

Hunting for Habitat Health

by Jim Reed

I'm a third generation Reed family landowner of the Reed Ranch in north central Texas. When I became the sole owner in 1998, I began making my plans for diversification of the ranch assets and income base because I could see that the way it had been run wasn't economically viable and would eventually lead to the ranch being sold. I wanted to make sure it was around for a fourth generation of Reeds, and I don't think that would have happened if I hadn't learned about Holistic Management.

Search and Engage

When I first took over the family ranch, I searched for an agricultural model that I felt would work for me. I knew by talking to lots of local people and family members that the traditional agriculture model would not work! In fact, most everybody I talked with advised me to sell the ranch as quickly as possible and enjoy the money. I almost gave up until I learned about Holistic Management on the Internet.

As I learned more about Holistic Management, I contacted HRM of Texas (the Texas branch), and then my wife, Judy, and I enrolled in a Holistic Management class taught by Certified Educator Peggy Sechrist. Peggy's introductory class was right on target for us and we've been practicing Holistic Management ever since.

Our ranch is about 1,780 acres (721 hectares) in size with about half the ranch in wetlands and the other half in hill land. The ranch had previously been primarily a cow/calf operation with close family members hunting recreationally for the past 60 years. Because of my primary interest in whitetail deer, I began conducting deer population census surveys back in 1993 with the help of wildlife biologists from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD).

This relationship with the TPWD has gone well over the years with many benefits. While they have always been helpful, the relationship deepened considerably when I demonstrated that I had goals for my ranch and that I was concerned about income *and* *habitat*.

Back in 1994, we wrote a wildlife management plan under the guidance of the

local TPWD wildlife biologist. This plan was integrated with our holistic goal in 1997. Over the years I think both the TPWD and we have learned how our cow/calf operation can complement our wildlife management program and vice versa. I'm now aware that income potential and habitat go hand-in-hand on my ranch. Most of the ranchers I know locally appear to feel that habitat enhancement *reduces* rather than *increases* income.

This cooperative approach with TPWD has brought such things as extended hunting seasons for my ranch because we conduct a satisfactory number of habitat enhancement initiatives and wildlife census surveys, keep records, and report harvest numbers. My season is about double the number of days of what it is in other parts of the state, and this extended season helps make my hunting club popular.

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We also received assistance from TPWD in matching wildlife resources with available food supply, special recognition (*see Bulletin Board, page 16*), helpful publications on management of wildlife habitat, forested wetlands and deer habitat partnership grants, and special help in determining herd sizes, frequency of harvest, and what the harvest mixture should be (i.e., how many buck and how many doe should be taken each year).

The TPWD's willingness to work with private landowners may be somewhat different from the wildlife department in other states because a little over 95 percent of Texas is *privately* owned. Because of this, the TPWD recognizes how important it is to work with private landowners, and they do an excellent job at it.

But there was a tremendous jump with

this effort when we started managing holistically. Our holistic goal really got the TPWD wildlife biologists “turned on” and their efforts to help us increased tenfold. Not many landowners around these parts have developed goals for themselves, so TPWD saw our focus and objectives as an impressive aspect of our ranch, and it seemed they couldn’t do enough for us! It was great! Of course, all we were doing was using the ideas we had read about in *Holistic Management*.

Using Resources Effectively

One of the biggest challenges early on was to balance the needs of our wildlife with our cow/calf operation. Although cattle and whitetail deer do not directly compete with one another for food supply, there is sufficient overlap (especially in times of stress, which can be caused by lack of rainfall or overpopulation of a particular species) that we have tried to ensure adequate forage when creating our grazing plans and in developing our land plan.

For example, we do not allow cattle in our forested areas during late summer or the winter months, because they would compete directly with wildlife for food. Although whitetail deer make a lot of use of browse and forbs, cattle do too at certain times of the year (especially when grasses are not readily available). However, because of the disturbance and new-growth created by the grazing cattle, the deer tend to follow the cattle around, and are seen frequently about two paddocks behind the cattle.

The situation gets even more complex because we also have commercial hunting of duck and feral hog as well as the deer. To balance out the different needs we plan how we can best use the impact of the wildlife (as well as cattle) on the habitat we manage.

For example, we use special mowing techniques to ensure an adequate cover of grasses, weeds and other plants in key fawning areas. However, we’re working on getting away from mowing altogether as we increase cattle numbers and decrease paddock sizes.

We also plant and re-establish native grasses for both cattle forage and wildlife cover (many are coming back now that

we’ve stopped continuously grazing). While we do some tilling and seeding, we plan to run the ranch with no equipment by the end of 2003, so we’re moving quickly to a point where equipment won’t be needed to establish more native grasses.

With these efforts we’ve been able to move toward our future landscape description by planned grazing that is sensitive to both cattle and wildlife. With our grazing planning we allow native grasses to mature in some paddocks, use others for wildlife cover, or create separate waterfowl habitat areas to increase food supply at certain times of year.

We’ve also used animal impact on the



Judy and Jim Reed

marsh elder and ragweed early in the growing season to control its presence. Young marsh elder and ragweed provide good protein for cattle in their early stages of growth, but become unpalatable to cattle as they mature. In this way animal impact appears to be a better way to deal with these problem plants than pesticides, which damage our soil and water.

Through earth moving we’ve increased waterfowl and migratory bird habitat by re-establishing marshy, wet areas in pastures that we previously used only for grazing. Likewise, we created wildlife corridors by noting where the animals normally congregate and enhancing those areas. The creation of wildlife corridors has worked beautifully, especially for whitetail deer. My feeling is that these corridors are also being used by a wide variety of species such as the cottontail and swamp rabbit, bobcat, ground-nesting birds, and whole host of other species that need cover from predators.

Lastly, we’ve used other forms of animal impact to initiate pasture improvements, particularly feral hog rootings. Normally hog rootings are cursed and discussed by locals in these parts as a problem. But, we use their “work” as an opportunity to plant seed in these spots. I now call these spots my “hog disced” spots.

Feral hogs can survive just fine in their natural habitat and naturally disturb soil with their rooting. I don’t ever have to gas ‘em up and they never break down or have flat tires like a tractor can if I were to use that tool instead! We’ve now established some pretty good areas of healthy switchgrass in the areas the hogs have “disced” for us.

Listening to Nature

We conduct our census surveys for whitetail deer using both night and day observations to achieve a more accurate count. The TPWD uses these figures to make harvest recommendations, and currently they are suggesting that we should be carrying less deer, so we’re trying to reduce the numbers.

We use the results of the night deer counts to determine the density of the herd. Back in 1994, the population density was about five acres per deer. Our most recent surveys now put the herd density at about 10 acres per deer,

which is more in line with what this geographic area can support. Our current plans are to decrease the deer population even more to increase individual size, fawn survival rate, and antler development (important from both a species health indicator and economics).

The results of the daylight observations are used to calculate the buck/doe/fawn ratios. In 1994, our results showed that we were seeing about one buck to every 10 doe. Now, this year’s preliminary figures are showing about one buck to every two doe (a sign of better deer management on our part).

We take our deer counts each summer. We usually begin somewhere around the middle of July and finish by the end of August as this is the best time to achieve an accurate count (fawns are big enough to be seen and still have their spots so as not to be confused for does).

continued on page 4

Hunting for Habitat Health

continued from page 3

The number of twins born to each doe has also increased. Back in 1994, for every three fawns there were 10 does. Now, based on this year's preliminary figures, we have six fawns for every 10 does. This increase in the number of twins and the fawn survival rate is a good indicator that the habitat is finally catching up with the herd size.

Listening to what nature is saying is one of the best ways I know to make good decisions. Nature already knows what needs to be done and *will* make decisions for us if we don't do our part. The problem most of us have (including me) is deciding how to be quiet long enough, to figure out what she's telling us!

Hog Heaven

On our ranch, there's always been sufficient numbers of migratory birds, including high populations of duck. My place is directly under a fly-by zone, and the wetlands usually provide plenty of water and waterfowl habitat. Like the deer hunting, the duck hunting is great!

We've had a hunting and fishing club in operation on the Reed Ranch since 1998. In the beginning, club members usually focused on deer and duck, although they occasionally took a feral hog. Because of the increased number of feral hogs on my place and the potential damage they can cause, I started a hog trapping program in the fall of 1998.

I soon learned that the feral hog could be used in many ways other than just trapping. Since that time, the hog hunting on the Reed Ranch has become an asset. We usually don't have to trap now, unless there's an area on the ranch that is being damaged to the point where we have to consider repairs (i.e., creating holes that will cause erosion or damage vehicles).

We've now been able to balance the feral hog population with hunting and trapping opportunities as well as having the meat as an excellent food supply. Hogs in Texas can be hunted all the time, and we do!

The ranch has created a partnership with a hog hunting website (www.texasboars.com) that supplies many of the hunters who come

out on our monthly (sometime more frequent) hog hunts. These hog hunts are conducted at night, and hunters will regularly pull all-nighters in search of free-roaming feral hogs.

Hog meat is excellent, the hunting is excellent, and the income is excellent, and the hogs help us re-establish some of my native grasses by providing an excellent seed bed. It just doesn't get any better than that!

Although I expect all the hunting income to increase in future years, I figure the hog hunting will exceed the deer hunting one day, primarily because hogs can be hunted all year round and the meat is easier to prepare than venison.



Many of the ponds on the Reed Ranch show the Reeds' success at enhancing biodiversity.

I figure the hunting income makes up about 25 percent of the ranch income. Of this, most comes from whitetail deer hunting (about 60 percent of hunting income), with hog hunting second (making up about 30 percent); and the remaining 10 percent coming from duck hunting.

A Learning Community

The ranch also maintains a ranch calendar on our website, which is used by hunters to schedule hunts and see when hunting opportunities are available. People mostly use the ranch calendar if they are involved with my ranch in some way to find out what's being scheduled or what has happened recently. This creates a community atmosphere for them. I also don't think I could manage the ranch efficiently without this community calendar. It's an excellent management tool that's available to anybody with Internet capability.

It has been an incredible experience developing a wildlife ranch. I wouldn't ranch

any other way! A section of our holistic goal has to do with learning and sharing opportunities, and studying wildlife habitat has taught us a lot. Likewise, learning how wildlife and cattle can be managed together has definitely produced an economic return.

Wildlife is a part of all ranches. In order to consider the whole, the wildlife must enter into the planning and monitoring. When testing an activity, we reflect not just on a single species but take into consideration all the species that live on the ranch.

This forces us to focus on the big picture, and creates opportunities to listen to all points of view, perceptions of what the real problem is, and a sharing of the best solution for all concerned. In many cases, the activity tested becomes more focused and sometimes even changes in scope and content. What better formula for success and to shift the old agricultural paradigm? If I hadn't been managing holistically, I'd never have thought of using hog rooting spots for seed bed preparation or seen the benefits of diversity in management of animal (cattle and wildlife) habitat, native grasses, and such. I also would never have seen the benefits of planned grazing

with cattle and its effect on wildlife (especially on whitetail deer) or been nearly as creative in seeing alternative ways to using machinery and technology. With Holistic Management, I'm now learning how to utilize animals, nature, and grasses to do many of the jobs I previously assumed could only be done with equipment. Lastly, I'd still be using pesticides and herbicides and decreasing the health of the habitat by attacking the symptom and not addressing the root cause.

These changes in ranch management practices and quality of life are directly related to having created our holistic goal and following the Holistic Management™ Land Planning and Grazing Planning processes. We couldn't have accomplished what we have without Holistic Management.

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