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Courtney White photo

Kirk Gadzia discussing ecological processes during a Quivira Coalition workshop on the Ute Creek Cattle Co. Ranch near Bueyeros, N.M., on Aug. 19, 2005.

For nearly three decades, a biologist has worked the rangelands of the Southwest, and cultivated the caregivers of that land in the process

By Courtney White
for Headwaters News
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It's just a guess, but Kirk Gadzia may be responsible for the improvement of more acres of rangeland in the Southwest in modern times than any other individual.

The possible exception is Kirk's mentor, Allan Savory, originator of the Holistic Management (originally called HRM) model. There is a crucial difference, however, between the two men. Whereas the career of the pioneering biologist from Rhodesia has been controversial, to put it mildly, with plenty of highs and lows, Gadzia has worked quietly and steadily as a second-generation educator and consultant.

In his own career, now stretching back 25 years, Kirk has taught, consulted, or otherwise worked with ranchers and other landowners whose global combined holdings run into the multiple millions of acres. And if the feedback from his clients around the Southwest is any indication, most of those acres have become healthier as a result of his tutelage.

"Another thing I have learned is that people are a lot like ecosystems; they have boundaries and thresholds too."

- Kirk Gadzia, educator and



Courtney 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.

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That's not bad for a man who has never owned a cow or managed a ranch.

"Other than pounding a few posts, it's been mostly talk," said Kirk with his easy smile. "In fact, I like to think of myself as a 'professional visitor.'"

These days his visits carry him from Canada to Mexico to South Africa to Hawaii, the Midwest, Florida, Virginia, and Australia. The thread connecting all his clients is not cattle, however, but rangeland health.

"It has been a tremendous opportunity to see so many ecosystems," he said. "And what I've learned is no matter where you are on the planet, ecosystem functions are the same."

It has also been an opportunity to exercise his considerable "people skills."

"Another thing I have learned is that people are a lot like ecosystems; they have boundaries and thresholds too," he continued. "It's something many people didn't understand about the Savory model – that it wasn't about cattle, it was about ecosystem principles and about how to manage people with the similar kinds of principles."

Sometimes the biggest obstacle to improving a ranch's economics or getting the range into better shape is contentious family dynamics – which is why Kirk does a lot of facilitation before he addresses questions about plants and animals.

A measurement of Kirk's skills in the "people department" is that he doesn't work with contracts.

And he's never had a check bounce.

Rangeland Health

When Kirk teaches a class he usually opens with his favorite Wendell Berry quote: "Sustainable agriculture is that which depletes neither soil nor people." For Kirk, the two are inextricably kinked.

For example, consider this link as you read through some of the definitions of land health found in Kirk's course materials:

An Effective Water Cycle: a permeable soil surface; evaporation losses minimized; the effects floods and droughts are less severe; underground water levels are stable or easily replenished; organic content is high; plant growth rates are fast.

An Ineffective Water Cycle: soil surface is sealed and crusted; evaporation is high; the effects of droughts and floods are severe; water levels are not easily replenished; organic content and plant growth rates are low.

An Effective Mineral Cycle: deep roots; rich organics; high diversity; few bottlenecks; rapid cycling of nutrients.

An Ineffective Mineral Cycle: high degree of bare ground; many bottlenecks; high erosion; shallow roots; low biological activity.

High Successional Communities: "Such communities are composed of populations of many different species of plants, animals, birds, insects and microorganisms. They are not as prone to wide fluctuations in populations or normal weather extremes."

Low Successional Communities: "Such communities are composed of populations of only a few species, relative to the potential of the site. They are usually unstable and vulnerable to fluctuations and extremes in population shifts

and weather."

In other words, people, plants, and animals are not as far apart as we might think.

Community diversity, site stability, resilience to perturbation, rapid recovery, normal variability, maintaining integrity, and the ability to capture and store scarce resources are the keys to health no matter what the species.

This link forms the core of Kirk's success in getting landowners around the world to improve their lives as well as the condition of their property.

It is also one of the reasons why Kirk was asked to join a National Research Council team in the early 1990s. Their task was to explore the possibility of a national assessment of rangelands using common or standardized techniques.

One product of their work was a definition of "rangeland health" that described an entirely new approach to conservation and restoration. According to an updated definition "Rangeland health is the degree to which the integrity of the soil, vegetation, water and air as well as ecological processes of the rangeland ecosystem are balanced and sustained."

In other words, it's all about relationships: people to people, people to land, ecological process to ecological process: balanced and sustained.

It is at only this point in his class that he gets to the cattle.

HRM

Unlike many ranch consultants, Kirk does not have a background in agriculture.

Born in Tampa, Fla., where his father served in the Air Force, Kirk was drawn early to the outdoors, especially hunting. By the time he entered high school, his family had moved to the Mojave Desert, and he spent most of his free time hiking in the Sierra.

At Brigham Young University he majored in wildlife biology, but minored in range science. Curious about the connections, he went on to earn a master's degree in range science from New Mexico State. In between his studies, he worked for the Bureau of Land Management doing vegetative and wildlife inventories, including field botany (he's an expert at plant identification), which also satisfied his desire to be in remote places.

It was only during his work on his master's degree that he began to think about cows. His first thoughts were not happy ones.

"I thought I didn't have a prejudice against cows when I began my research," he said, "but when I began to study Black grama grass I found myself automatically assuming that the study plots contained in exclosures would be healthier."

To his surprise, they weren't.

"I saw better establishment of Black grama grasses in grazed areas," he said. "But the real revelation came when I learned that the exclosures were mesquite-free not because they were cattle-free but because they had been sprayed by herbicide. Everything changed after that."

"Ranching will always be around, though it may not look like what it does today. Working with animals is an ancient human activity and it's not going to fade."

– Kirk Gadzia

The myth of "pristineness" vanished for Kirk, to be replaced by thoughts of proper management. Soon, he found himself wanting to apply his knowledge "to the real world."

Upon graduation, he moved to Albuquerque and took a job as a range conservationist with the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Southern Pueblos Agency. The work was stimulating and educational, and he enjoyed working with the tribes, though sometimes he felt frustrated by the endless meetings.

In 1980, his life changed when he took a two-week HRM course taught by Allan Savory and Stan Parsons. Both men had recently relocated to Albuquerque from Rhodesia, bringing with them a new vision of people and land – a vision, though widely accepted today, that was considered heretical then.

"It was an era of great excitement in range management," he recalled. "I was thrilled to be a part of it."

With the assistance of Savory and others, Kirk convinced Sandia Pueblo to put a short-duration cell system on 20,000 acres of tribal land. They wrote the plan, built the fences, and did the monitoring.

"A lot of tribal members came out when we started," he recalled. "And it worked well for a while. But eventually it failed, and it failed because it was our project, not theirs. They didn't have ownership. They chose to not fix the fences after we left."

This taught Kirk an important lesson about the value of eager learners.

Kirk departed the BIA to work for the Savory Center as its Education Director. During the next seven years he taught an HRM course once a month to 20 or more ranchers and others. One of his students was Jim Winder, a co-founder of The Quivira Coalition.

In 1994, after honing his teaching skills, and touching a lot of lives, he left the Center to start his own business. One of the lessons he took with him was to never work with "hates" – the attitude that something will never work, an attitude he frequently saw directed at the Center.

"I was blessed to work with people who look at the positive side of life and work hard to get things done," he said. "And I still am."

"I can't say enough about how much Allan Savory has created a new awareness and knowledge in the field of resource management," Kirk continued. "Much of the material I use in my role as an educator and consultant are based directly on his work in creating a holistic decision making model. I consider it a great privilege to have worked so closely with him over the years."

One of Kirk's current projects, created in collaboration with [Todd Graham](#), who manages the Sun Ranch in Montana, is a new rangeland health monitoring protocol that is simple and easy to use and is aimed at helping landowners achieve their specific goals on the land.

Once again, the overarching goal is the health of the land.

As for the future of ranching and all those millions of acres that they manage, Kirk's not too worried.

"Ranching will always be around, though it may not look like what it does today," he said. "Working with animals is an ancient human activity and it's not going to fade."

Not if educators like Kirk Gadzia are around to help.

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