

## Learning from my Mistakes

Steve Nelle, San Angelo, Texas; [nelleangelo@suddenlink.net](mailto:nelleangelo@suddenlink.net)

I told a friend that I was going to write an article about mistakes I have made during my career. He replied, "I suspect that is going to be a lengthy article". He was right – I have made my share of mistakes, perhaps more than my share. In order to avoid writing a book on the subject, I have condensed them down to some of the more teachable mistakes.

It is humiliating and sobering to describe some of the errors made during my career in range and wildlife management. The intent is that readers might benefit from these accounts and not make the same mistakes I have made. You can learn the hard way or you can learn from the mistakes of others.

After graduating from Texas Tech with a degree in Range and Wildlife Management, I began my career with the Soil Conservation Service in 1976 as a Range Conservationist. During the next 35 years, I had the incredible privilege of working with many fine landowners and natural resource professionals across Texas.

### **Immature Enthusiasm**

In 1977, my wife and I were transferred to Laredo where I worked for six years as a Range Conservationist. Here is where we started our family and here is where I gained a great deal of experience and made many mistakes. Shortly after we arrived, we were invited to eat supper with one of the fine old traditional ranch families in Webb County. It was a very nice expression of hospitality on the part of the rancher and his wife. During supper as we visited and got acquainted, I very unwisely began to probe about his grazing practices. Shortly into the conversation, I discovered that they did not utilize any form of planned rotation – they tended to graze continuously with occasional rest periods provided. Here during our first meeting, which was supposed to be a social call, I began to tell the rancher about all of the economic and ecological benefits of rotational grazing.

Although he was cordial and friendly, I could see that my overly aggressive promotion of grazing management was not welcomed. There is a time and place for promoting and encouraging better management, but I was brand new in the county and had done nothing to earn the respect of local ranchers. They had no reason to listen to some new kid who thought he knew all about grazing management. It was a big mistake and one that I regret to this day.

I went on to learn a lot from this rancher and we did a lot of work together on the family ranches over the next six years. I think he forgave my immature and arrogant enthusiasm to convert him to rotational grazing.

### **Canned Sales Pitch**

On another occasion as a new conservationist in Laredo, I was supposed to set up a planning date with a rancher and be evaluated by the Area Range Conservationist. This was a routine part of professional development called "direct supervision". The idea was for the older seasoned employee to provide critique and suggestions to the young employee. I set up a date with two brothers who owned about 10,000 acres in eastern Webb County.

For this planning date, I had everything planned and prepared ahead of time; I wanted to make a good impression on the Area Range Conservationist. As I recall, we sat around the table at their ranch cook shack while I spread out the ranch map and began to go through the basic steps of the planning process.

As I look back on this, I can see that my presentation was canned and artificial. It was as if I was going through a sales pitch trying to sell them a vacuum cleaner. I went through my “thunder book” which was a collection of visual aids meant to illustrate some important conservation practices and principles. I had spent a great deal of time preparing the thunder book, which I went through page by page with these two ranchers.

The two men were polite and listened to all that I said. The problem was that I did not listen to them, ask questions, or seek their input. I was “putting on a show” for the Area Range Conservationist and lost sight of what the purpose was supposed to be.

Needless to say, the two brothers did not ever ask me to the ranch again. I could have learned a great deal from them if I would have taken a slower approach instead of telling them everything I knew on the first date.

I totally botched this planning date and made a poor impression on two ranchers. The followup report from the Area Range Conservationist was not complimentary. He told me what I needed to hear. He directed me to take more time to get to know the ranchers, to ask them about their operation, their goals, their practices, and to try to develop a relationship with them before giving them both barrels at once.

Even though I bombed the planning date, I did learn something that day. In talking about deer habitat management, one of the brothers told me that they had reserved a full 640 acre section right in the middle of the ranch as a refuge area. There was no hunting, no brush control and no disturbance in this refuge area. It was a thicket of dense brush with a ramadero running through it. This was long before the deer gurus were promoting the concept of buck sanctuaries. This is one of countless examples of ranchers coming up with practical conservation methods and techniques long before the professionals. This also shows that even when we fail to perform up to the standards of the agency, we can still learn valuable things each day. That day I learned two important lessons – one about the nature of effective conservation planning and one about white-tailed deer management.

### **Seeking Recognition**

Fast forward about 20 years. I was now the NRCS Wildlife Biologist serving the Edwards Plateau and Trans Pecos. In this position, I had the opportunity to write many articles and make numerous presentations. I was not a great writer, but I worked very hard at it, and every now and then, I wrote a piece I was proud of. I was also a member of a couple of professional societies, including the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society. I decided to nominate one of my articles for the Publication Award. I was told that it was the norm for people to nominate their own work. I was encouraged to “toot your own horn”. I was confident that the judges would recognize my article with an award.

You guessed it – the article was not selected for the award. It was a humbling experience and I learned a great lesson here – let others praise your work, but do not praise your own work or seek your own recognition. I learned my lesson.

## **Overselling Fire**

Back in the 1990's, a coworker and myself led a field day for ranchers at the Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The field day addressed most of the usual topics – grazing management, brush management, wildlife habitat, range plants and prescribed burning; but one topic overshadowed the others. During the course of the field day, we repeatedly hailed the benefits of fire as a superlative and beneficial tool for ranching and range management. We thought we had done a good job of informing the local ranchers about the great benefits of fire and we hoped that we had made a few converts that might now consider the use of prescribed burning.

A few days after the field day, we received a very articulate letter from a well-respected rancher and one of the local community leaders. He said that we had grossly over-promoted the use of fire without mentioning some of the drawbacks and side effects. I had to admit that he was correct in his criticism.

Without really intending to, we promoted only one side of fire; only the beneficial aspects, but we did not present a balanced view. We were guilty of presenting fire as a magic bullet or panacea. This kind of one-sided promotion of a tool or technique or product is a common mistake within natural resource management and we were guilty of it.

After reflecting on the truth of that reprimand, I have since intentionally tried to present a more balanced perspective on whatever topic is being discussed. No tool is always right for all people and all situation. There is a downside to fire just like there is a downside to all other “good” practices and methods.

## **How to Kill Old World Bluestem**

Perhaps the first officially sanctioned SCS-assisted summer fire in Texas took place in Webb County in September of 1982. The goal of the burn was to kill or suppress twisted acacia, otherwise known as huisachillo, a troublesome shrub in South Texas. The fuel consisted of 8000 pounds per acre of dry Old World Bluestem, which had been planted experimentally on the ranch in the 1970's. We knew that winter fires would not damage the shrub other than a temporary top kill, so we gained the blessing of the State Range Conservationist to try a hot summer fire. September afternoons in South Texas are usually over 100 degrees, and that day was no exception. We made all of the normal preparations and had a crew of SCS folks and ranch hands. We told the rancher that we expected the fire to do some serious damage to the brush, but that it would not harm the grass. That was the prevailing wisdom of the day.

The fire went off without a hitch. It was an awesome sight to see that much grass burned on a hot dry day. Everyone was pleased at the end of the day as we examined the pasture and the extreme damage that we hope was inflicted on the brush. It did not rain for a while after the fire, but examination in late fall indicated a total 100% kill of Old World Bluestem. Another examination the following spring verified that the grass was completely dead – roots and all. Furthermore, all of the huisachillo had sprouted back with a vengeance. Oops. The fire had exactly the opposite effect as planned. The lesson learned was to be careful in communicating unrealistic or unproven expectations of a practice, especially when it is new and untested. The rancher has never done another burn even though the Old World Bluestem re-established from the seed bank.

## **Mountain mahogany**

April 1995 will never be forgotten by those of us who planned and carried out a prescribed burn in Kimble County. The pasture had been rested for several years to establish a good fuel

source. Young ashe juniper were now numerous and 3 to 5 feet in height and were the target of the burn. We had a good crew and good double fireguards around the pasture. We felt like we “had” to burn this pasture, even though there was little or no soil moisture. The burn was challenging to say the least but we got it done. Unfortunately, it did not rain very much that spring or summer. The pasture remained eerily barren for several months with little sign of life.

The rancher had been especially proud of his mountain mahogany. Mountain mahogany is a primo browse plant – one of the very best, and this pasture had an unusual abundance of it. The rancher was a progressive range manager and raised goats and cattle and had an active and profitable deer-hunting program. Maintaining a desirable browse resource was very important to him. We are all taught that shrubs re-sprout after fire (except a few). In fact, we are taught that fire stimulates the new growth of most shrubs. Since much of the mountain mahogany had grown tall, one of the secondary objectives of the burn was to stimulate basal sprouting. I had seen how well it re-sprouted following mechanical damage so I made the assumption that it would spout equally well after fire. In a normal type fire, my assumption was correct.

But, in this case, a very hot fire with no soil moisture, followed by hot dry conditions resulted in the complete root kill of most of the mountain mahogany. I had reassured the rancher that his desirable browse plants would not only survive, but would benefit from a fire. Now, all I could do was apologize for being wrong and for giving him bad information based on assumption and repeating what I had been taught.

It finally began to rain later in 1995. With bare soil and sloping topography, the loss of soil from this pasture was immense. In the bottom of some draws, you could bury a sharp shooter in rich black soil and ash that eroded from the hillsides. Although much of the grass in the pasture also died, there was rapid new seedling establishment of mid successional grasses such as tall dropseed and green sprangletop. The pasture finally recovered after several additional years of rest and rainfall. But there is still very little mountain mahogany.

The lesson learned is to ***follow the prescription***. All NRCS fire prescriptions require that there should be adequate soil moisture. We violated the prescription; the pasture suffered ecologically and the landowner suffered economically until the pasture recovered.

Simply stated, hot, harsh fires combined with dry conditions often do a great deal of harm to plant communities and soil. The proponents of this practice seldom describe the negative side effects. Fire, like any other tool has benefits as well as drawbacks, and uncertain results. We are of best service to landowners and ranchers when we honestly describe the possible negative side effects of the practices and techniques that we offer, and not try too hard to sell our favorite practice.

### **Promoting Our Own Objectives**

Some years ago, I was invited to a large ranch to evaluate and assist with their deer management program. The ranch had already been in a program for many years but they were not satisfied with the results. Their stated goal of producing mature trophy bucks was still mostly unrealized. After taking a great deal of time to carefully evaluate many years of harvest records, it became clear to me what the problem was. The ranch had aggressively culled many spike bucks for many years, yet with no reduction in the incidence of spikes. The result was a significant reduction in the number of bucks graduating into older age classes. The hunters seemed content to kill mostly average 8 point middle age bucks, which were abundant, but the owner wanted to produce mature trophy bucks. The ranch also raised a large number of goats and the resulting competition had an impact on deer nutrition; hence, the large numbers of

yearling spikes. Culling of spikes would never address the nutritional problems but would impair the development of good age class distribution of bucks.

I thought I had a good basis to make a logical recommendation to the rancher. I suggested that he stop emphasizing the removal of yearling spikes and that he alter his objective of trophy buck production. Instead, why not simply endeavor to produce a large number of average middle age bucks. I made a solid case why this made good common sense and economic sense. The rancher was not going to reduce goat numbers, so the level of nutrition needed for large trophy antlers was not likely to develop. However, he could easily continue to produce large numbers of middle size bucks.

My mistake was assuming that the rancher would be willing to alter his objectives and accommodate my ideas. I essentially communicated that his objectives were not valid and that my ideas were better. And, in fact, my ideas did make more sense, but it was foolish to try to tell him what he should do, especially since I had not yet earned his trust. I was called to help him achieve his objectives. If his objectives were not realistic or attainable, I would have been better off trying to gently and gradually nudge him in a new direction, rather than bluntly recommend a different deer management objective. People normally make such changes slowly, and only after much consideration. I may have been able to lead him in a new direction if I had been more discerning of human nature. It needed to be his idea, not mine. Leading people in this way is harder and requires wisdom and skill, but it is more successful than telling them what they should do. I was never called to the ranch again for further assistance and I still regret my ineffective manner in dealing with that situation.

### **Over-promoting New Concepts**

In the late 1970's the new grazing concepts of Allan Savory were sweeping the state. Many ranchers were interested in what was being called "cell grazing". The claims seemed fantastic and people were actively building wagon-wheel fences; SCS Range Conservationists were expected to be actively promoting this new kind of grazing management.

I worked extensively with one particular rancher who was enthusiastic. We laid out miles and miles of fence to go from six pastures to 12 and designed a central watering hub with alley and pens to access each pasture. With 60,000 gallons of storage and a 30-foot trough in the center, everything was set to begin rotating 200 cows through the 5000 acre cell. Within a short time, two other cells were established on the ranch.

The new fast rotation seemed to go well enough; but the hoped for increase in grass growth and stocking capacity did not materialize. The size of pastures and the density of brush still required considerable labor to make the frequent moves. It was fun and novel at first, but as time went on, the difficulty of keeping the herd intact in brushy pastures became a burden. Eventually, the moves became less frequent and more gates were left open to accommodate stragglers. Labor became more difficult to find and other ranch priorities took precedence over grazing management. The cell systems were never completely abandoned, but were never managed at the level needed for success.

The mistake was that I did not have the background or experience to be coaching someone to go into such an intensive and complex management system. I was in over my head. I knew enough to be dangerous and only followed the prevailing cookbook ideas of how to implement these systems. I did not properly understand the ecological concepts that are fundamental in such a program. I bought into the newest fad without understanding the key principles. Fortunately, there was no train wreck. However, the large investment in fencing, water, and

labor did not produce enough extra grazing capacity to justify the expense. Range conditions did not improve nor decline. The over-promotion of new un-tested ideas without a corresponding level of knowledge, skill and experience can be a costly and sometimes dangerous combination.

Now, I realize that holistic planned grazing is a complex and long-term endeavor that requires ongoing planning, monitoring and adjusting. It requires a great deal of skill and dedication to be successful. I did not have the skill and the rancher did not have the dedication. There are no quick fixes or simple cookbook solutions when it comes to grazing management.

### **Restraining Our Words**

When we work with landowners as a conservationist, specialist or advisor, we are expected to have the right answers. That is what we are paid to do.

One of the hardest parts of working with ranchers is the ability to listen carefully to them, while at the same time being able to think ahead of how you might address their questions or concerns. My tendency too often was to listen only partially and to spend too much effort in thinking what I should say next. On too many occasions, my mouth got ahead of my qualifications. I felt like I needed to give people answers to questions that I was not fully capable of providing. The need to impress people with knowledge sometimes trumped my desire to carefully listen and come up with sound advice.

I hope I have finally learned the value of listening more carefully and attentively and not worrying so much about what I will say. We don't always have to have the right answers immediately. Listening is more important than formulating the right answers. People respect you when you are honest to admit you do not know, especially when you take the time to followup and search for a solution. The worst mistake we can make is to give quick cursory answers to complex or unique problems. Now, when I hear a professional talking too much and not listening carefully enough, I am reminded of how I was guilty of the same thing and how that kind of assistance is not very helpful.

### **Torpedo grass**

I would like to think that most of my mistakes were from the early years, before I gained experience and the "wisdom of age". This story proves otherwise.

In 2012, I observed Torpedo grass (*Panicum repens*) on a private ranch on the Pedernales River in Blanco County. In 2013, I observed it once again on a nearby state park. This was the first documentation of this species in central Texas although it is common in some places along the Texas coast. The origin of this grass is somewhat in question, although many people believe it is not native to Texas.

I was happy to see this robust colony-forming riparian grass along the Pedernales where it was trapping and stabilizing sediments, reducing erosion, improving water quality and holding banks in place. In this setting, torpedo grass occurred in patches and was mixed with the normal native riparian species – switchgrass, spikerush, bulrush, cypress, willow, sycamore and others. I saw its presence as desirable and beneficial. I saw no sign that the species was dominating the site or displacing native vegetation.

I happily announced the discovery and my positive assessment to some fellow conservationists via email. Within hours, it was clear that most of my colleagues did not share my enthusiasm about the new grass. These friends whom I respect were not happy to hear that another

aggressive non-native grass had been found along our waterways. Since the grass is strongly rhizomatous and stoloniferous, it does have the right growth form to expand rapidly.

My mistake was in prematurely announcing that torpedo grass was a good thing to find and confidently heralding its benefits. I knew that the grass had an unsavory reputation in Florida and had been labeled invasive but I saw no sign of this on the Pedernales. Fortunately, several my friends were not shy about calling me down on what may have been a misguided and overly optimistic assessment of torpedo grass. The jury is still out on whether or not this grass will prove to be problematic or beneficial in this setting; (it might be both). However, wisdom says that we should err on the side of caution.

Because I wanted to find a desirable riparian grass along the river, my assessment matched what I wanted to be true. Too often, we see only what we want to see, despite the evidence and I was probably guilty in this instance. I was looking through the filter of my own bias, which is usually not a good idea.

### **Hard to Find Good Help**

In the early 1990's we were conducting a prescribed burn in central Texas. All of the normal planning and preparation had been done including the recruitment of help. We selected a day that matched the prescription and we began with a complete review of the burn plan with the crew. Then we began setting backfires to create a blackline firebreak. I was the first grunt and was assisting the fire boss. During the course of blackline burning, despite the forecast, we had some variable and gusty winds and we ended up having multiple spotfires on three different sides of the pasture. That is enough to make you nervous and extra cautious. However, we had enough help to quickly deal with these small spotfires.

As the blacklines were completed to an adequate width, the headfire was set with everyone in the right position. As the headfire was about half complete, it was 4:00 and we observed two of our helpers driving away from the ranch. These were agency employees and it was getting close to quitting time, so away they went without notifying anyone. Almost half of our burn crew disappeared. Fortunately, the completion of the fire and mop-up went smoothly, without any problems. But what if we would have needed extra help? We would have been in a real bind. The mistake we made was in not insuring with clear communication that the entire crew would stay with us the entire time. Perhaps we made an assumption that they would be more responsible. You know what happens when you assume; (you make an ASS out of U and ME).

### **Gar**

In about 1980, in Webb County our job one hot summer day was to assist with pond management on a large ranch. The pond had become infested with alligator gar and the ranch owner wanted to renovate the pond in order to restock with bass, bluegill and catfish. We determined the correct amount of rotenone to use and decided upon the best way to apply it to reach the deep water. The operation involved a few SCS workers, as well as the rancher and his crew of Mexican ranch hands.

I quickly learned a great deal of respect and admiration for these undocumented workers that were the labor force on nearly all ranches. They were usually called "mojados" or "wets". There was no disrespect whatsoever in using these terms – that is simply how they were referred to in those days. The rancher referred to them as "the men". The men were hard working, respectful to others, and were equally good at being a cowboy, veterinarian, welder, mechanic, plumber, fence builder, bulldozer driver, or just about anything you needed. They could also cook good

meals with the simplest ingredients and I enjoyed many such meals during my time in South Texas.

Within about 30 minutes of starting the application of rotenone, the gar began to come to the surface. Within an hour or so, there were gar by the hundred, ranging in size from 3 to 5 feet. The ranch owner was a particularly frugal fellow, not wanting to spend money unnecessarily. As the gar continued to come to the surface and float to the edge of the pond, the rancher informed the men that they should begin collecting all of the gar and cleaning them because that is what they would be eating for the next few months. I assured the rancher and the men several times that fish killed with rotenone were safe to eat. The men dutifully began carrying away the gar to a cleaning area where they were filleted and prepared for the freezer. The men were well acquainted with eating gar, which in Spanish are called "catan". In Mexico, catan is considered desirable table fare, not a trash fish.

As the men continued to clean the gar, and as the rotenone job was completed, it was late afternoon and time to go home. As we began to drive away, the men stopped us and offered me a big plate of fresh fried gar. I thought that was a very nice gesture of friendliness and promptly thanked them and ate the fish with fresh squeezed lime. It was delicious and I was happy that the men had a good supply of fish to eat. As we drove off, the rancher told me that the men were not sure about eating fish that had just been poisoned. Their gesture was not entirely benevolent – their real purpose was to see if the gringo would eat the fish that had just been poisoned with rotenone.

There was no serious mistake here, but a lesson to remember - that people often will not believe what you say until you back it up with action and proof. Until I ate the fish, they were reluctant to believe that it was safe to eat. Just telling them it was safe was not good enough. This was a clever and respectful way for the men to insure that the fish was OK to eat and was just another illustration of why I grew to admire and respect the Mexican ranch hands.