

Editorial: Cattle to the rescue?

Will vast herds of livestock one day save our planet from destruction?

They will if land managers embrace biologist Allen Savory's solution to desertification.

Local college students recently held a round of discussions on TED Talks, presentations on the topics of Technology, Entertainment and Design. Savory's video was not among them, but it was brought to our attention by Tyler Livingstone of Ruby Valley.

"I invite you to watch this 20-minute presentation," he wrote. "It succinctly and eloquently explains what many of my longtime rancher friends already know about how livestock and the health of the land relate."

So we did.

Savory talks about the extreme threat to our climate and our planet from loss of grasslands. He explains how desertification is caused by livestock overgrazing, and that he grew up hating livestock.

"Well, I have news for you. We were once just as certain that the world was flat. We were wrong then, and we are wrong now," he says in the talk posted at www.ted.com and on YouTube.

So, will the disease really turn out to be the cure, or is Savory some kind of nut?

The biologist from Zimbabwe is the originator of holistic management. He won the 2003 Banksia International Award and the 2010 Buckminster Fuller Challenge. And he once made one of the worst ecological decisions in history.

In the video, he remorsefully explains that while working as a biologist in Africa in the 1950s setting aside land for national parks, he convinced his colleagues that 40,000 elephants needed to be shot in order to save the land. But instead of the damage getting better, it got worse.

When he came to the U.S. he found desertification on a scale equal to Africa. Land managers had no explanation.

"So I then began looking at all the research plots I could over the whole of the western United States where cattle were removed to prove that it would stop desertification, but I found the opposite," he says.

Looking back through the historic record, Savory concluded that large herds trampling an area and then quickly moving on to another area regenerated the landscape. So he came up with what he calls "planned grazing," and his presentation includes before-and-after photos of how quickly it restores the landscape.

The key lies in the number of livestock, their tight grouping, and movement. He declares, "There is only one option left to climatologists and scientists, and that is to do the unthinkable, and to use livestock, bunched and moving, as a proxy for former herds and predators, and mimic nature. There is no other alternative left to mankind."

Some ranchers and land managers are giving holistic management a try. Livingstone is certainly convinced:

“Finally, a scientist that has the guts to admit his own mistakes and the courage to buck the mainstream and pursue truth, no matter the consequences. Kind of like most every rancher I know.”

Members of the Elko Daily Free Press editorial board are Travis Quast, Jeffry Mullins and Marianne Kobak McKown.