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Author: Monlezun, Anna Clare

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Why we should consider cattle partners

By Anna Clare Monlezun

On the Ground

- Other worldviews offer alternative ways of thinking and being in relation to food animals.
- Embracing complexities in our relationship with cattle could be a starting point for resolving common, and sometimes contentious paradoxes in our industry.
- Heart-centered connections we have with food animals are somehow taboo and left out of our research, professional conversations, and communication with broader society.
- Shifting our language around cattle to consider them “partners” could be transformative.
- Our work may benefit from intentionality, humility, and acknowledgement of our symbiosis with cattle and the natural world.

Keywords: alternative worldviews, cattle, human dimensions, land management tools, metaphor, rangelands.

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Introduction

Discoveries in rangeland ecology and animal sciences have taught us there is more to the cattle story—the herbivore-land relationship is remarkably more complex and dynamic than the lawnmower-land relationship. Think about patch effects, trampling, nutrient deposition, and grazing selectivity, not to mention nuances across spatial and temporal scales. It is not about one entity acting upon another. It is about co-existence, resilience, co-evolution, and feedback cycles with no discernable beginning or end.

In a similar way, let’s consider the herbivore-human relationship. Think about agricultural history, cultural identities, food provision, domestication and breeding, land use deci-

sions, and rural and pastoral livelihoods. My studies in traditional ecological knowledge, graduate research in collaborative rangeland management, and my own personal journey to ranching and ecology have long inspired me to think critically about our relationship with food animals, like cattle. From a childhood fascination with animals, to a teenage stint in vegetarianism, to owning and operating my own pastured cattle, sheep, and hog ranch as an adult, I have embodied diverse mentalities, emotions, and stories about the human relationship with food animals. These collective embodiments have widened my vision for what could be, and today I usher a challenge to our modern paradigm and the language habits we have developed as an industry. Perhaps embracing our own complex relationship with cattle through the words we use to communicate our work could be a starting point for resolving common, and sometimes contentious paradoxes in our field.

In unraveling this theme, I explore three questions through which I am inspired to transform my own approach to ranching, rangeland science, and land stewardship:

- 1) What would happen if we stopped referring to cattle as “tools?”
- 2) What if we shifted our language around cattle by one word to call them our “partners?”
- 3) What would happen if we approached our relationship with cattle from a perspective of admiration and even kinship rather than solely a perspective of utility?

What would happen if we stopped referring to cattle as “tools?”

I get it. A popular rangeland community response to widespread contemporary villainization of cattle has been to reconsider them as “tools”—something useful we employ to accomplish an ecological objective, like thinning overgrown vegetation to reduce wildfire fuel loads. We know for the last 10,000 years, domesticated draft animals, relatives of modern cattle, oxen, horses, and donkeys, were very literally “tools” used by agrarians across Eurasia to cultivate the land among other things.¹ This is still a reality today in some parts of the world, yet nearly a century after the great mechanical revolution in Western agriculture, we have not allowed ourselves to let go of this archetype. In the literature, conservationists and rangeland and forestry researchers, with the best of intentions,

continue to refer to cattle as “tools” for grass and brush mitigation.²⁻⁵ At professional conferences and in conversation I hear presenters and colleagues casually echo this association—cattle as “land management tools.”

Aldo Leopold,⁶ a widely revered conservationist of the 20th century may have been the first to propose this metaphor in the context of rangelands in his book, *Game Management*, originally published in 1933. At face value it is true, we have learned over centuries that cattle, like other large herbivores, can be useful to humans in many ways, from providing food and countless byproducts, to holding spiritual significance and improving biodiversity and soil nutrient cycling on the lands they graze.⁷⁻¹¹ Geese, salmon, and bees are also useful to humans and provide essential roles in ecosystem sustainability. Do we refer to them as “tools?”

Today, we place cattle between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, cattle make otherwise agriculturally unproductive tracts of land productive by turning biodiverse, often native-plant communities and sunshine into high quality, nutritiously rich protein and dairy products upon which global populations depend. And on the other hand, they have been accused of desertifying grassland ecosystems all over the world and emit significant amounts of one of our most feared greenhouse gases, methane.^{12,13} A cow’s fascinating digestive anatomy and physiology make all of these truths possible.

More and more, however, it is becoming clear that cattle themselves are not responsible for the environmental challenges of our time, but our own management of them is a driving factor, perhaps more important than the ecological processes alone. Rangelands as well as most ecosystems today are inescapably social-ecological systems, and failing to acknowledge the human role is like turning a blind eye to the white elephant in the room.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ In other words, it is more about humans and unintentional outcomes caused by our general misunderstanding of cattle and their role “in the family of things.”¹⁸ This is not about blame. It is about letting down our defenses and focusing on solutions.

Notably, our understanding is improving. Never before has the cattle-land interface been under such scientific scrutiny, and never before has such a broad spectrum of society cared so much about the way cattle are managed. In fact, when we work with cattle so that we honor their innate way of behaving in relationship to the land, and when we recognize and respect their strengths, their superpowers, and their limits, we find cattle can actually contribute to our efforts in sustaining, protecting, and even restoring grassland ecosystems.^{5,19-22}

What if we shifted our language around cattle by one word to call them our “partners?”

Replacing an inanimate connotation (tool) with an animate one (partner) requires a subtle shift in language but one with transformative significance. As Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer²³ asserts, “Language is a dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else. It is a prism through which to see the world” (p. 258). Words are powerful, and metaphors even more so. They timelessly shape our collective mentality

and reveal our deepest human sentiments on culture, politics, and society: the melting pot, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, the red road, the rat race, and the iron curtain. Metaphors and their stories have also long shaped our philosophies about human relationships with nature, and they continue to construct and inform the mental and biophysical policies by which we live.^{23,24} Most of our everyday metaphors are so integrated into common language that we don’t even consciously notice them. However, it is important we choose our metaphors wisely, as they have the power to either snare us in a mental prison or unlock the shackles.²⁵ Is “tool,” therefore, a wise metaphor for any animal?

I do not intend to rebuke any of my fellow colleagues, rangeland managers, consultants, conservationists, or ranchers who, until now, have entertained the “tool” metaphor for cattle. As I mentioned, this is a way we have attempted to reframe the cattle role, transposing them from beast or felon to field instrument, while deeply understanding their capacity to provide dual benefits of food production and land management services. In fact, some of our best solution-focused approaches to coupling conservation and cattle stewardship stem from this metaphor.

Perhaps until now we have perpetuated the “tool” metaphor as a defense mechanism to alleviate the weight on our own conscience when we find ourselves lacking control over situations of exploitation, poor management, or animal welfare violations. Could we turn our feelings of helplessness into determined action founded in our chosen forms of dialect and vocabulary? The implications of such a mass reframing could permeate our collective system through the power of language. Reflecting on the power of language and metaphor in religious and political contexts, we see that it can be transformational. It can divide or unite us. Promoting cattle from object to subject would summon our ancestors’ traditional ecological knowledge, a system of knowing that did not and does not shy away from living in deep awareness of and relationship with nonhuman beings. Some of the oldest belief systems on Earth have embraced this approach.

Dr. Robin Eckersley,²⁶ a contemporary thinker and author in environmental political theory, describes ecocentrism as a worldview where, “the world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and nonhuman” (p. 49). This view challenges the Western status quo of anthropomorphic thinking, where the natural world is primarily of instrumental value to humans, who are regarded as superior beings and the pinnacle of evolution. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Dr. Kimmerer²³ reminds us that ecology causes us to “reconsider the place of humans in the natural world” (p. 218). Through the lens of ecology and ecocentric thinking, we may crack open the conceptual boundaries we have constructed around rangelands and livestock management.

Two decades ago, Dr. Fred Provenza²⁷ challenged us to engage systems thinking and non-Western teachings as a philosophical framework for the ecological sciences. In *Sci-*



Figure 1. “Pastoral Scene,” painting on wood by Constant Troyon, c.1860. Located in Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, Hungary. Image downloaded from the public domain of [wikiart.org](https://www.wikiart.org).

ence, Myth, and the Management of Natural Resources (2000), he writes, “Just as physicists have been forced to relinquish their rigid Newtonian views, researchers and managers of natural resource systems must eventually abandon inflexible perspectives for ones that reflect the dynamics of life” (p. 35). Dr. Provenza²⁷ further explains, “The courage to love is the courage to transcend tradition. The contemporary world of natural resource management is filled with passion, but devoid of compassion” (p. 35). Do we uphold compassion in our rangelands’ language? Where and when do we allow ourselves to acknowledge the connections we feel with other species we work with?

After all, cattle, not unlike us, are animals, and anyone who works closely with them would be hard pressed to deny that connectedness. We tenderly take photos and create works of art inspired by the pastoral landscapes of cattle and feel tugs on our heart strings when they succumb to predation (Fig. 1). We recognize their very complex maternal behaviors and familial structures. Their five senses, especially sight and taste, are many times more acute than ours, and they have ways of knowing their environment, predicting the weather, and recognizing danger, far more sophisticated than ours.

Dr. Kimmerer²³ also reminds us we are “younger brothers” in the web of life (p. 346). If we truly consider our kinship with nature and cattle specifically, imagine what we may also learn from them. Science has always looked to nature and the magnificent biophysical qualities of plants and animals to solve challenges of our own species, but while science is good at the accumulation of knowledge, it can also be void of “ecological compassion” (p. 345).²³ And yet, I don’t know anyone who works closely with cattle and doesn’t hold a sense of wonderment about them at the end of the day.

What would happen if we approached our relationship with cattle from a perspective of admiration and even kinship rather than solely a perspective of utility?

Our human relationship with cattle is filled with complexity. Our woven histories hold many truths that are simultaneously incriminating and inspiring, despairing and hopeful. As a species, we too are growing and learning about how

to co-exist in an interdependent multispecies world. We can only thrive as a part of nature, not apart from nature, and as Dr. Lauren Porensky¹⁰ expresses in *Embracing Complexity and Humility in Rangeland Science* (2021), “to grow as humans we must transform” (p. 142). Shifting our metaphorical language and therefore psycho-emotional framework around cattle would naturally lead to a shift in action—the way we work with them, study them, talk about them, or write about them. We are all keen to the criticism that the rangeland and cattle industries are ecologically exploitive and insensitive to animal welfare. A transformation in language and approach to, but not limited to, cattle may also have the potential to rectify these common misconceptions about our field of work.

Recognizing our interdependence with domestic livestock, our symbiosis, our entwined existence would rightfully also put us in our own place. Cattle are responsible for us, as we are responsible for them, creating a relationship of reciprocity and symbiosis. Most cattle could jump a three or four-foot fence if they wanted to, so why don't they simply escape our manmade confines and run free? Could it be that we have co-evolved into a relationship of trust, bound by reciprocal caretaking? Isn't this partnership?

What if... What if we embraced this idea? Does it not matter to our audiences when we use the term “harvest” instead of “slaughter?” What about when we use the term “stewardship” instead of “management?” Don't these subtle changes feel different when we speak the words, when we communicate with people outside of our industry? There is power in semantics, and therefore our vernacular ought to be fully intentional. I realize there will be barriers, and I believe that the toughest barriers will be ourselves and our own discomfort with trying on a new hat, a new way of thinking and doing. In the beginning each of us will be going against the grain, challenging the status quo. However, like all paradigm shifts that have come before, the minority view will slowly become the majority view.

Imagine the positive implications that would infuse our industry. This shift could improve our relationships and attitudes toward cattle, improve our marketing of their provisions and our ability to find common ground with skeptics. Considering cattle as partners may even improve the psycho-emotional health of ranchers, other rangeland stakeholders, and our efforts to maintain thriving ecosystems. I do not believe this is about changing how we truly feel about cattle, but rather, being more transparent about our feelings and reflecting them in our language, which may dissolve some contentions around our field.

So, let's reframe the primary metaphor under which we work with these animals. Let's stop talking and writing about cattle as if they were tools, something expendable, something solely utilitarian. Let's consider them partners, fellow beings. Let's approach our management of them in a way which respects first their nature, their needs, and their health. Let's respect their role in the food chain, the way they may preserve grassland ecosystems through herbivory, and the way we may harvest them through carnivory. Let's acknowledge that as humans we are emotionally bound to our world. Let the lives

of cattle fill us with awe, the way they are born and the way they grow. Let our scientific and professional conversations also include our feelings toward them, happiness when we see them thriving and sadness when we see them go. Let's not forget our infinite universal and elemental kinship with cattle and other food animals, and while the constraints of our partnership illuminate our own positions of power, we remember to exercise that power from a place of relationship, not objectification. Responsibility, not exploitation. Partnership, not supremacy.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Author is from: Department of Ecosystem Science and Sustainability and Natural Resources Ecology Laboratory, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado (Anna Clare Monlezun)