

Essays of a Peripheral Mind

The Range Problem in New Mexico

By **K. M. Havstad**

He didn't get it right. He came close, but then tried to be too pragmatic. Not that anyone at that time could have been expected to identify the correct solution. The fact that he even tackled the problem exceeded any expectation. Just the process took him several years, typically riding in a wagon or on horseback. He covered the entire Territory of New Mexico, over 78 million acres at the time, or an area, as he described it, the size of the New England states, with New York and New Jersey thrown in. He spoke with and interviewed hundreds of people, took untold number of photographs, and employed his extensive skills as a botanist and a naturalist to characterize these landscapes. Then, in about 12,000 words, a long book chapter for today's reader, he summarized his observations into 46 pages of text and figures. Most importantly, who he wrote for was, as he described, the "average citizen," the people directly interested in the development of this Territory.

One hundred years ago, in April 1908, Elmer Ottis Wooton (photograph), at the time a professor at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts, published his treatise on the problem of overgrazing across New Mexico's rangelands at the beginning of the 20th century. He titled it "The Range Problem in New Mexico" (see: <http://usda-ars.nmsu.edu/biblio/pdf/001.pdf>). It was a fascinating synthesis of this environment at that time. The late 19th century had been a time of extreme use and disturbance, one that was well-documented, and was not unlike the periods of stress and disturbance that other rangeland environments have gone through at some point before or

since. And, it was not a period of denial. Wooton and the people he spoke with were fairly blunt and honest in their assessments of this resource at the start of the 20th century. His 1908 report was simply a plain statement of the situation, a situation that was known to the people living on the land, and a statement Wooton wanted to communicate more broadly to the public. The situation was that "...much damage has been done to the range..." (p. 19). Our literature has other classic assessments of the western rangelands that reached similar conclusions during this time period. It seems that these impressions are well accepted, and there has been little revisionism over the subsequent years to create a less harsh and less honest assessment of those times and their degraded landscapes.

In the same fashion in which he communicated this straightforward assessment, Wooton attempted to convey his rationale for a solution. He said there were two keys to restoring carrying capacity of these rangelands—control of use and good management (p. 28). There would not be much argument today that those are still the two keys to restoring capacities of these lands to provide goods and services, irrespective of what type or combination of goods and services might be in demand today.

Where he was wrong was in his final proposal for a means to exert the needed control. Please know that my essay is written with a great deal of admiration for what Wooton accomplished in his lifetime. In fact, this essay is being composed from an office in a building named Wooton Hall, a name specifically chosen to recognize his accomplishments and contributions.



Elmer Ottis Wooton, in 1923, whose career included being a faculty member at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts, photographer, scientist, botanist, and, finally, a bureaucrat within the US Department of Agriculture (for a wonderful biography, see Allred, K. A., 1990, Elmer Ottis Wooton and the botanizing of New Mexico, *Systematic Botany* 15:700–719).

He said that restoring these lands would be best served if control of the lands was in the hands of nonresidents. He thought the pragmatic thing to do was to place the authority to manage these public lands far removed from local personal interests. He thought this solution would adjudicate their management in the best interests of all parties concerned (p. 33). He wrote that control of these lands should be with the federal government (p. 37). Of course, Wooton was not alone in these sentiments at this time. Many others were also campaigning for a federal system of public land management for the West, including President Theodore Roosevelt. In fact, there were reasonable existing examples of the value of a federal system of control for certain services, including at that time the federal postal service.

With passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934, a simple document of only a few pages, a federal system of control of over 80 million acres of public rangelands was eventually established. Today, the Bureau of Land Management provides this system of federal control for hundreds of millions of acres of rangelands in the United States, including millions of acres of rangelands in New Mexico. Wooton eventually saw the implementation of his pragmatic solution for the range problems in New Mexico.

Yet, one would argue that there are still range problems in New Mexico and elsewhere. This is not to say that the BLM, and the many other agencies and organizations involved in rangeland management, are not professional and competent organizations. Or that rangelands of today

are not improved over their conditions of prior centuries. Or that federal (or state) land management entities have not also provided professional land management leadership and technological services. That is not what Wooton got wrong. What he missed, and what is often continually missed in developing our policies and practices across these landscapes, is that these are systems that have been strongly shaped and influenced by the people who live on these landscapes. These are human-coupled ecosystems. The management of these lands is not about control, it is about the people who live there. Simply put, these are human-dominated landscapes.

This human influence has been the primary driver of these systems for decades, even well before Wooton's time. As one illustration, here is a snippet of observations by a person who was extremely familiar with these landscapes in New Mexico and the Southwest: "He recognized that the once inexhaustible west was shrinking before his eyes... the tendrils of civilization creeping in.... The West was filling up fast...everything he touched, it seemed, had withered." This and other wonderful observations are in the book *Blood and Thunder*, written by Hampton Sides (2006, Anchor Books, 480 p.). The observations quoted above were made by Kit Carson, the noted frontier man, mountain man, guide, soldier, and a central figure in the expansion of the American West in the early and mid-19th century. These were his observations about New Mexico in the 1840s.

Our current understandings of the impacts of this human presence are increasingly sophisticated, yet they seem to be in the same alarming vein as those of Kit Carson's from over 160 yr ago. One recent example, of many, is the observation that 60% of trends in river flows and snow packs in the western United States over the last half of the 20th century are "human-induced" (see: Barnett et al., 2008, Penetration of human-induced warming into the world's oceans, *Science* 319:1080–1083). Of course, these observed trends are leading to drier summer conditions, and all of the negative consequences associated with reduced water availability.

The negative impacts of humans in these landscapes might seem to be an argument in support of Wooton's 1908 proposed solution. Yet, many impacts, such as anthropogenic-induced climate change, are created by humans in many landscapes, not just the western United States. And, if people have been part of the original problem, they have to be part of the solution. Much of our literature, and much of our policy for proper resource management, has a central theme that starts with empowering the people who live and work on the land to act as stewards of that land.

If I am as honest and blunt today as Wooton was over 100 yr ago, I have to admit there are still range problems here and elsewhere. As one example, just look at the mess that is the wolf reintroduction program across the western United States. For a fairly honest review of the convoluted

status of this program see Morell, 2008, Wolves at the door of a more dangerous world, *Science* 319:890–892.

If Wootton were alive today, I doubt he would offer the same pragmatic solution he put forward in 1908. You might think this is purely conjecture, but I think not. In 1908, he actually did offer another solution, what he termed an “ideal solution.” He wrote, “An **ideal** system would place the land in the hands of as many individuals living upon it as it will support, and this ideal is the thing to be striven for” (p. 45).

He just didn’t think that this ideal was possible at the beginning of the 20th century.

Wootton was a skilled and experienced observer of the world around him. If he had a century of observation over the course of the 1900s showing that his initial solution had not solved range problems in New Mexico, I have to believe that he would have more forcefully made a case for his ideal solution. I think he would have acknowledged the reality of how the ecology of these lands has been shaped for a long time by the people who lived there. Even more importantly, his ideal solution reflected the need that any desired landscape would have to be a product of the people on the ground being directly involved in the management of all of its resources. The recent proliferation of local, community-based management groups springing up around the west in an effort to find lasting, sustainable, on-the-ground solutions to basic problems seems to illustrate the logic of his ideal.

By mentioning the wolf reintroduction program, I am not arguing that efforts to maintain or restore important ecological components of systems, such as a top predator, are not ecologically valid. And this is not meant to be a repudiation of efforts to restore endangered and threatened species. It is that these programs do not seem to start from

the honest and blunt basis, irrespective of how “remote” a wilderness-designated landscape might seem from Washington, DC, or even some office in Boise, Denver, Tucson, or Santa Fe for that matter, that these are landscapes shaped and managed by humans. Until those humans that live on these lands are fully engaged in solving a problem, that problem will not be solved. These are human-dominated landscapes.

There are other places in the world where I’ve seen wolves within landscapes, such as in Asia and southeastern Europe. It seems that the difference in these non-US cases, where wolf populations are apparently sustained, is that the people who live there, including the livestock herders in Mongolia and Bosnia, are involved to some extent in the management of these wolf populations. These non-US landscapes might be quite dangerous in a fashion for a wolf, as is typical for any large predator. Yet, in these foreign settings the wolf is clearly a part of a larger human ecosystem.

To be honest and blunt, we all live within human-dominated landscapes. Policies that continue to be bluntly uncoupled from the humans within these landscapes will not create honest solutions to these local, regional, or national problems. Wootton’s ideal solution is actually possible today, and locally driven, community-based management groups are one pragmatic demonstration of that ideal.

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