

The Quest for Viable Ranching—

Interning at the San Juan Ranch

by Vanessa Prileson

When I tell people I want to make my living running a ranch someday, I usually get a general response along the line of “Do you realize there is no money in agriculture? You’ll have to win the lottery or marry somebody rich to have your own ranch!” I used to feel annoyed when people shot down my dream like this; now I am disappointed by this negative reaction because those people do not realize thousands of ranchers and farmers are exploring ways to make ranching viable right in front of them. If you are open to avenues that involve learning what would make ranching a more viable livelihood, you may find more opportunities to manage animals and land than you thought possible.

I have found such an avenue through ranching internships. For the past six months I have been working as an intern/apprentice on the San Juan Ranch with George Whitten and Julie Sullivan on their grass-fed, organic cattle ranch in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado.

A Passion for Ranching

While growing up in the suburbs of Tucson, Arizona, I wanted to experience cattle ranching. I am the only person in my family interested in pursuing a career in animal agriculture. I believe what triggered my passion for ranching were the numerous day trips my parents took my brother and me on throughout southeastern Arizona. While my parents thought it great fun to visit the wineries, I was more satisfied with patting horses over the fence and counting cattle dispersed across the desert grasslands sloping into rugged mountains.

As I entered high school economics classes, I started paying attention to issues resulting from vanishing rangeland in the southwest. I was introduced to the realities of ranching working on the Empirita Ranch southwest of Tucson during the summers, and began to wonder how could ranching be sustained? I deduced a more viable way of ranching would be if cattle were raised solely on rangeland forages, and the grain-finishing process was eliminated.

With this realization I wanted to bring agricultural producers and conservationists together to cooperate on how to produce healthy meat and maintain thriving ecosystems. When I attended Oregon State University, I carried this

passion with me and stuck to my theory of raising grass-fed beef, even though grain-finished beef production was taught in my university classes. One day, my good friend invited me to go on a rangeland ecology field trip to Doc and Connie Hatfield’s holistically managed ranch in eastern Oregon. This trip was a turning point for me; Doc and Connie showed that raising beef in an unconventional way, such as without hormones or antibiotics, was not only possible, but profitable. This knowledge combined with rangeland ecology and agricultural economics classes motivated me to find out first hand what it would be like to raise and market grass-fed beef while managing rangelands.

I discovered George Whitten and Julie Sullivan’s internship during my junior year in college. The position had already been filled for that summer, so I kept in contact over the next year and a half. Meanwhile, I lined up an internship at the holistically managed Lasater Ranch for my first real introduction to grass-fed beef production and marketing. After graduating

from college, I was hungry for more ranch work, grass-fed beef marketing, and grazing planning. I began my internship with George and Julie in the fall of 2006. Interning following college has been a valuable transition period for me. It enables me to see what it takes to be financially stable in a real world agricultural setting and provides me with ideas for an agricultural career. I ask myself, “Is this how I want to make my living? What about this do I need in the future? Will this allow me to make ranching a viable way of life for others?” My experience at George and Julie’s San Juan Ranch tells me, “Yes!”

No Visible Line

At the San Juan Ranch, I’ve been able to experience my dream—I’m learning how to raise cattle in a sustainable way. After first settling in at the ranch, I shared with George and Julie my main goal of learning how to run this type of ranch. From that day, I felt they did everything they possibly could to help me accomplish this goal, including involving me in how they work toward their own holistic goal.

From the very beginning I was involved in all the daily ranch chores and the planning of the ranch’s future. Being included in everything was effective and exciting in learning how important decisions are made on the ranch. If I had only been included in the physical work such as moving cows, loading hay, and moving fence, I would have only become good at following directions. I would not have become better at determining cattle movements, how much hay to feed, why only some marketing techniques work, and, most importantly, I would not have truly understood how a holistic goal interrelates the animals, people and land of and surrounding the ranch.

It wasn’t always easy—some obstacles came up for me while interning on the ranch. It was inevitable that I got caught in the middle of personal struggles, family disagreements, and issues. Luckily, I had become accustomed to working and living closely with people on several other ranches in the past, so I overcame these obstacles and worked through



Most of Vanessa’s family and friends can’t understand what the appeal about ranching is for Vanessa. But, whether she’s moving electric fence across frozen ground or helping with the grazing planning, Vanessa has a passion for learning how to ranch sustainably.

them. Sometimes it was hard to be away from all of my friends and activities I was involved in during college. But I reminded myself frequently why I willingly chose to live without some of the amenities of a young person's lifestyle, if only temporarily; so I could learn what it takes to be a rancher. Being a ranch intern requires me to be steady, be myself, be dependable, be open to new ideas and be there when ranching is fun, and when it's not.

There is no visible line that separates working and living; the combination is what creates the life a rancher seeks. Supper may be ready, but you might still be out walking through the cow herd checking for cows calving or giving a calf yogurt to settle an upset stomach. These things really make me appreciate living on a ranch because I love caring for animals while knowing I am working to benefit the world.

I've learned the holistic goal you live by, not just talk about, becomes your lifestyle because it determines every decision made for the ranch. Each decision moves you toward accomplishing part of that overarching goal. The beef marketing plans carry the same values as the grazing and financial plans because in considering each option, the holistic goal is considered. If one objective is to run the ranch using as little fossil fuel as possible, ranch chores must be modified. For example, George and Julie cut and pile their meadow hay every year rather than bale and stack it. This haying method meets the triple bottom line: the nutrients are put back where they came from, fossil fuel is not necessary to feed the hay, and George and Julie can be among the cattle during daily feeding.

The concept of holism is the most important thing I learned during my internship—one decision affects all the other aspects of the ranch. It is intriguing to see such a dynamic and personal holistic goal be consulted so often, and it made me realize just how devoted George and Julie are to working toward it.

The Realities of Ranching

When I began my internship in October, the entire cow herd was on an allotment on the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. Within my first weeks I learned how to move and roll up electric polywire fence, see the graze line, and observe the cattle for sickness or any other problem. When we brought the cows to the home ranch, my daily chores throughout the winter included feeding organic alfalfa-oat hay (grown on the ranch's own farm) off the back of the flatbed pickup. My other main chore was to move electric fence every day to give the cows their ration of hay piles.

When I was not floundering in the snow and chasing calves back where they belonged, I helped



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calculate how long the winter hay piles would last at the home ranch using Animal Days per Acre. I learned what an Animal Unit Month and an Animal Day per Acre can look like on an arid grassland rather than in a college textbook. Now I have a better idea of how these can vary even within a few hundred feet. I helped with the calculations of the growing season grazing plan and in the spring helped to set up paddocks for strip and rotational grazing. I learned to plan for rest and water access. Soon after implementing a grazing plan, I realized grazing planning is far more than making a chart and moving fence. A good grazing plan requires careful thinking and planning ahead. It is a puzzle that must constantly be solved.

Cattle must always be somewhere eating something; they cannot be hung out on a clothesline. For example, the end of May comes around and all the winter feed has been used up. The growing grass needs to recover and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) allotment turnout date is not until June 20th. This is a circumstance where a flexible and well thought-out grazing plan will feed the cattle for those couple of weeks. The grazing plan needs to provide a reserve to feed the cattle for those couple of weeks by determining the additional forage needed in a worst case scenario. Additionally, a thorough plan does not merely consist of one backup plan. Plan A through Plan Z are necessary because Plans A, B and C can often fall through very quickly.

Because I am almost as passionate about grass-fed beef and the cattle as George and Julie are, it hit me just as hard when an important

marketing option fell through for them. Right then we had to think of Plan C, which was not easy. I recall one winter night on the way to supper in town when George slowed the car down about a quarter of a mile before the stop sign because the roads were very icy. Then it hit me. Driving on ice is a lot like cattle ranching; if you don't plan ahead you could have a wreck.

All these experiences matter to me because I see now how much mental and physical work it is to raise cattle in general, let alone organic and grass-fed. It takes self-discipline and enthusiasm to make your work into a lifestyle. I also understand how difficult it is to make financial ends meet even when the most well-intentioned ecological and economical decisions are made. It is important for me to experience and observe these realities so that I can better plan my future and know which questions to ask: Do I really want to own a ranch or do I want to manage someone else's? Do I want to lease land to start a herd? What kind of an operation would I want? I've also learned how to make a decision that feels right.

Making It Personal

During my internship, George and Julie helped me make my own holistic goal. It wasn't hard to make because what I want is all inside me; I just needed to visualize it. During my internship, I was confronted with some very difficult decisions regarding my own future. Before I could make any decisions about careers and my personal life, I needed to put onto paper what I want in several different aspects of my life. Creating my

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holisticgoal helped me to decide to explore such options as:

- Managing a grass-fed beef ranch somewhere in the world;
- Managing a ranch camp;
- Creating a buying club to market grass-fed beef;
- Setting up farm and ranch internship programs;
- Playing a role in rangeland restoration using livestock as a primary tool, and;
- Becoming part of the public land management force and helping it to conserve and manage natural resources.

My holisticgoal helped me decide to take a job with the Forest Service after my internship. Although the job will not include managing a ranch, it includes managing land, people, and animals in ways that aim to conserve natural resources and communities as well as learning about rangeland ecology. I feel it will also allow me to have some time to pursue some of my other interests on the side. With George and Julie's support and my holisticgoal, I have gained clarity. Consequently, I felt good about the decision I made. I learned this is what really matters about any decision.

I know trying to make a living in agriculture in today's society takes forward-thinking, creative minds. I want to be one of those progressive thinkers and promote sustainable agriculture to the point where people want to go into agriculture for a career or support sustainable agriculture.

As I finish my internship, I think of the small but significant things I learned in addition to the big things: moving electric fence in below zero temperatures with freezing fingers; yanking sweet-smelling, moldy bales of hay off the soggy ground and watching the rotted twine snap and the bale break loose; jamming the old truck into four-wheel drive in the middle of a snow bank; and, through it all, watching animals thrive and suffer as I learn to take care of them. Nothing I learned in my college classes prepared me for the actual realities of ranching. What the wonderful topics of rangeland science and economics did do for me, however, was encourage me to find ways to make ranching work. Without those lectures, field trips, dedicated professors and my parents taking me on all those day trips, I may never have been so motivated to experience ranching, so I am thankful for them.

It heartens me to see George and Julie and other ranchers finding ways to make ranching truly sustainable, or as sustainable as they can get in today's society. I know now that it is possible, though not easy, to make a living ranching and that someday I can do it. This is the answer I've been looking for ever since my passion for ranching began. 🌿

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