

Manejo Holístico in Chihuahua— Las Damas Ranch

BY ANN ADAMS

In the fall of 2014, the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory released a video about ranchers in Chihuahua that are improving bird habitat by their grazing management. Two of the ranchers that were highlighted in that film were Alejandro Carrillo and Jesus Almeida—Holistic Management practitioners. Alejandro lives in El Paso, Texas, but commutes to his ranch, Las Damas, in Chihuahua, Mexico (approximately 4 hours away) for two weeks a month. When I visited with him by phone he shared not only how he came to learn about Holistic Management, but also how Holistic Management is beginning to spread in Chihuahua.

Las Damas Ranch was purchased by Alejandro's father, Raul Carrillo, 25 years ago. His father managed the ranch until about 10 years ago when he asked Alejandro to take over the ranch management. Alejandro was living in Miami at the time and was working as a software engineer. He moved to El Paso to help and decided he needed to get all the professional development he could to better manage the ranch.

In 2005, Holistic Management educator, Elco Blanco Madrid, taught a Holistic Management class in Chihuahua City with Holistic Management practitioner Jesus Almeida. The training took place in four different cities around the area.



Alejandro Carrillo on his family's ranch in Chihuahua, Mexico.

Alejandro went to many of the courses and realized how much this kind of management was like what he wanted to do. "They were talking about wholes, how we needed to consider each and every part of the ranch," says Alejandro. "We need to look at the ranch, soil, family, neighbors, and employees—not just the cattle. We need to mimic what nature does, not fight nature."

But, Alejandro admits that crisis brought him to Holistic Management. With the never ending drought, he could run very few animals, so there was too much work for very little return. At that point he was having to supplement his animals from March through July using cornmeal, cotton meal, and salt. He was running 250 cows on his

ranch and 150 cows on some additional leased land.

Now Alejandro runs 580 cows with no supplements and no vaccines. As he improved his management he was able to bring the 150 cows off the leased land to his land, which improved his profits even more. "After we put the cows together, I noticed right away how much better their condition was," says Alejandro. "At one point, right after the training, we had 700 cows, but that was too many so we dropped down to 500 cows. We don't want to be ahead of the grass, so we watch our numbers and move the animals daily.

"We started with 10 pastures, but now we have 80 pastures with a mix of conventional and permanent electric one-wire fences as well as some temporary electric fencing. It took only one year to become profitable because we immediately stopped supplementing when we went to combining the herd and moving them more frequently. It took about 3 years to get enough forage that we could bring the cattle from the area we were leasing. That made the business

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Holistic Management is practiced around the globe on 6 continents. Learn about the many cultures and people and how they are using this process to make a better world, including the Maasai and other pastoral groups in Northern Kenya in the article beginning on page 3.

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even more profitable.

“There were lots of experienced guys practicing Holistic Management at that first training that said the main issue is to make sure you get enough water so you can run the cows the way they need to be run,” says Alejandro. “When you are in the desert, you need the water so you can

begin getting the stock density you need. That was the first thing I did after the training—I put all the cows together. We originally used 1 ½-inch pipe for our water system. Now we are using 2-inch pipe. Our goal eventually is to run 1,200 cows, so we may need to change to 3-inch pipe to make sure we have the water flow we need.

Alejandro also had Bob Kinford come to the ranch and teach some low-stress livestock handling. They had a workshop so others could learn this skill. The stockmanship skills have been a very important piece of the grazing management to get the animals to move easily and have good animal performance.

“The huge advantage for me in Chihuahua was the number of great Holistic Management practitioners that I could learn from. Besides Elco and Jesus there were Octavio Bermudez and Billy Finan. I learned from all of them and had mentors. At the end of the 2005 training there were 5-6 people in the area who were committed. Now we have 30-40 people practicing Holistic Management here in Chihuahua. That’s very exciting,” says Alejandro.



As Alejandro increased forage productivity he was able to move from a carrying capacity of 250 cows to 580 cows—a 132% increase.

Cattle to Match the Landscape

Alejandro’s landscape is dominated by tobosa grass. When he first started ranching he didn’t have much grass at all. But with good management, he began to see more tobosa, and then other grass species. He now has sprangletop, grama, and sideoats among other species. Where the grass used to be very short, it is now one to two feet tall and much wider at the base. This has been accomplished largely by moving his recovery periods to 90-120 days. Moreover, he only grazes twice a year, and usually these are one-day grazes to avoid any overgrazing by staying too long on a pasture.

Alejandro has neighbors both upstream and downstream from his property. During rain events, he has a lot of muddy water moving off the upstream neighbor’s property through arroyos. Alejandro is working to heal the arroyos on his property so that he can use the water runoff to his advantage. “I don’t want my neighbor’s problem,” says Alejandro. “I am working hard to let all my neighbors know about Holistic Management because I want them to

succeed as well and improve land health. But, in the meantime, I will do what I can to use the water that comes on my property.” Alejandro is excited that two of his neighbors are committing to practicing Holistic Management.

Alejandro currently runs about a thousand head of animals. This is about 3 times the stocking rate that his neighbors run on the same amount of land. Moreover, his neighbors are needing to supplement their animals to run that number. However,



With improved grazing management has come improved bird and wildlife habitat resulting in improved deer and bird populations.

Alejandro has been working on the genetics of his herd to improve the ability to run a low input herd. He began with Charlois/Brahma genetics and is moving toward Red Angus from Kit Pharo and Herefords from Billy Finan.

Now the cattle are grazing from November through July and are able to have good body condition with no supplementation. He weans his calves at 8-9 months using nose rings so there is no separation issues between calves and mothers. In this way he can run one herd and keep things simple. He does keep his bulls separate except for the 65-day breeding period.

Alejandro is currently selling into the commodity market when the cattle get to 12 months. At that point they are generally 500 pounds. There is a small grassfed market in Mexico, but at this point he is more interested in trying to sell his animals into the U.S. commodity and grassfed market.

Working with Conservancies

When Alejandro first began working with the various bird conservancies that were interested

in bird habitat in Chihuahua, he had to convince them that he actually had grass plants that were necessary for good bird habitat. As he worked with organizations like the American Bird Conservancy, the Rocky Mountain Bird Conservatory, the Audubon Society, and Mexico's Pronatura, they came to his ranch as well as other Chihuahua ranchers who were managing their land well and noticed how many birds and how many bird species were on these ranches. Consequently, they have offered help with infrastructure development such as electric fencing to help improve grazing management even more so that bird habitat will also improve.

Besides improved bird counts, Alejandro has also experienced increased mule deer and peccari populations. "This part of Chihuahua used to have one of the largest colonies of prairie dogs," says Alejandro. "I'd like to see the return of that biodiversity here. I've always been a conservationist as well as a rancher. We put water everywhere so that the wildlife can use it. We have mule deer and mountain lion. I'm not concerned about the coyotes we have. It's all part of the whole. We have no predation of our

cattle because of the herding and calving in sync with Nature. They stay close together and the predators can't get calves."

In 2004 Alejandro had 20 inches of rain and had less production than he had in 2012 on 8-9 inches of rain (the average rain is 11 inches). With improved management has come not only more diversity, but also greater water infiltration which means more production and continued increase in diversity. As Alejandro continues to experience increased diversity and production, he will work to build out his water and fencing infrastructure to increase stock density and improve his grazing management even more. He also plans to continue to reach out to his neighbors and fellow ranchers so that they too can experience the benefits of Holistic Management. To learn more about the benefits that Alejandro and others have experienced in Chihuahua, view the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsmoJsRWK0Q>

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