

Restoring Faith Hollow Ranch

BY TRACY LITTLE

As our children left home to live their lives apart from ours we began to look forward to the next part of our journey in life. We knew that we wanted to live in the country, have the life we'd always dreamed about, one of ranching and caring for the land. We began to search for the ranch of our dreams. In 2009, we found it; only it wasn't in dream condition. It was worn out, trashed out and overgrazed. Most fence lines were broken and brushed up with every thorned bush and cactus South Texas has to offer. We became the fence clearing/repairing maestros.

Our vacation that year was a holistic grazing workshop by Ian Mitchell-Innes and Greg Judy. And so, began our journey with Holistic Management—discovering how to work with nature to make our dream a reality. In 2012

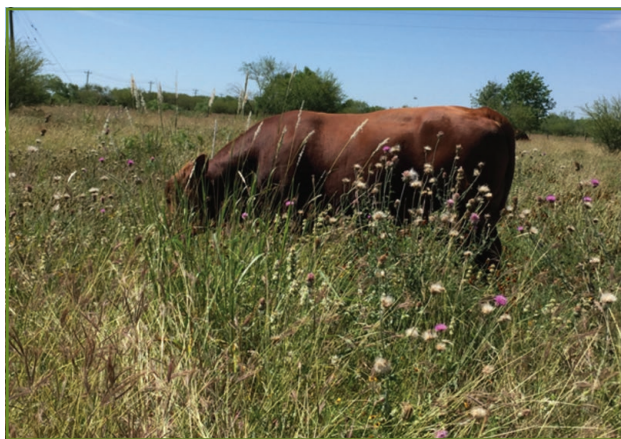
know that this undertaking would begin a new journey of self-discovery, land management, soil studies, and grass studies, as well livestock management.

When we bought the ranch it consisted of 149 acres of which two pastures (32 acres total) were cleared. There was nothing but a few clumps of grass amidst a moonscape of bare, capped soil. The rest was brush. The ecological climax community for this area was a mid- to short-grass prairie. That's not what was there. Years of overgrazing, then being left fallow without management input, had degraded to what NRCS considers Go Back Land—nothing but bare soil, cactus and thorned brush.

With a whole farm goal in place we went to work partnering with our animals to bring back the native grassland, improve the soil health,

subdividing the pastures, thinning out some of the brush/trees and cutting lanes to run electric wires. We would minimize the use of herbicide to just the stumps of the brush in the hotwire lanes and follow up with compost tea. This decision met the “triple bottom line” toward our holistic goal. Searching out the root cause and addressing that, rather than a symptom, is the mantra in our decision-making process. Improvement is noted and celebrated.

Despite three years of exceptional drought conditions, followed by unusual rains and the short time of ownership, implementing the principles and practices we've learned through Holistic Management has improved our land in ground cover, diversity and water retention. We are now seeing the diversity of the prairie coming back. Our soil is coming alive. We have



Using goats and cattle the Littles worked to increase stock density and reduce overgrazing with holistic planned grazing to transform a moonscape of capped soil with a few clumps of grass to a verdant forage stand filled with a variety of grasses including windmills, bristle grasses, side oats, little bluestems, Rhodes grass, and drop seeds. More wildlife (birds, reptiles, and small mammals) also were sighted enjoying this more hospitable habitat.

I was accepted into the Beginning Women's Farmers and Ranchers Program, and learned how to apply the principles and practices of Holistic Management to our piece of paradise.

As we fleshed out a holistic goal for our ranch, we made a huge discovery... we had alienated our children with our “work ‘till we dropped” mentality and our weekend warrior approach to the land. We were so focused on the land that we failed to include ourselves—providing time to relax, enjoy ourselves and others, as well as the land—into the mix of our endeavors. Back to the drawing board we went to include ourselves in the whole we manage. Simplified, our holistic goal became, “Restoring the land and ourselves using regenerative agricultural practices.” Little did we

using the positive grazing practices we learned through Holistic Management. We run cattle and goats with a few horses thrown in. As we progress through the practices, implementing the planning processes, and monitoring for success, the holistic goal remains the guiding light in the decision-making process for the ranch. While exploring how to regenerate our land, the testing framework became invaluable. We first looked at bulldozing, spraying herbicide and combining the two which were the methods recommended for our area. However, these actions created long term consequences that were in opposition to our vision in our Holistic Goal.

We chose to continue using animal impact, increasing the stocking density by further

seen an increase in soil organic matter from 1.6% to 2.9%. We are building diversity both above and below the ground moving our land ecologically to restoration, providing food for all. New grasses are peaking through: windmills, bristle grasses, side oats, little bluestems, Rhodes grass, drop seeds, and wildflowers! More diversity is noted in the wildlife present from birds, mammals & reptiles.

With Holistic Management, we are moving it from the “Go Back Land” to “Come Back Land”—the Native Mixed Prairie. 🌱

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