

On Becoming Native

by Jim Howell

During the past three years as editor/writer for *Land and Livestock*, I've written several articles focusing on my family's place here in southwestern Colorado. They've mostly been technical stories, delving into the practical details of grazing planning in our cold, high altitude environment. One story, that came out about a year ago, skimmed a little of my family's history and our emotional connection to this part of the world. It was titled "A Sense of Place," and I briefly stated my belief that to truly steward our resource, we have to grow to know it in intimate detail. Simply put, I believe that we have to become native to our landscapes.

Over the past year and a half, my family (my wife, Daniela, and daughter, Savanna) has been immersed in the construction of a small log home on our lower place, which ranges from 7,200 feet to 8,400 feet (2,200 to 2,560 m) in elevation. At that elevation in this part of Colorado, we're in the oak brush, big sagebrush vegetation belt. The aspen and spruce begin to appear just above our highest boundary, and the pinyon pines and junipers take over below. This band of country in western Colorado is typically blessed with about 14 inches (350 mm) of annual precipitation, about half of which comes in the form of snow in the winter. Because of the cold temperatures, the snow doesn't melt off until April, so for roughly five months, our landscape is a winter wonderland.

Very few early European settlers were tough enough to live in this country year round. Many of those who tried it eventually gave up. Most ranchers made their permanent bases in the nearby Uncompahgre Valley, about 20 miles (32 km) and 2,000-3,000 feet

(610-915 m) lower. A migratory pattern of life developed, with ranchers herding their sheep and cattle from the winter country of the valley bottoms, up into the foothills and eventually to the tops of the mountains by mid-summer, some of which climb above 14,000 feet (4,270 m).

Most of this spring, summer, and fall country was (and is) only periodically visited by its owners during the snow-free months. This includes my family's country. My dad and granddad would come and check their cows once a week or so, spending a night or two in a small homestead cabin, then would return to their irrigated fields of barley, wheat, potatoes, and alfalfa. They worked incredibly hard. They had a huge list of tasks to accomplish daily, and never took much time to stop and smell the roses. They were pioneers in this country—the first non-native inhabitants to enter this land since the first American pioneers arrived via Siberia, 10,000 to 15,000 years ago. I'll get back to my family's story, our new house, this land that we live



Jim and Tosha returning home after an evening cattle move.

on, and how this is all related to the theme of becoming native, but first a little broader history to lay the context.

Pioneers

Throughout history, and extending to all habitable corners of the globe, pioneer experiences share some remarkable features. First, in every instance that I'm aware of, the first people to enter a new environment saw their new resource base as inexhaustible. This was true for the first Americans, who walked into a continent filled with mammoths, native horses and camels, giant long-horned bison, amid

many others. It was true for the first Australians, who found a virgin land occupied by giant, rhino-sized marsupials. It was true for the first New Zealanders, who were greeted by over a dozen species of giant flightless relatives of the ostrich, the moas. To these first pioneers, it was likely inconceivable that their efforts to make a living within their newly adopted habitats could possibly extinguish these incredibly rich resources.

But, due in large part to human beings, exactly like us, simply striving to make a living and survive, this fantastic resource did largely disappear. That's the second commonality to all pioneering peoples. Whenever we discover a new resource, we use it to its breaking point. As a consequence, conditions of scarcity develop, and people are eventually forced to adapt to the less abundant resource base with which they are left. Gradually, cultures of environmental responsibility, of ecological intimacy, develop and advance. Rituals and traditions evolve that ensure a population's sources of sustenance won't be depleted, and that their clans will survive. Human populations cease to be pioneers. They become true natives (for detailed accounts of this topic, read Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* and *The Eternal Frontier*, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, and Brian Fagan's *The Great Journey*).

Things really haven't changed much. Modern day pioneers haven't been the first humans on the scene, but they arrived at most corners of the globe equipped with technologies and cultures developed in Europe, Asia, and in parts of Africa—technologies that allowed for a much deeper degree of exploitation of natural resources than was being achieved by the natives. The domesticated horse, the plow, the wheel, gunpowder, domestic livestock, steam power—these things, among many others, gave the newcomers tremendous advantages. Imagine how these pioneers, among them my great-granddad, granddad, and dad, looked at their newfound resources. The millions of acres of deep, fertile prairie soils, the never-ending forests and grasslands, the incredible fisheries, the abundant water, the massive herds of bison, pronghorn, elk, and deer—it all must have seemed endless, inexhaustible, eternal. My recent ancestors, with their livestock and farm implements, must have looked upon these resources the same as the first immigrants from Siberia, with their spears and atlatls, looked at the woolly mammoths, long-horned bison, horses, and camels of their new world.

Enlightened Pioneers

Like every creature on the earth, humans are programmed to survive and propagate their lineage. If we see an opportunity to advance our family's state in the world, it is only natural to take it. When my ancestors first gazed upon the abundant river water that could be diverted for irrigation, the lush mountain grasses, and the towering spruce and fir trees, that's what they saw—a seemingly endless, untapped resource offering the opportunity to grow, expand, and propagate.

Now, just as the first Americans eventually discovered, we're coming to grips with the reality that all these natural resources—the resources that sustain all human endeavor—are not endless. We've

been aware of this for a long time, but old habits—established cultures—die hard. With our technological prowess, we continue with the pioneer mentality, pushing the limits of our resources with ever more sophisticated levels of extraction. Now, for example, we're to the point of directly manipulating strands of DNA to create plant hybrids capable of surviving broad scale biocides that destroy every potential competitor. This isn't bad; it's simply human nature. We have to continue to make decisions that are in line with our own self interest. Holistic Management® decision-making stresses this reality. But (and I think this is one of the most important points of emphasis of Holistic Management), holistic decisions are made not just in our own self interest, but in our own “enlightened” self interest. What's good for me financially is not truly good in the long run if it makes my life miserable and/or contributes to the depletion of our natural resource base.

Pioneers don't think like that. The pioneer mentality typically doesn't actively consider the effect of a decision on quality of life or family relationships, nor does it consciously examine the potential ecological consequences of decisions. I grew up with romantic notions of my granddad's and dad's lives during the first half of the 20th century—farming with horses and mules, running sheep and cattle in the high country during the summer, feeding hay in the snow. I spent all my school years in the metropolis of southern California, only getting to the Colorado high country for a

couple months during summer vacation. I longed all year to be in Colorado. I remember speaking to my granddad about his life one day, talking about all the old ways of ranching and farming. I was a teenager, and he was in his early 80s. I remember making the statement to my granddad, “You must have had a really satisfying life.” He glanced down, thought for a moment, then simply said, “I worked awful hard, Jimmy.”

My dad couldn't wait to get away from the farm and ranch as soon as he was old enough to make his own decisions. The way they lived was surely meaningful and productive, but they didn't fully love their lives on the land, and the natural abundance of their resource base gradually eroded through the decades. In the early '60s, when it was apparent my dad wasn't planning to build his life on the land, my granddad sold his livestock and the lower elevation cropping ground, but held onto his high summer country to generate some income from livestock grazing and hunting leases and occasional timber harvest. If I wouldn't have come along and expressed a deep love for this place, it all would have been sold and passed from our family a long time ago. Now, my family, making decisions in our own enlightened self interest, is poised to begin the transition from pioneer to native.

Transitioning

And this brings us back to this house Daniela and I just finished building. As I write this, we've been living here about two months now. Thanks to Holistic Management, Daniela and I, at early ages, were motivated to become very clear on how we wanted our lives to

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continued on page 12

On Becoming Native

continued from page 11

be. That's what brought us back to Colorado in 1997, and we're into our seventh year now of stewarding this land. But my family never had a home here. It was always "the summer country." Daniela and I have had our home base in town for the past six years, so this place wasn't home to us either; it was where we made our living. The decision to locate our permanent home here—a home that we would design and help build from materials harvested from our land—passed toward our holistic goal in many respects. I won't go into those details, but it has greatly enhanced our quality of life and the effectiveness of our lives.



Jim and Savanna examining the anatomy of a grasshopper: "I believe the only way we will keep succeeding generations on the land is to nurture a love of nature's intricacies within our children."

Since waking up here every morning, I have also been experiencing some personal epiphanies. Recently, it dawned on me that we're the first human beings to be living here, on this specific place, since the Ute Indians were removed in 1881. As I said above, the European immigrants into this country passed through with their livestock, utilizing the abundant forage with a pioneering mentality, never stopping to genuinely, deeply, know their new surroundings. They never truly lived in this place. I'm sure many of these pioneers appreciated the beauty of their new surroundings, but stories of beauty, of interacting and living with nature, didn't become part of their culture. That wasn't—that isn't—the pioneer way. As my good buddy and holistic manager, Tony Malmberg, says, "As ranchers, we were taught to work hard, to be tough, and to endure."

My dad has told me numerous times, the most recent being just a few days ago, that he never appreciated the beauty of this place

when he was growing up. Did my granddad? I don't know. He never said he did. My family, like most pioneering families I know, has no deep cultural traditions or rituals tied to changes in seasons, as the native Utes did. We barely recognize the majority of the plants growing on our land, let alone know their names. We are light years from deeply knowing the ancient natural patterns of interaction between our plants, mammals, insects, birds, and reptiles, not to mention the billions of critters that escape our immediate sensory perception. We do know all the things we brought from Europe—our fences, our roads, our mechanical equipment. Until recently, I also thought I knew the land, but this spring, living here every day, I've realized that we don't know this place. We are not native.

But there is no way we could be. We just haven't been here long enough. The Ute Indians, and their more archaic predecessors, lived here for thousands of years, passing down intimate knowledge of natural patterns through tradition, song, ritual, and story through scores of generations. We are the first family since that long line of humans to begin anew on this place, and if we are to survive here, if we are to reverse the degradation wrought by the first few generations of pioneers, we have to start to develop a new culture that honors the same natural rhythms and patterns that shaped the lives of the Utes.

Native Relationships

In heightening our awareness of how the natural world functions, Holistic Management has played a major role in initiating this shift in culture. Now we look at the land, and describe its health, in terms of ecosystem function. Is the ground covered with litter and vigorous living plants? How is the litter distributed and how is it decomposing? Can a raindrop soak into the soil, or is it likely to run off? Does the diversity of plants permit optimum sunlight harvest, the cycling of nutrients from a deep profile of soil strata, and habitat niches for an abundant community of wild animals? How are my actions on the land, the movements of my livestock, the harvesting of grass and shrubs and trees and forbs, my mere presence amidst the elk and deer and bears, affecting these ecosystem processes? Is my perception keen enough to recognize what's happening? Holistic Management insists that we assume we're wrong when making decisions affecting the land. That is so critical, because as Allan Savory emphasizes, the ecosystem is not only more complex than we understand, it is more complex than we can ever understand.

But I think there's a difference between understanding and knowing. I may not understand my wife, but I know her intimately. The same applies to nature. We can't understand her. Scientists perform incredibly elaborate controlled research in an attempt to do so, and they might figure out a few pieces of the puzzle, but do these

pieces fit when added back into the whole? Another of Allan's favorite lines concerns oxygen and hydrogen. We can study each in isolation, and learn absolutely everything there is to know about them, but such study would teach us nothing about water. I'm not discrediting scientists by any means, but I am saying that it is only the people who live on the land, deriving their sustenance directly from it, who are going to ever know it. Science can help clarify or solve some of the riddles, but it will be the native folks that will meld the scientific insights into the natural whole.

Native cultures don't necessarily understand their habitats from a scientific paradigm, but they know them in detail. Gary Nabhan, in *Cultures of Habitat*, eloquently describes many of the fantastically intricate relationships that indigenous peoples had (in some cases still have) with the plants and animals of their native habitats. In many cases, these relationships were essential to the maintenance and propagation of the diversity and ecological integrity of the environment, just as pollinators are critical to the reproductive success of many flowering plants. Many of these relationships have been lost to native cultures. Nabhan stresses that, to preserve biodiversity, these relationships are just as critical as the plant and animal species themselves, and their extinctions just as tragic.

As the most recent family in the new line of humans relating to this landscape, I feel it is our solemn duty to rediscover, to re-evolve, these relationships. If the world's land base continues to turn over to new "owners" every 10 or 15 years, or if the people on the land are ephemeral employees merely carrying out the orders of their corporate bosses living in far off, detached cities, these relationships will never develop. Nabhan cites an incredible pattern highlighting the importance of a long connection to place. He describes two maps of the United States, one displaying the relative duration of residency within each county, the other documenting the counties having the most threatened and endangered species on the federal government's lists. The correlation, says Nabhan, "is undeniable." Where human populations are the least mobile and have the longest history of residence, fewer plants and animals have become endangered species.

One beautiful evening about three weeks ago, I rode my mare (actually my daughter's mare), Tosha, up to the top of our place to clean out a pasture. Along the way, I was struck by the number of plants I didn't recognize. Have these plants always been here and I never noticed them? Do I just not remember them? Has our management caused them to appear? Did last year's drought have something to do with it? Or is their appearance a result of the climatic conditions that prevailed this spring? If so, I have no idea what those specific climatic conditions could possibly have been. See what I mean? I'm not native. But I hope I'm at least an "enlightened" pioneer.

That was the evening that I realized I'm a long ways from being a Ute Indian. But I made a holistic decision that night. Most of the time when I go up to irrigate or move cows, I ride up a Honda Foreman 400 all terrain vehicle—4-wheeler for short. Once or twice a week I go horseback, like I did that evening, if my job is more easily achieved the equine way. But, being of the pioneer mindset, I've always assumed that I had to be as efficient as possible. By the time I get my horse caught and saddled, I can be a long ways off on the 4-wheeler. If the horse isn't essential to the task at hand,

I reasoned, it can stay home. But I've never wanted to be an expert 4-wheeler driver, and have always striven to be a skilled horseman. That was one strike against the 4-wheeler. If I'm horseback, I'm developing a relationship with another of nature's beings, much more in tune with natural processes than I am. My horse might actually teach me something if I can learn to listen. I can't say that for the 4-wheeler. On the 4-wheeler, I am locked into taking the same road every day. On my horse, I can elect to take a different path every time if I want, and I can see many spots on the ranch that I seldom see otherwise. If I'm horseback, I'm seeing the land, and interacting with my habitat, like a Ute Indian.

So, based on all those factors, I basically parked the 4-wheeler

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three weeks ago. I still use it if I need to haul a load of salt or mineral, or if I really am in a desperate hurry, but I've pretty much switched my mode of transport to man's best working friend, the horse. I'm not sure why, but my morning routine is only taking about a half hour longer, if that, and the positives have been tremendous. I've been observing things this spring that I can't explain, some really good, some a little

concerning, but I never would have noticed those patterns if I'd been going like a bat out of hell up the same road every morning. I've found the hangouts of about five outstanding bucks. Never would have figured that out on the 4-wheeler. If I ever need some really straight, large diameter oak brush posts (an exceedingly rare phenotype), I found a thicket of oak brush with dozens of them—again, way off the 4-wheeler track. I could go on and on with examples of little things I've noticed and am learning. There are probably lots of things that are being recorded in my subconscious that I'm not really aware of that are contributing to my transition from pioneer to native. Horseback, I think native relationships have a better chance of re-evolving.

But I'll probably never be truly native to this place. My daughter Savanna might. Her descendents have a better chance. Hopefully, I can find a mentor who can help raise my awareness and accelerate my family's native transition. In the meantime, we'll do the best we can to see our land, to rediscover the unique natural relationships of our habitat, and to glean all the insights we can from science. Most importantly, we'll continue to carefully plan our actions, monitor them closely, adapt accordingly, and gradually evolve a new culture of living within our landscape. Eventually, maybe several generations down the road, humans will once again become naturally adapted, native elements of this place.