



Dale and Tom Lasater

1996 BBU Environmental Conservation Award

Lasaters understand balance between nature and cattle

by Gretchen Ratliff Reuwer

Wildlife Sanctuary: Please Cooperate...

The sign that greets visitors to the Lasater Ranch in Matheson, Colorado, hangs across the fence from the one proclaiming that this home of the Foundation Herd of Beefmasters has received the Excellence in Grazing Management Award from the Society for Range Management. Nature obviously plays a lead role in this ranch's success story. For their work in maintaining a successful balance of Beefmaster cattle and a vast array of wildlife on their 28,000 acre ranch, the Lasater family was named the 1996 recipient of the BBU Environmental Conservation Award.

The ranch was purchased by Tom Lasater, founder of the Beefmaster breed, in 1948 after oil exploration inflated the price of land to the point that his dream of owning a ranch couldn't be realized in his native South Texas. A friend vacationing in Colorado notified Tom with the news that a Colorado plains ranch 50 miles northeast of Colorado Springs was for sale. After a quick trip to see the place, Tom put in his offer and became the proud owner.

His Beefmaster herd, and the philosophy he had developed them with, was moved to the short grass prairie ranch. This philosophy is based on survival of the fittest, and it affects every aspect of the operation even today. Mother Nature has been very discriminate in her selection

process on the Lasater Ranch. Every cow that has failed to wean a calf every year, beginning as a two-year-old, has been culled. Period. Tom Lasater's theory is, "If you make excuses for your cows for one reason, pretty soon you'll be forgiving them for other reasons."

"The Beefmaster breed and the Lasater philosophy grew out of the Great Depression when there was nothing extra lying around," Dale Lasater explains.

You have to make the decision to take a step back and allow certain things to happen—allow natural selection to take place.

"These cattle didn't survive on what came out of a bucket. They came out of the reality of having to pay leases and trying to make a go of it during that time. I think Dad refined his approach by observing the land and drawing conclusions about how one should approach the land as a steward from those early days."

Dale Lasater has been managing the ranch since 1986. Prior to that, he managed a company headquartered in Kansas for about 10 years that was primarily involved in feedyards. He has also managed ranches in Florida, South Texas and New Mexico.

Dale explains that there are two themes to working with nature and they're intertwined.

"On the cattle side, there are a

variety of characteristics that we can weigh, judge and measure on a comparative basis," Dale says. "Beyond those things, there are a series of other factors in livestock that can't be readily measured or seen. A person attempting to move a herd ahead genetically, has to admit in part that he doesn't have all the answers and he can't make all the decisions. The final judgement of whether or not an animal will survive and flourish is still out of his hands.

"On the land end, we're trying to mimic the natural world and mimic what was here before us," he adds.

"Our forebearers came and brought with them a variety of European attitudes and approaches from a very different climate. As they 'tamed' the West, they naturally had this attitude

of imposing themselves, their civilizations and their way of thinking onto this land."

This need to impose man's approach on the land and to conform the land and its various traits to his productivity was maintained for over 100 years, Dale points out. Anything that wasn't cattle oriented or directly related to cattle and producing beef was somehow in the way. That led to some very erroneous thinking, he says, because many of the things considered in the way were a very important part of what happened on the land before the pioneers got there.

"I think one of Dad's early conclusions was that all of these things, including predators and burrowing animals, have a very important role," he says.

No hunting, trapping or poisoning of predators is allowed, and this includes coyotes and rattlesnakes. There is no artificial seeding of ranges, and no use of chemicals for weed and insect control. With this approach, the land was in good shape. In fact, Dale thought it was in its maximum shape. Then, in 1987, he took the ranch to a new plane when he initiated the practice of Holistic Resource Management (HRM). Taught by Allan Savory of Albuquerque, New Mexico, the philosophy dovetailed with the Lasaters' management beautifully.

"As we got into HRM, the exciting thing was that I concluded we had not topped out in production," Dale recalls. "In fact, we had the possibility of moving quite a bit further ahead.

"One of the remarkable things



The herds of pronghorn antelope (seen on the horizon) have thrived in harmony with the cattle on the eastern Colorado Ranch. Photo by Watt Casey Jr.

about nature is that even after years of something being essentially taken out of the mix, it's still present," he points out. "There are still seeds and a few plants. We haven't gone back in and reseeded. Dad was very skeptical of coming in and putting in improved grasses. I certainly share that thought. What nature has put here and what was supporting millions of grazing animals when our forebears got here has got to be a pretty good mix."

Dale established a three-phase goal with HRM involving: 1) optimum production levels; 2) a desired landscape goal for the various parts of the ranch; and 3) the necessary quality of life for the human resources involved on their operation.

"Dad was a very conservative, careful, observant manager," Dale

says. "But, all we thought about was so many acres versus animal unit, and the timing factor did not enter our thinking until the last 15 years or so. Even when a person is conservative, if the management still involves continuous grazing, then you still run into this pitfall of causing overgrazing by the timing of it.

"So we changed things in that area," he says, "and now we're doing a lot more rotation. We've put in miles of electric fences and we're leaving longer rest periods so all grazed plants can recover.

"The key to HRM is observing and the flexibility to take this general thinking and apply to your own place, knowing your place is different from

mine and different from the next guy down the road," Dale stresses. "It's not a blueprint that can be laid out for each operation and used, it's adjusted to all those factors on each operation."

Starting from a very strong base and a very well-sodded ranch, the various remnants of grasses that had been pretty much taken out of their mix over the past 100 years are expanding and the ground cover and amount of



Porcupines are among the many wildlife species found on the Lasater Ranch. Photo by Watt Casey Jr.

litter, which is critical, is recovering. Dale is excited by the possibility of the land returning to its former state prior to pioneers.

Besides the recovery of the land and an increase in the productivity of the cattle, there has also been an increase in wildlife numbers. The mule and whitetail deer populations now number in the hundreds, compared to a couple of dozen or so 40 years ago. Wild turkeys have reestablished themselves, and the pronghorn antelope herds continue to flourish. Rabbits, fox, coyotes, porcupines, hawks and even eagles are found on the ranch.

The changes in the land, the wildlife and the cattle are probably less dramatic because of the stewardship of the Lasaters, but things are changing.

"Our mission is not to go out and speed up this process or plow up the land and reseed it. We've simply attempted to facilitate those things that are happening naturally, given the chance to express themselves," Dale says. "It took us 100 years to get in the shape we we're in, and it's going to take us time to get back." ■



The mule and whitetail deer numbers have increased from a few dozen to several hundred in the past 40 years. Photo by Watt Casey Jr.