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Cattle, convinced



Guy Glosson of Jayton, Texas, teaches a new way to handle cattle: no noise, no prods no disrespect.

A growing number of ranchers find that if they treat their livestock with gentle respect, they bring home more from the auction yard

By Courtney White
for Headwaters News

Somewhere John Wayne is rolling over in his grave.

This thought crossed my mind not long ago as I sat in the back of a class taught by Guy Glosson, Tim McGaffic and Steve Allen – ranchers who practice a new type of livestock handling that emphasizes patience, kindness and respect toward animals.

Stop the whooping and hollering when moving cattle, they said. No more electric prods, hot shots or aggressive attitudes, either. No more control of animals by fear, pain or other forms of stress-inducing pressure. Hell, they didn't even want you to make eye contact with the livestock anymore.

"Consider not wearing sunglasses when approaching cattle," said Guy. "You're the predator and they're the prey, at least that's the way they look at it. If they can't see your eyes it may make them more nervous as they may not be able to judge your intentions."

Worry about making cattle nervous? What's wrong with that?

"If cattle get worried," continued Guy, "you've taken the first step toward losing control of the herd. Animals want to feel secure. But they won't feel secure if you're yelling at them all the time. Your job is to treat them with respect."

"You're not trying to tell him you're a nice guy or anything, because you're not. You're still the predator. Instead you're trying to communicate mutual respect."

Respect? I could almost hear The Duke groan. Yelling at cattle and prodding them into action was as old as, well, Hollywood. And not just Hollywood – it



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White writes a monthly column for Headwaters News that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

Courtney White in
New Farm magazine:

[All in the family](#)

Outside of Durango, Colorado, the James Ranch is using holistic management, direct marketing, and community involvement to build a sustainable livelihood for all the members of the clan.

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is standard practice on many modern ranches as well. Perhaps that explains why, as Guy told me later, Baxter Black, perhaps the best known cowboy poet in America today, once challenged him over the idea of low-stress management with a simple "Why?"

Why, indeed.

"I told him it is all about the health of the animal," Guy replied. "Consistently handling animals without scaring them allows trust to be formed. This trust helps animals to remain calm and that equates into a healthier immune system and better response to vaccines and other medications they may need."

"I also told him that it was less stress on the handler too which made us healthier," said Guy with his easy laugh.

Stress

As I learned that day in class, there are many reasons why low-stress handling is useful – and becoming more popular every day.

One reason is economics. The margin of profit for ranchers who sell cattle on the commodity market is literally counted in pennies. The stress put on cattle as they move from the ranch to the feedlot and then to the slaughtering facility (which can be terribly stressful for obvious reasons) can "shrink" an animal's weight by 1 percent to 15 percent. That can be as much as \$125 per animal, which is real money.

Stress in the sale barn or feedlot can cause animals, especially young ones, to die. It can also cause "dark cutting" – meat that has turned dark. According to a January 2001 article in Beef Magazine, "There's nothing wrong with its nutrition or food safety, but dark cutting has an off-flavor and shorter shelf life [which] raises eyebrows among retail consumers and foodservice customers."

The article goes on to say that rough handling, long hauls, wide swings in temperature and the shift from a grass diet to grain in a feedlot have all been linked to dark cutting.

Stress can also make an animal more susceptible to disease, often requiring additional medicines and additional costs. According to Guy, stress can affect pregnancy rates in cattle, the bread-and-butter of a rancher's bottom line, as well.

It all adds up quickly in dollars and cents.

But there are other reasons to consider low-stress methods too. One is philosophical – we need to treat animals with more respect.

"Out of necessity we built a system of handling cattle based on fear and intimidation," said Guy. "The early herds of Longhorn in Texas were wild animals, so the men who handled them had to be as tough and wild as the cattle. But that system is no longer needed."

"For grazing animals like cattle, the most dangerous predator on earth is a young human male," Guy continued. "Until trust is established, animals will always perceive humans as a threat. And we don't want that. These animals are now domesticated and for the most part, they depend on people for their every need. If we want them to perform at their best, they must not be afraid of the person caring for them."

Zones

Guy learned the concept of low-stress livestock management from Bud Williams, a Canadian rancher who has spent his entire life studying how to swiftly and easily handle animals, including reindeer, elk, sheep and wild cattle.

After a four-month mentorship, Guy returned to his job as manager of the Mesquite Grove Ranch in north-central Texas to put what he had learned to work. And it worked so well, he decided to share the methods with others.

Teaching Bud's methods to others led Guy, Tim and Steve to look closely at the predator-prey relationship, and at the effect such things as noise, size, distance and motion have on cattle. In the process, they began to understand that cattle, like many animals, have well-defined zones in which certain activities trigger certain responses.

The Recognition Zone is where the animal takes notice of you and tries to determine your intention. The Flight Zone, when crossed, will cause the animal to move away from your approach. Violating the Flight Zone means you are likely to encounter an angry or panicked animal who has perceived you to be a threat.

The key to low-stress management of animals, they determined, was something called "pressure and release." Your presence (as predator) creates pressure that an animal (as prey) wants to relieve. The critical moment happens when you choose to reduce the pressure instead of vice versa.

You do this by stepping into the animal's Flight Zone in such a way to pressure it in a direction or manner you intend for it to move, and then back off when the pressure is no longer needed – before the animal runs off. Animals learn from the release of pressure, not the pressure itself.

The whole idea is to use a "law of nature" to positive effect.

For example, Guy teaches his students to approach an animal on foot in a non-threatening manner, often zig-zagging as he or she gets closer. When the animal sends a signal, such as raising its head, or widening its eyes, you stop, or back up a step or two. If an animal moves off, then the student is too close, or has done something threatening. Guy tells them to start over.

"You're trying to start a conversation with the animal," said Guy. "You're not trying to tell him you're a nice guy or anything, because you're not. You're still the predator. Instead you're trying to communicate mutual respect. And you want to keep the conversation going as long as is necessary to get the job done. And you need to let the animals know when the conversation is over."

It works too. Over the course of a three-day class, student after student was able to calm animals and make them do exactly what they wanted them to do, first on foot, and then eventually from horseback.

"A man on a horse is very intimidating to cattle," said Guy.

Months later one student told me he was easily able to guide an errant bull back into a pasture with his pickup truck using the "pressure-and-release" strategy.

The class I attended concluded with a bravura performance by Tim McGaffic, who convinced a grumpy mama cow to jump into a trailer from clear across the pen simply by applying pressure from horseback, and then taking the pressure off at just the right moment.

When the mama cow jumped into the trailer the ranchers watching broke into a sustained round of applause.

Herding

Many of Guy's students have told me that low-stress livestock handling has changed much of what they do on the home ranch. In addition to the economic benefit derived from less-stressed animals, gentler cattle are easier to control, easier to "place" when driving them across a landscape, easier to find and easier to keep together.

This isn't new. Pastoralism is an ancient human activity. In the grasslands of Mongolia and the steppes of northern Iran, herds of cattle are still tended by just a few individuals, usually children.

In the evenings, the animals are brought into the camp in order to protect them from predators. In this way, cattle are born into a system of continuous care from humans and remain gentle as a result of this close association.

In North America, the early Spanish missions had large herds of cattle and may have employed a similar system of management. But increasing conflicts between the missions and raiding native tribes, followed by the violent confrontation between the American government and Native Americans, resulted in most herds going wild. The art of low-stress handling was lost to history.

Many people, including Guy, Tim, and Steve, think Bud Williams single-handedly revived low-stress handling in this country. They think herding is the next step.

"In my opinion," said Guy, "we are now just beginning to understand the relationship between large herds of animals and the soil. The evidence suggests that in arid and semi-arid areas where animals move in large, fairly tight herds the soil and plants are much healthier. We need to figure out how to put these herds back together again."

Some attempts have been successful. In the mountain wilderness above Paonia, Colo., for instance, in the mid-1990s a pool of ranchers combined their animals into a 1,000-head herd and move them today as one unit, as often as every seven days.

This "experiment" has proved so successful that the Forest Service awarded an increase in the number of animals allowed to graze in the wilderness - which enabled the ranchers to keep their private lands intact, rather than sell out and subdivide as might have been required by economic hardship.

Another benefit of herding and low-stress management is how it fits with changing values in society. The Humane Society of the United States, for instance, champions the technique.

"Low stress handling directly addresses some common animal welfare problems and is important as consumer concern for the welfare of farm animals increases," said Jennifer Lanier, director of scientific programs for the society's Farm Section. "It is also inexpensive to implement and can immediately improve the lives of animals."

For Guy Glosson, the main reason for low-stress herding is simple: "Ultimately it is less work for the people and better for the land and animals."

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