

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATOR CASE STUDIES

MY ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT:

How learning to practice Holistic Management has changed . . . everything

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I provide technical assistance in natural resource management to landowners for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). I work in a field office that is located in the Potomac Highlands area of eastern West Virginia. Our main work product is a conservation plan for land-based operations, many of them agricultural.

NRCS conservation planning policy considers soil, water, air, plants, and animals in working with those who manage natural resources. The resulting conservation plan can address all aspects of an operation.

Learning the holistic decision-making process through my participation in the 2001 Northeast Region Holistic Management® Certified Educator Training Program has shown me the distinct difference in how most people make decisions and the holistic decision making framework. I've learned that if a person makes a decision based on the best possible outcome for the social, financial and environmental aspects of a situation, there is a much better chance that lasting benefits will be realized.

I've provided this type of assistance in natural resource management to clients for over twenty years. Often we are asked to design a specific solution to what is perceived as the main problem facing an agricultural operation such as addressing an animal waste management situation or a limited livestock watering system. While listening to the client and inventorying their resource concerns, I am now able to better discuss possible root causes of these concerns.

For instance, the distribution of precipitation in our part of the world is limited in the growing season by frequent dry periods. This prompts many landowners to pursue building more ponds to catch surface runoff or to drill a water well. While these measures will improve water quantity in the short-term, often they don't address the root cause of an ineffective water cycle. Increasing organic matter levels in our soil through improved management, as well as slowing down potential water runoff, always addresses the root cause of this problem rather than a symptom.

Understanding who the decision makers are in an operation at the beginning of the planning process has saved much time by determining

the parameters of what potential changes are possible. Everyone must be 'on-board' for successful management of most family operated farms.

My conversations with these clients have changed as well. Discussing their operation and the reasons for their decision making often leads to a discussion of their desired quality of life and allows for a better understanding of their perspective. Hearing explanations about how the manager expects to produce the quality of life they desire is often very descriptive of their personal decision making process.

Realizing that those of us involved in natural resource management are all in the sustainability business, I now ask questions of farmers such as "How

do you want this farm to look when your granddaughter or grandson is managing this farm?" This can provide powerful insights for both them and their planner.

I routinely engage farmers in discussions about the effectiveness of the water and mineral cycles on their land as well as the plant and animal interactions and the efficiency of solar energy. These ecosystem processes, which are vital to all life, are of a major daily concern to those who farm and make a living from the land, but in the past I didn't spend as much time talking to farmers at this level.

Often however, farmers must be motivated to make decisions with the short-term financial considerations foremost in their minds. Having a holistic perspective now leads me to bring the social and environmental considerations into the picture.

Having a holistic perspective while working within a bureaucracy can be challenging. At times we all tend to have professional differences of



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opinion. Learning about the holistic decision-making framework and its effect on policy has taught me not to question someone's motives for their decisions. Conventional decision making does not simultaneously address the social, financial, and environmental aspects of a decision. If the results of decisions made without this perspective don't provide the desired results, I've learned to focus on how the decision was made rather than to question the expertise or motivation of the person.

Using the Holistic Management® model as a framework for diagnosing problems and finding solutions has brought new emphasis to the consequences of natural resource decisions and the application of what most consider to be 'best management practices.' Applying such practices to the land, while failing to see the interconnectedness of resources, can lead us away from where we hope to go in land-based operations.

Learning to test my own decisions toward my holistic goal has been important in learning to practice Holistic Management and to teach it to others. In the past, when considering job opportunities in other locations or in other disciplines, I have been at a disadvantage when using a simple 'pro and con' list. Using the testing guidelines has given me a contented feeling that I've done my best to get closer to 'how I want my life to be.'

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Initially learning to live the life one values most takes desire and discipline. After the first trials of learning to make decisions by this process it becomes easier. As we have learned in our training, learning improves greatly with practice.

I value my work as a professional in natural resource management with the NRCS. Learning to teach Holistic Management has enriched my work and allowed me to see that even small steps taken are valuable if they move us toward the environment we describe in our holistic goal.

I have introduced this decision making process to the management team of the USDA-NRCS in West Virginia and have been asked to continue to train other employees in the future.

It has been my privilege to have been chosen to participate in the 2001 Northeast Region Holistic Management® Certified Educator Training Program. Sharing this important information with those who make decisions on the land will continue to challenge me in my work and will allow me to contribute to making our part of the 'whole' world a better place.