

## HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT

Perhaps the single most impressive insight in Alan Savory's "Holistic Management: A New Framework for Decision Making" (1999) distinguishes "brittle" from "non-brittle" environments, brittle where rainfall is sparse and/or unevenly distributed throughout the year, and where organic waste breaks down slowly, and non-brittle its opposite.

The distinction is crucial because two-thirds of the earth's cultivable surface are brittle environments, with millions of acres of bare soil between plants, which can't hold water or cycle nutrients well. All of this is moving toward desertification, which already (1999) affects 900 million people in over 100 countries.

Yet we manage both extremes similarly, with disastrous results. Whereas continuous light grazing, fire and rest work well in managing non-brittle environments, because everything decays and grows back so quickly, they create deserts of brittle lands, including much of the western U.S.

The ideal relationship among humans, animals and the land prevailed before agriculture began, when herds of grazers moved quickly from plant to plant, driven by predators, including humans, and thus seldom lingering long enough to cause environmental damage. Savory would have us move back

toward that ideal, using contemporary tools – domesticated stock, technology and, most importantly, our brains.

Always pay attention to the soil's surface, Savory says. What goes on there controls what goes on above and below. So, holistic management aims for constant vegetative cover, even in the most brittle environments. Ideally we should try to establish perennials that grow densely and with the greatest possible leaf area, thus maintaining optimum water and mineral cycles sustainably, and reversing desertification.

And only herding animals, he says, driven by moveable fencing, lures or the human/animal equivalent of predators, can achieve this on brittle soils. Grazers need to be bunched and milling to have a positive effect on soil, trampling and dunging it briefly, with plenty of rest afterward for plants to re-grow. This is a sustainable system.

“What other ways exists,” Savory asks, “to treat millions of square miles . . . without consuming fossil fuel, without pollution, and by a means millions . . . can employ even while it feeds them?”

Current practices – continuous light grazing, extended rest and overgrazing of brittle rangelands – will result in expanding desertification. Savory's program would re-green the earth, even its most fragile lands, appropriately and sustainably.

Though land management is key to “Holistic Management,” the book casts a much wider net. In studying ecosystems, Savory says, we can’t isolate anything, much less control the variables, because there are no parts or boundaries, no stuff, only wholes and wholes within wholes – patterns and arrangements.

In managing anything, from a household to a nation, we need to think creativity, collaboration and synergy, rather than hierarchies and organization, to manage people and their surroundings together, now and in the future – to see everything in its context.

When we test proposed actions, we need to consider the economic, environmental and social consequences. We need to plan, monitor, control and re-plan in a feedback loop, prepared to shift paradigms as conditions merit, to seek true causes and weak links, and always to assume that, where nature is concerned, our decisions are probably wrong.

Toward the end of “Holistic Management” Savory lists several problems which all nations share – from rising crime and violence, poverty, and social breakdown to global warming, desertification and loss of biodiversity.

He gives four reasons for optimism about solving those. They are, holistic thinking—always taking any management decision in its fullest context, both spatial and temporal; a common

enemy – global warming; advanced technology, which lets us know the truth about the earth and our effect on it; and broad, instant communication through the internet.

His faith is that we can become whole again if only we will think holistically. More and more renewed land, worldwide, suggests his faith is well-founded.