

## The Formation And History Of The Malpai Borderlands Group by Bill McDonald

The Malpai Borderlands Group is attempting to implement ecosystem management on nearly a million acres of virtually unfragmented open space landscape in Southeastern Arizona and Southwestern New Mexico. The area involved is roughly pyramid-shaped, with the base of the pyramid running from just east of Douglas, along the Mexican Border to just west of Antelope Wells, New Mexico. The apex is just south of Animas, New Mexico.

The elevation in this area ranges from about 4500 feet, which is characterized by desert scrub and tobosa grasslands, up to over 8500 feet, which features Arizona Ponderosa Pine and Douglas fir. Within this diverse area of mountains, canyons and valleys are numerous riparian corridors with Sycamores, Cottonwoods and other obligate riparian species. Several rare, threatened or endangered plant and animal species are found here. In addition, it is the only area in the United States where Gould's turkey and white-sided jack rabbits naturally occur. It is also home to such popular big game species as Coues deer, mule deer, pronghorn and Desert Bighorn sheep. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about this huge landscape is that less than 100 human families reside on it. Except for two small wildlife preserves, this is cattle ranching country.

The diversity of the land ownership is nearly as great as the country itself. The patchwork of ownership includes 53% private and 47% made up of state trust land in New Mexico and Arizona or public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management.

On the surface, little has changed since the homestead days of the turn of the century when our families established ranches in the area. It was a time when a regime of survival of the fittest established the carrying capacity of the land for people and their livestock, although not without cost to the land. Since that time, it might appear that not much has changed, but change is in the works.

In 1991, several of the area ranchers met at the Malpai Ranch in the San Bernardino Valley. The ranch is so named after the volcanic malapai rock which is prevalent in the area. We met to discuss what we saw as a deteriorating situation. Cattle ranching in the West, especially grazing on Public Lands, was under attack and on the defensive. Additionally, we were concerned about the future of the resource we depended on for our livelihoods. The grasslands with some shrubs were moving inexorably to shrublands with some grass. As individuals living on our remote ranches, we felt ill equipped to deal with all this. It seemed as though the "dig in your heels" approach was doomed to failure, so we decided to embark on a different approach, to reach out to our critics and find common ground.

For two years, a small group of ranchers and environmentalists, together with scientist Ray Turner, met to discuss our mutual concern for the health and the open space future of our land. We called ourselves the Malpai Group and after two years, we drafted a Malpai Agenda. It addressed two major concerns. One was the threat of fragmentation of the

landscape. Already some ranches on the fringe of our area had been subdivided. Fragmentation would permanently limit future options for a desired sustainable condition for the land. The second concern was for the declining productivity and loss of biological diversity accompanying the encroachment of woody species on grasslands. The consensus of the group was that more government regulation was not going to help. At best, it would replace one set of problems with another. The inevitable result of the free market would seem to be 20 acre ranchettes. This was not the future we wanted to see for this land.

While not sure what we needed, we felt, whatever it was should be driven by good science, should contain a strong conservation ethic, be economically feasible and be initiated and led by the private sector with the agencies coming in as our partners, rather than with us as their clients.

Two subsequent events took us to the next step. One was the suppression of a small brush fire just inside our area. The fire was suppressed by the land management agency in authority over the objection of the private landowner whose land intermingled with that managed by the agency. The fire was burning in some three-awn grass interspersed with creosote brush. The fire was bounded on one side by a road and on all other sides by bare ground and creosote brush. It wasn't going anywhere. The ranchers felt strongly that this fire should not have been put out. Fire suppression was believed to be a major factor in the accelerated encroachment of brush in this century and many ranchers, as well as others, felt it was time for fire to regain some of its naturally occurring role in the ecosystem. Another meeting was held at the Malpai Ranch, this time with some 30 ranches represented. Out of that meeting came a request for the land management agencies to work with the ranchers on a Comprehensive Fire Plan for the area. The response from the agencies was quick. A followup meeting with the Coronado Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management in Safford, Arizona and Las Cruces, New Mexico, the State Land Departments of New Mexico and Arizona and the Natural Resource Conservation Service represented, was held at the Gray Ranch. This two day meeting with representatives from the ranching community produced a commitment by all parties to work toward coordinated ecosystem management for the whole area. After all, fire crosses land ownership boundaries and fire is just one tool in managing landscapes. Clearly, it was time to figure out how to work across political boundaries to improve the land. The second event which transformed our group was the purchase of the huge Gray Ranch by the Animas Foundation from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The Conservancy had purchased the Gray from a rancher who was a Mexican national who was willing to subdivide part of it in order to maximize its worth. Following the purchase, TNC began to look for a buyer. The community, fearful that the buyer might be the federal government, went to the Hadley family, twenty year owners of the Guadalupe Canyon Ranch, and asked them if it might be possible for them to purchase the Gray. The Hadleys, who have substantial resources beyond their cattle operation, were able to create a private organization, the Animas Foundation, with which to purchase and manage the Gray. It was important to TNC that the Gray be sold to a party which would keep it in open space and preserve and maintain its natural beauty. The ranch was purchased, therefore, with conservation easements on the private land guaranteeing that it would never be subdivided and with conditions establishing monitoring procedures to record the health of the range and habitats. To help manage the

Gray, the Animas Foundation has invested in a Geographic Information System and has offered to extend its use to ranches involved with the Malpai Group. It has also provided some seed money to the group to help start up its operations. The Nature Conservancy became interested in the group and its goals and assigned a senior vice-president, (the same man who negotiated the Gray Ranch purchase with the Animas Foundation), to work with the group and the Foundation at the request of the ranchers.

The upshot of all of these events was the establishment of the Malpai Borderlands Group as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, capable of accepting tax-deductible contributions and of holding conservation easements. Our Board of Directors include local ranchers, and scientists and other stakeholders. The goal statement of the group reads as follows: Our goal is to restore and maintain the natural processes that create and protect a healthy, unfragmented landscape to support a diverse, flourishing community of human, plant and animal life in our borderlands region.

Together, we will accomplish this by working to encourage profitable ranching and other traditional livelihoods which will sustain the open space nature of our land for generations to come.

Some of the accomplishments of the Malpai Borderlands Group over the past ten years include:

The Malpai Group has acquired conservation easements on 77,000 acres of private land on twelve ranches within our planning area. This also affects a total of 202,000 acres of associated state and federal land. When coupled with the conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy on the Gray Ranch, this means that well over half the private land in the area is now permanently protected from subdivision and development.

Since 1994, 66,225 acres of land have been impacted by fire in the area now known as the Malpai Borderlands. Four prescribed burns, including the largest successful prescribed fire in U.S. history, have been executed. Monitoring analysis verifies that the fires, in general, have been effective in reducing woody plant cover and stimulating the growth of perennial grasses. These are primary objectives of our goal to restore natural processes and a healthy landscape.

Over the last ten years, the Malpai Group has been involved in a number of efforts aimed at making the protection of endangered species in the area more compatible with rural livelihoods. In cooperation with others, our efforts on behalf of the jaguar, the leopard frog, the long-nosed bat, and the ridge-nosed rattlesnake, among others, has resulted in a more secure future for those species as well as for the landowners whose livelihoods help maintain their habitats. The Safe Harbor Agreement we just signed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Habitat Conservation Plan that is nearing completion, are official recognition of that fact. Our exemplary partnership with the government agencies, forged when this experiment began, and strengthened over years of working through tough problems together, is the envy of the conservation community and has been a major factor in our success to date.

Our early effort to involve the best science available in our work has resulted in the establishment of a landscape-scale comparison study of how fire, livestock grazing, and natural herbivory interact to structure our grasslands. Our Science Advisory Committee,

featuring some of the most renowned experts in their respective fields, helps review our projects and gives us unmatched credibility.

The Malpai Group has established a technical and cost-share assistance program to help landowners put in place needed conservation projects and implement sound management practices. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Forest Service continue to support positions within their agencies dedicated to assisting us in these endeavors.

In place for two years now is our watershed restoration program that has been responsible for the construction of over 2,000 small structures within gullies and draws to slow down runoff, capturing sediment, establishing vegetation, and thus controlling erosion. So far, nearly 10 miles of watersheds have been treated using native materials, and we've only just begun!

We continue to cultivate a working relationship with our ranching neighbors in Mexico, addressing issues ranging from fire to jaguars. Last fall, some of the staff and Board of Directors took a two-day tour of several ranches in Sonora at the invitation of ranchers there. This year it's our turn to play host to ranchers from northern Sonora and Chihuahua. Our public outreach program, that includes our Ranching Today workshop for ranchers and their prospective conservation partners, has seen participants from all sections of this country and every continent in the world except Europe so far. (No penguins from Antarctica either.) When requested, we also travel to conferences and meetings when possible. Over the past ten years, numerous articles have been written about the Malpai Group in magazines and newspapers and we've been featured on radio, television and the World Wide Web.

Perhaps as important as any single thing we have accomplished, is the fact that this small group in a remote corner of Arizona and New Mexico has had a very significant influence on the way that ranchers, the environmental community, the government, and the public perceive conservation and ranching today. The focus is moving away from confrontation, regulation and litigation toward finding common ground and working together, using the best available science, working at the level closest to the ground (grassroots), and exhibiting real stewardship. The concept of working in the "Radical Center" is gaining more converts every day.

The next ten years will hold challenges every bit as daunting as the last ten. Subdivision pressures will only increase, as will recreational pressures and the impacts of undocumented aliens and the Border Patrol on the landscape. On the other side of the equation and in spite of the commendable efforts of our Sustainable Ranching Committee, it is still a struggle to ranch profitably here, as it is almost everywhere. Nonetheless, the Malpai Borderlands Group looks to the future with optimism and confidence, knowing that with your support, we will be up to the task ahead.