

Healing the Land for 25 Years—

The 3 R Ranch

by Ann Adams

Reeves and Betsy Brown have been holistically managing the 3R Ranch in Beulah, Colorado since 1985 when they took their first Holistic Management course from Kirk Gadzia and Allan Savory. Their passion for the ranching life and for improving land health is evident in everything they do. The results they have achieved are a reflection of that passion.

Land Planning Implementation

The 3R Ranch is approximately 10,360 acres (4,144 ha). Of that, there is 5,110 acres (2,044 ha) in grazable forest, 4,530 acres (1,812 ha) in rangeland, and 720 acres (288 ha) of irrigated pasture and hayland. The elevation ranges from 7,800 to 5,700 feet (2364 to 1727 m).

The timing in 1981 was perfect for the Browns to buy the 3R. “I had always wanted to live in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, it took 14 years of stock farming in Central Texas and a really generous financial offer on our 1,100 acres (440 ha) before Reeves was willing to move with me to the Rockies,” says Betsy. “I looked from the Canadian to the Mexican border with all our wish list in mind. After two months of looking at ranches, the realtor and I passed by this ranch which the realtor said was ridiculous to show me as we could not afford it. As we drove through the 3R Ranch, I told the realtor that this was ‘it,’ all the criteria that we wanted in a ranch. So we offered the Hunt Brothers from Dallas half their asking price in cash and they took our offer. They had just had their big silver failure and were in real financial trouble.

“We bought the ranch in September 1981. We wanted good land that would grow good grasses and adequate irrigation water to raise hay for the cattle, and good water for cattle and a decently long growing season.

“Our first HRM (Holistic Management) class was the two-week class that Kirk Gadzia and Allan Savory co-taught in Albuquerque in August 1985. Reeves and I both went to the class together which was absolutely needed since we are both totally involved in working and managing the ranch.”

After their training, they began to put into practice the ideas they had learned as they began to develop infrastructure, slowly. “After the class in 1985 we were so overwhelmed with all the possibilities that we asked Kirk to come to the ranch and help us line out a starting point and follow up steps which he did in the fall of 1985,” says Betsy. “With our first holistic goal in hand we started the grazing plan, did a little electric fencing, and began our planned grazing the following spring with all the cows in one herd.

We kept dividing the pastures into 100-acre increments as time and money for fencing would allow until now where we have 68 divisions. The ranch went from 16 acres (6.4 ha) to run one cow to 7.6 acres (3 ha) per cow. When we bought the ranch, the manager was running about 600 cows for the summer season. We now have 650 cows and 150 replacement heifers for the whole year.”

They doubled their stocking rate by averaging two to five day grazing periods, keeping a minimum of a 90-day recovery period, and feeding their hay out on the rangelands in the winter when snow covers the ground. In the process they changed the landscape. As Betsy notes, “Our land changed, especially with the planned intensive grazing. When we bought this ranch in 1981, it was basically a grama grass country, with approximately 30-40% bare ground. Now the medium tall grasses such as wheat grass have moved in and increased our total pounds of harvestable vegetation hugely. We’ve also seen smooth brome, side oats grama, and even some bluestem come in. Bare ground has diminished vastly down to 10% with lots of clover and

alfalfa in the pastures.” The Browns feed the hay from their irrigated pasture during the winter months when snow is on the ground.

The Browns also developed their irrigation system. Hay is cut then baled into big bales in mid to late June with an average yield of three tons per acre (7.5 tons/ha). Hayland species are smooth brome (70%), orchard grass and alfalfa, with a protein rate of 12-14% because they cut at an early bloom. They have developed a center pivot sprinkler system that runs on gravity pressure to reduce energy costs. They laid about 1.5 miles (2.5 km) of pipeline from a stream and put a pivot filter at the beginning of the pipeline. The 220-foot (67m) drop creates enough gravity pressure for the pivot and the only energy cost is the electric motor that creates the hydraulic pressure to move the pivot.

Challenges & Opportunities

In 2002 Colorado was in a drought. Without moisture, the ground was simply not putting forth grass. To protect the crowns of the grass plants, the Browns moved the cows to a feedlot in Pueblo County and then to Oklahoma for 2 1/2 years. Betsy says, “I really credit the learning through Holistic Management with Plan-Control-Monitor-Replan with getting quick action going to see the need and act on the need to *move*.”

Reeves adds, “We were able to remain in the black during that time, although our profit margin was been reduced. We wanted to maintain the herd genetics we had built over the years without sacrificing the land.” The replanning they did helped them keep the herd intact *and* protect the land. People around them tried to tough it out and everything suffered. The land and animals looked terrible and when those around them finally sold their cattle, the prices were poor.

Keeping those genetics was critical as the Browns had moved their cow herd from a multi-colored and multi-breed group to a far more productive group of cattle as they bought into U.S. Premium Beef (a closed coop that owns packing houses and is the fourth largest packer in the U.S.) and marketed their cattle through that channel. “With the kind help of the feedlot owner, a veterinarian, and a bull producer in Kansas, we have taken the “mutt” herd of cows to a vastly improved herd that consistently earn us premiums (approximately \$40-70/head) on the grid that we sell on at the packing house,” says Betsy. When grain prices were high and the cost per pound of gain was in the upper \$.80’s, they were able to keep a reasonable profit margin with the premiums earned on the grid. Stephen Broadwell, with whom the Browns manage the 3R, has all the cows on the Cow Sense computer program and they cull cows and select replacement heifers with this information.

The People Part

As anyone who has practiced Holistic Management knows, the human resource management can be the toughest part of this management transition. It was no different for the Browns. “I think the biggest challenges that we faced were personal growth and husband/wife growth that were opened up as a Pandora Box from our holistic goal and the training through what was then the Center for Holistic Resource Management (now HMI),” says Betsy. “We continued to take all the courses offered, and there was massive pain and gain from these learnings. Basically Reeves saw himself as the man in charge—his right—and I wanted respect and to have input that was accepted. I would not want to go through the process again, it was long and hard. The equality has happened, but I have to put my number 10 boots down often yet.”

When asked how this transition was for Reeves, he noted, “Satisfying and painful. That process allowed Betsy’s latent abilities to flourish. We pull in the harness together now and the ranch is better off because of that.”

With a holistic goal and working together as a team, the Browns were able to enjoy the beauty of their ranch, improving the vegetation, improving their cattle herd, and as their debt load was laid aside, being able to spend time and money improving the ranch—fences, irrigation, buildings, and erosion control.

They also were able to look at other opportunities on their ranch. About half of their land is timbered, so for the last 15 years they have had two men timbering this rough, heavily-timbered land. The Browns like having these men living on the mountainous part of the ranch for security, and for their work in thinning the timber. The dollars to the ranch from the sale of the timber are helpful to the budget, but it is the improvement to the health of the forest that is the motivator.

Harvesting the timber slowly allows for a small, steady income and a continuous job for these two men and the logging truck driver. It may not be as profitable as the cow herd, but the Browns appreciate the sustainable nature it which it is being harvested. These men also do guided hunts for bear, elk, and deer. Having the money to hire good people to work with them on the ranch, people who are skilled and who we genuinely enjoy sharing the work and play, is an important component of the Browns’ quality of life.

The Browns hired Stephen and Heather Broadwell to manage the ranch with them as the Browns focused on improving the people part of their holistic goal and addressing the issue of getting and keeping reliable help. They could have probably handled all the ranch duties, but they wanted to give others the opportunity to enjoy this lifestyle and possibly pass the ranch on to them. The Broadwells had been living on the East Coast where agriculture and farm land is disappearing at a fast rate, so they began to search for ranching opportunities in southern Colorado. After meeting Reeves and Betsy and seeing how they strove to improve all aspects of agriculture, they decided that the 3R Ranch is where they wanted to call home. They took their first Holistic Management training in February 2008. The Broadwells have found that being involved in all aspects of the ranch and working as a team to achieve group goals, as well as being able to work together as a family, as a very rewarding experience.

“Getting up every morning and looking outside at the physical beauty of the foothills of the Rockies and then going outside to see the day, tending to the cattle, I truly love working with the cattle,” says Betsy. “They are great joys to me. Through Holistic Management we learned of and went to several Bud Williams cattle handling seminars and that experience changed us hugely. Handling the cattle calmly and with respect for the animals has been of untold joy for me. I enjoy just sitting in the midst of the cows and lying in the grass watching the cows eat and seeing what plants they are selecting, especially when they have just moved to a fresh pasture. And I anticipate taking the Broadwells’ two-year-old Sadie outside to go with me and play. It’s great having another generation on the ranch.”

The Browns are active in numerous organizations, including The Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Colorado Branch HRM, Pueblo County Stockman’s Association, and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Their environment has changed from one of rural neighbors in an agricultural community to one of being in a community of 40-acre landowners. They have had to learn to live with this and to share the benefits of their open space, the ranch, so that these new people respect them and their ranch and see them as good neighbors who have a viewshed that they appreciate and a way of life that they find worth protecting and learning about.

When asked how Holistic Management has affected their lives, Betsy says, “Reeves and I have always been very conservative with our money and planned carefully for our income and expenses and savings, but the financial planning forms and now computer bookkeeping have made this process smoother. Even though we no longer have debt, we are equally diligent with posting and monitoring our financial status and sharing that information with the people who work with us.

“Because of this monitoring and planning, the ranch can remain profitable in the future. One cannot imagine the changes that will have to be made, but by always being watchful and not stuck in a pattern, the ranch can adapt and move forward wisely. I love learning and applying that new knowledge to the operation of the ranch and our lives.

“Holistic Management helped me look at the whole, especially the people part. It’s made us more mellow and appreciate the good people around us. We want them to be a part of the ranch,” she says. “People skills were not my forte, and Don Green’s work on the people stuff [for the Center for Holistic Management] was extremely helpful to me.

“To someone who is contemplating ranching today, I would tell them to be really sure that they want to work as hard as it takes to ranch and to tend the land well. Then I would tell them to first get themselves to one of Kirk Gadzia's Holistic Management classes!” In fact, the Browns will be hosting Kirk’s February 2010 Holistic Management course (see page 22).

“Holistic Management has allowed us to integrate so many production factors and utilize and improve resources in a way I never thought I could do,” says Reeves. “It’s been the center of all our expectations. It has been monumental. Certainly the land would not have healed the way it has without it.”

Betsy & Reeves Brown live in Beulah, Colorado. They can be reached at: (719) 485-3485.