

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Grasslands, seasons and ski instructors

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



“Nine months of winter and 90 days of bad sledding” is one of the more poetic local descriptions of our

high mountain valley. Nestled on the Pacific side of the central Rocky Mountains, it is a place characterized by a panoramic landscape, long cold winters, precipitation patterns typical of the high desert with highly variable soil and plant production. The typical time between hard frosts is about 110 days. A long-time rancher refers to our ecosystem as “scenic as can be, but it’s sure hard to make a living on pretty.”

Like any ranching region, it has its benefits and its drawbacks. One thing for certain is that it has taught us to take nothing for granted and to be wary of making assumptions. The lessons of a life engaged in grassland agriculture go far beyond acquired knowledge of warm- and cool-season grasses, forbs, browse, time and timing of grazing, stretching irrigation water, and stockpiling forage.

It has also taught us about the rhythm of life; that people, families and communities also move through the seasons and, like nature, are always in a state of change. Life in the high country also demands that we embrace conditions as they are, not as we wish them to be; and that we are diligent in the quest for indicators about pathways for assuring productivity and making more effective management decisions.

Find the opportunities

We learned to find opportunity in every season, even when battered by blizzards and drought. By leaning into the seasons with positive expectation — the long winters, the whisper of spring, the bounty

created from late May to early September and the full glory of spectacular autumns — we have found new ways to do better with the cards that have been dealt.

These experiences on the land have altered our perspectives on people, as well. Just as a healthy plant community is composed of a varied set of grasses, forbs and browse; finding the right mix of talents, attitudes and skills is critical in creating a healthy team of ranch personnel. Excellence is borne of varied competencies

— each critical to the success of the organization.

Grasslands transition through phases of growth, dormancy and stages of maturity; not unlike the process of personal and professional development of human beings. For most ranches, the people are a mix of ages, stages of maturity, knowledge and experience.

Learning to blend the differing capabilities (and limitations) of multiple generations while developing intentional approaches to transferring knowledge ultimately determines the longevity of the ranch. Time and timing are just as critical to developing people as they are to growing a productive stand of forage. People, like plants, require cultivation.

Grasslands require moisture, nutrients and appropriate grazing pressure. Humans thrive when they



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are nourished by knowledge, feedback and opportunities to grow through the pressure of new experiences and responsibilities.

People and pastures suffer when time and timing are incorrectly managed. Plants need rest to recuperate; too much stress weakens their capacity to remain healthy, and prolonged stress cripples the plant community. Are people really different?

Perhaps the greatest gift of life on the land is learning to perceive the world differently, to see the subtleties and to appreciate the experience of being exceptionally present in the moment. Not long ago I had a wonderful conversation with a childhood friend of my son’s who has pursued a career as a professional ski instructor with an industry-leading school. He radiated joy as he described the experience of working with skiers of varying

ages and stages of skill to help them grow in the sport.

“Skiing is a great equalizer. CEOs fall down and have to get back up just like the kindergartners,” he explained. “It is such a pleasure to be part of their experience and to coach them into developing and maturing in their skills, and to take the time to remind them to appreciate and enjoy the beautiful places where we get to ski.”

I could sense the connection that he felt to the mountain and the people, not unlike the one I feel to our ranch and its people. In our interactions with nature and humanity, we had learned that in each season and in each person lies a world of wonder and opportunity, if only we have the will and wisdom to search. |

Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular column in both the *Angus Journal* and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.