owned, and 18 percent privately owned (GOPB, 2011 as cited in UDAF 2019). Rural economies benefit from livestock grazing on these rangelands, many of which are managed for multiple uses including recreation, mineral extraction, timber harvest and other practices. Political and public sentiment toward livestock grazing on public lands is becoming less positive as the attention turns from livestock and conservation to recreation and preservation. In 1973 Utah State University and the Utah Society for Range Management started Utah's Range Camp for high school youth in an effort to help the rising generation see the value of rangelands and livestock grazing. Up to 25 high school youth are allowed to participate in this program each year. The camp teaches youth about the basics of rangelands and natural resources. Youth learn about poisonous plants, noxious weeds, wildlife, livestock, and how to identify plants. If possible, the camp is changed to a different location each year to give returning youth new perspectives. Youth experience each ecosystem available in the area from desert shrubland to alpine tall forb communities. Professors, agency land managers, and ranchers are brought together to share with the youth about their jobs and different issues they face in their careers and ways to manage rangelands. Many young adults come to camp because they want to work in a range related field or because their family is involved in range, while others come because it gives them an edge at FFA (Future Farmers of America) competitions. Some attendees may never be involved in a range related career, but they are taught the importance of natural resources and multiple uses and become vital to the future of rangelands as educated community members.

Introduction

In 1954, the Utah Section of the Society for Range Management (Utah SRM) decided to begin holding youth Range Camps to speed up the adoption of rangeland management practices and principles among Utah ranchers (Smith, 1981). Range Camp is still used to help the public adopt rangeland principles but it is also used to help the students to network, expose them to potential colleges and careers and succeed in FFA competitions. The first camps were held from 1958-1962 and, starting in 1973, have been held annually ever since. While attendance has not been accurately counted prior to 2016, an average of 20 individuals attend each year making an estimated total of 1,100 youth that have participated in the Utah Range Camp since its start.

Methods

Originally, when Range Camp began, it was the responsibility of the Utah State University Rangeland Extension Specialist to direct the camp. This has evolved over time, the only real consistency being that the Range Camp Director was a member of the Utah SRM and was chosen by the previous Camp Director.

Each summer, up to 25 Utah High School youth between the ages of 14 and 18 who are interested in Rangeland Management and Natural Resources apply to attend Range Camp. Camp is usually held for one week (Monday-Thursday) in the summer, when most plants have finished their growing cycle. A site is chosen to base the camp out of for the entire week. Each year, it is the intent to change the location of the camp to give repeat students the chance to experience different areas. Depending on the venue, young women sleep in a cabin and young men camp in tents. Usually there are bathroom and kitchen facilities provided. Leaders for the camp are invited by the Camp Director and include Range Specialists from Federal and State Agencies, Universities and institutions, and the private sector.

Throughout the week, students learn about, collect, press, and correctly label 20 plants on their plant list. They are graded off of neatness and accuracy. Plant ID tests are held at several locations each day in which the student must properly identify the plants common name, growth form (grass, forb, woody), life span (annual, perennial), origin (native, introduced), forage value (desirable or undesirable for grazers and browsers), and whether the plant is toxic. Students should take notes and complete worksheets to receive full credit for participation. Worksheets include; forage production estimation, line point intercept, line intercept for shrubs, soil stability, and grazing utilization. These are filled out while a professional helps them complete these hands-on monitoring activities. At the end of the week each student must give a prepared two-minute oral presentation on something they learned at camp. Students are judged and graded and the combined winner and runner up are chosen to represent the Utah SRM by competing at the High School Youth Forum at the National SRM Meeting. The winners are given financial aid by the SRM to attend. To maintain high standards, students who do not achieve 50% or greater are not welcomed back to attend camp the next year. Previous winners may attend the next year but will not compete.

After attendees are checked in, they are given a plant press, a grass and forb identification field guide, water bottle, swag bag provided by a sponsoring college, pencil and pen, and a camp binder. The binder contains; the camp agenda, the Western National FFA Range CDE practice worksheets, ideas for a career in rangelands, instructions for writing an effective resume, the Western Rangeland Career Development Event Manual, several Ecological Site Descriptions that match locations the group will visit during camp, and several plant ID test sheets and rangeland monitoring forms. The first day is spent giving lectures and trainings on Introductions to Rangelands, Plant Identification, and Soils.

Each day begins with showers and breakfast and then the group travels to a range location using vans. Each day focuses on a different zone. The group is able to familiarize themselves with the low brush desert, semi desert, foothills, mountain brush, mountain grasslands, and alpine tall forb zones anywhere from 2000 to 11,000 feet in elevation throughout the week. Rangeland principles are discussed, monitoring is practiced, plants collected, and students are tested on plants in each zone. Students are able to learn from local land managers about current issues and practices and ask questions about their jobs. Time is taken to discuss toxic plants, noxious weeds, soil texture, aspect, climate, precipitation, vegetation, wildlife, and livestock in each zone.

Each evening is spent with dinner and more lectures and trainings in a classroom setting. Lectures are usually given by a representative of a college or range related career detailing their jobs or research. Other topics include discussions on livestock stocking rates, wildlife conflicts, noxious weeds, toxic plants and innovations in rangelands such as virtual fencing. Evenings are finished up with the students preparing for their oral presentations and labelling and pressing plants collected that day. At the end of the week, winners are selected and camp is cleaned up.

Results

To show the long-term impacts of Range Camp, a survey was created and sent out to all previous students on file, and distributed to members of the Utah SRM and State and Federal land management agencies within Utah. The 49 survey respondents previously attended Range Camp as a youth. 100% responded that it was important that youth attend Range Camp and would recommend that other youth attend. Respondents noted

that it is a great way to teach the rising generation the importance of rangelands, it prepares youth to participate in FFA Contests, prepares youth for employment, and it is a great networking tool to introduce students to colleges and career paths. Those who attended Range Camp noted that they loved gaining knowledge of rangelands and the friendships they built through the program. 58% of the attendees attended the camp more than once. Those who only attended the camp one year noted that they would've attended more than once had they been able to. The top two reasons for not attending the camp a second time was that the students had either aged out or their Agriculture Teachers did not notify them of the activity. Figure 1 shows which years the survey participants attended Range Camp. Figure 2 shows the reasons youth attended Range Camp.

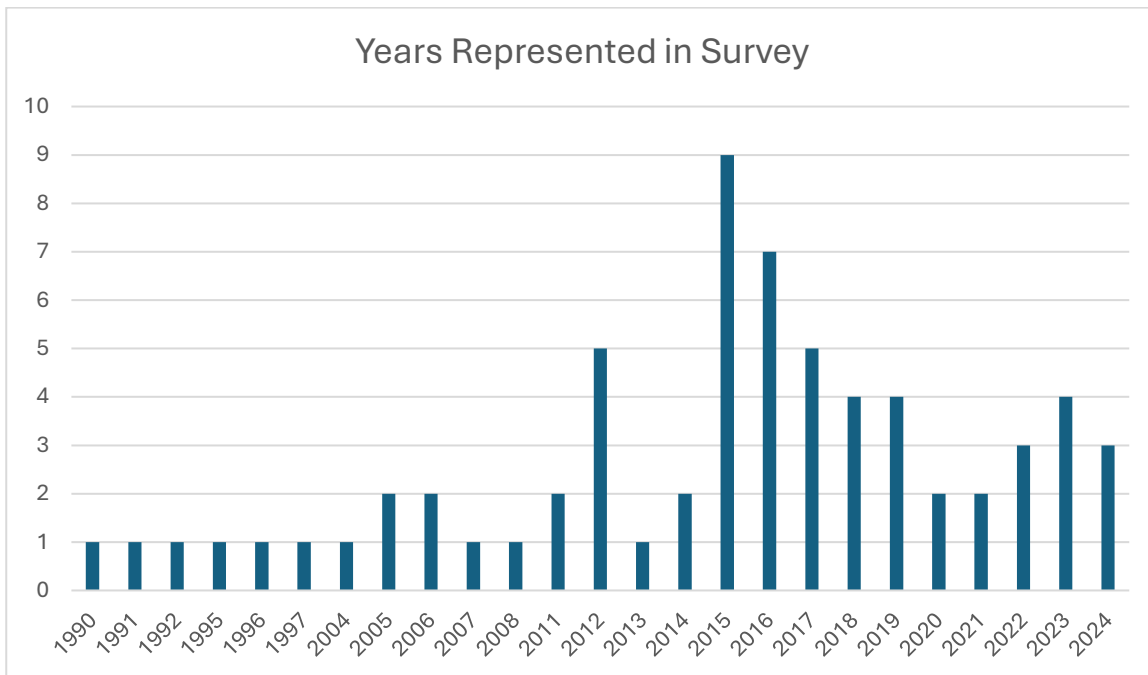


Figure 1

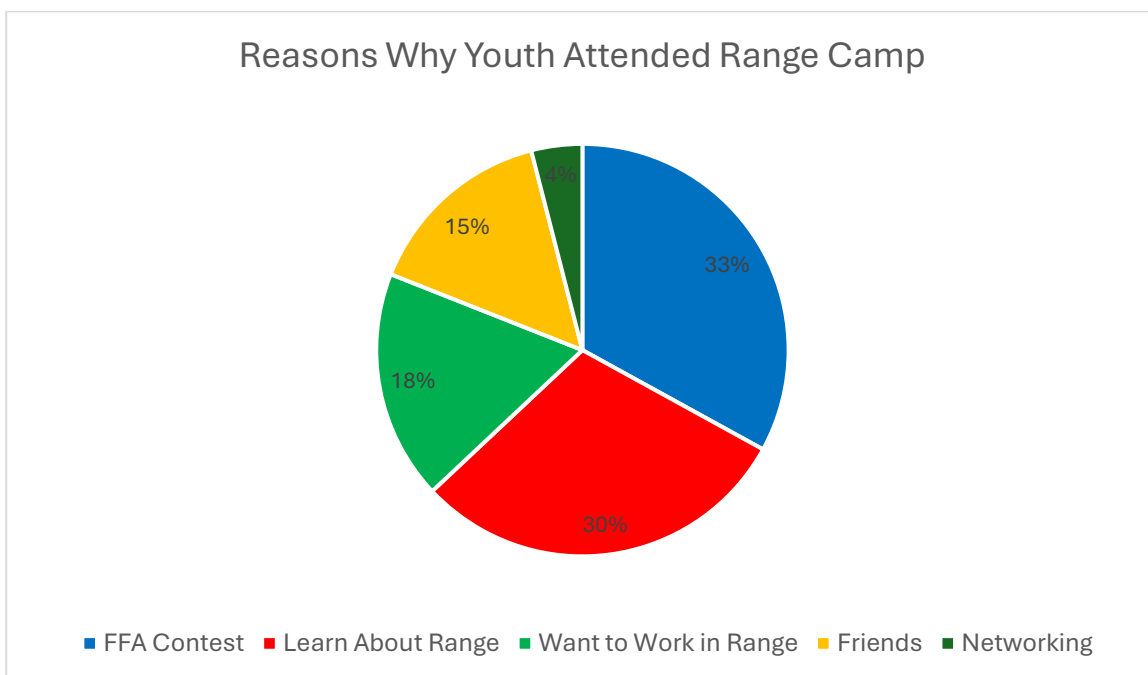


Figure 2

All survey participants rated the quality of the instruction and quality of the instructors as very good or excellent. 54% of youth said that Range Camp influenced their decision to pursue a college degree in Rangeland or Natural Resources and 56% said that it influenced which university they chose to attend. Utah State University, Southern Utah University, and Snow College were the higher institutions that Range Camp Participants attended. 39% of respondents said that they applied for a range related internship because of Range Camp. 83% of those who completed a range internship went on to work in a range related field and 73% responded that range camp influenced who they chose to work for. The employers listed are the United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Land Management, United States Forest Service, National Park Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and private ranches. 100% of those working in a range related career noted that Range Camp helped them be a better rancher or range manager. 100% of survey participants responded that Range Camp has positively influenced their current career choice and has helped them to positively contribute to society and the rising generation. All survey participants noted that they still use knowledge gained from Range Camp.

Discussion

Only an estimated 5% of Range Camp attendees completed the survey. Until 2016, data was not collected from the participants and the majority of the attendees contact information listed were school emails that became invalid after the students graduated. Most of the results were gathered by locating previous attendees via Facebook Messenger. Some survey applicants were reached through the Utah SRM email list serve, however, this would only reach individuals that are currently involved in rangeland management within the state of Utah. Moving forward, camp participants will be asked to fill out contact information using their personal emails in hopes to gain more long-term data on the camp. Although part of Range Camp is to help students do better on FFA competitions, very little information is had as to whether Range Camp has consistently helped with this goal. At the 2024 Utah Range FFA Competition, seven of the top ten individual winners and 5 of the top ten teams participated in Range Camp. At the 2024 Western National FFA Competition, one of the top ten individuals and one of the top ten teams attended Range Camp. These results will be followed more closely in the future. Range Camp has proven to be an important recruitment tool for colleges and employers. Only the employers and colleges that frequently send a representative to Range Camp benefit from recruiting these students. This information will be used to help increase participation from other employers and higher institutions. Another key note is that those students who pursued a range related internship clearly had more success in obtaining a career in range management, this underlines the importance of internships. In conclusion, Range Camp has successfully aided students in pursuing higher education and range related careers and has positively represented range management practices to individuals not involved with rangelands.

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