
The Whole and the Sum of the Parts: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Rangeland

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Historically, the Holistic Management™ movement in its various forms over the years and the rangeland science establishment have had an uneasy relationship characterized by antagonism and mistrust. This is unfortunate, as both groups have the same overall vision and aims, being broadly to conserve and restore rangelands through various sustainable management approaches.

The scientific establishment follows well established scientific methodology, based on experimentation and the collection of robust data with the results being subjected to rigorous peer review before gaining credibility. This approach is often criticized as being slow, cumbersome and unresponsive to new ideas. Scientifically based management approaches are often characterized by a high degree of inertia, relying on a large body of scientific evidence for justifying resistance to change or requiring a large body of evidence before embracing and recommending change.

Scientists and the scientific method are often criticized for being reductionist i.e. placing a lot of emphasis on the functioning of the components that make up the whole, and not focusing on the whole.

Alternate groupings, such as Holistic Management, are not restricted in this way, and have the freedom to pursue and promote alternate ideas and approaches quickly, without rigorous testing and peer review.

Holistic management, as the name implies, is focused on the whole, with less emphasis on the parts that make up the whole. Land users and managers, who are searching for solutions to management problems, are often attracted to an approach that appears more vibrant and exciting than the seemingly slow moving scientific approach.

Fortunately, in recent years increasing dialogue between the apparently divergent approaches has resulted in increased understanding among scientists and people associated with the holistic Management movement. As part of this dialogue, Mr Jozua Lambrechts presented an invited keynote address at the 47th Annual Congress of the GSSA, on behalf of Mr Allan Savory (President of the Savory Institute) who was not able to be present.

The address focused on the role of range science to meet global challenges, with emphasis on the benefits of the holistic approach. As part of a fascinating presentation, Mr Lambrechts outlined the history of the Holistic Management approach to rangeland management and discussed success and failures, giving insight into past experiences. Examples from the Savory Institute's ranch in Zimbabwe were used to illustrate the approach and emphasize the role of animal impact in range management.

The presentation conveyed a strong message regarding desertification, biodiversity loss and climate change, and the role of rangeland scientists and managers in tackling these issues proactively and together. This presentation was followed by a presentation on the use of fire and oxen in rehabilitating degraded rangeland, by Robin Ford, Wayne Truter and Mike Peel. The authors highlighted the role of using fire and grazing animals in changing and improving rangeland condition, manifested by a decrease in abundance of unpalatable species and a consequent increase in grazing value of the rangeland.

The final presentation in the session was presented by Keith Ramsay, on behalf of Heleen Els, and was focused on the importance of adapted breeds of cattle in sustainable systems. This fascinating presentation touched on the importance of unusual traits such as the ability of a cow to scratch its ear with its hind foot in tick control. This and many other interesting facts about the adaptive abilities of cattle and the sometimes inappropriate traits that are currently selected for, certainly proved thought provoking when considering sustainability of extensive cattle farming activities, and the impact that cattle have on rangelands.

The three presentations generated some lively discussion, with the main issues arising from the first presentation on Holistic Management. In essence, it seems that there is a lot of common ground between scientists and the Holistic group – probably more than both groups realized. There are, however, still some areas of disagreement or possibly misunderstanding. These include the role of fire in ecosystems and the issue of animal numbers. Most scientists recognize the role fire plays, but the Holistic Management practitioners tend to denigrate fire and its potential benefits. The Holistic Management movement continues to promote stocking levels that most scientists feel are unsustainably high, and there is still some uncertainty about this. The increasing levels of dialogue can only benefit the end user of the resultant recommendations, namely farmers, land managers, conservationists and the general public.

