

Colorado & The West

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**Cattlemen try
to preserve land
while using it**

'Holistic' ranchers riding herd on the range

By Gary Gerhardt

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

MATHESON — Coyotes are welcome on the Lasater cattle ranch 20 miles southwest of Limon.

So are most critters considered nuisances by ranchers, including ants and ground squirrels that build mounds in the middle of pastures.

"They're all part of the natural process, and each has a part to play," says Dale Lasater, 50, son of the ranch founder Tom Lasater, now 83 and retired.

The Lasaters are disciples of Holistic Resource Management guru Allan Savory, former Rhodesian (Zimbabwe) game biologist, who advocates ranching in harmony with nature. Savory says livestock should mimic migrating wild herds that never remained on the same pasture for months.

The same theme of working with nature applies to wildlife that remain on the land.

"Coyotes keep the rabbit population under control, and since we raise cattle rather than sheep or other small livestock, we don't have a lot of predation problems anyway," Dale Lasater said.

"As for the ants and ground squirrels, they're natural aerators. If you look into the center of an abandoned mound, you'll see wheat grass sprouting among the blue grama.

"It's a natural process of filling a void."

Another unfortunate void-filler is leafy spurge, a noxious weed for which millions of dollars have been spent on herbicides over the years.

"What you need to do is figure out how leafy spurge got into the field in the first place, then find a natural way to get rid of it."

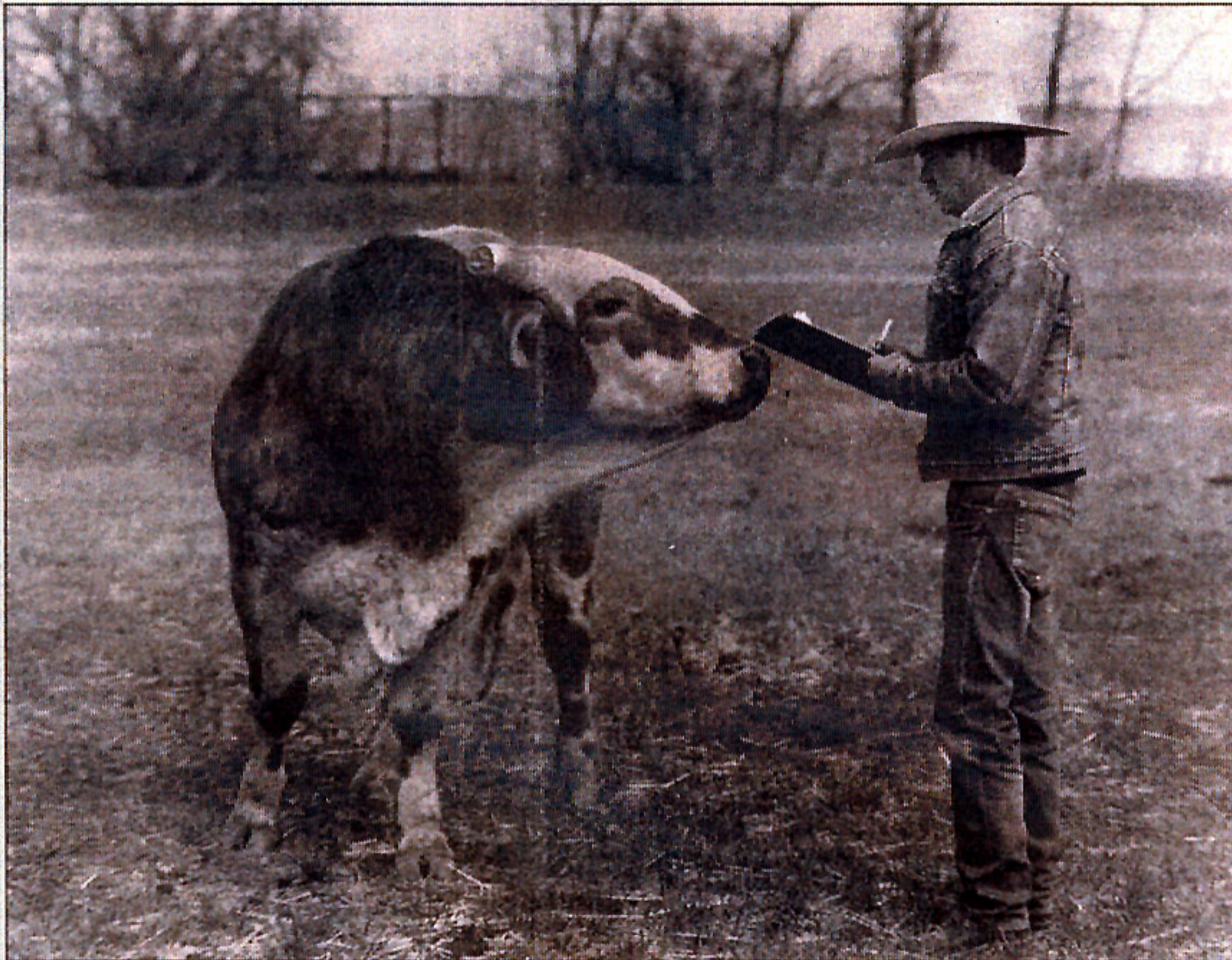
The first line of attack will be using domestic sheep and goats, which he says eat the weed.

"If that doesn't work, we'll look for some of the weed's natural predators, insects that attack and keep it down," he said. "It's better than dumping chemical poisons on the land."

Being mavericks runs in the Lasater family.

Dale's grandfather, Ed, was a Hereford and shorthorn cattle rancher in southern Texas early in the century who got interested in Brahman cattle in 1908.

He crossed the large white cattle from India with some of his squatty European breeds and discovered they were more disease and insect



Photos by Dean Kraker/Rocky Mountain News



A Beefmaster bull watches as Dale Lasater makes notes about him. Lasater runs the 28,000-acre Lasater ranch on holistic principles. At left, Lasater stands with his father, Tom, 83, who developed the Beefmaster breed.

resistant, had better milk production and bore healthier calves.

"My grandfather claimed those two-way crosses increased the value of his land by \$5 an acre — which at that time about doubled its value," Dale Lasater laughed.

After Ed died in 1930, Tom took over and experimented crossing all three breeds to produce what he believed was another genetic jump forward.

In 1954, the USDA agreed and officially recognized the Beefmaster as a distinct breed of cattle.

Like his father, Dale Lasater is a graduate of Princeton University. He received a Fulbright Scholarship to

the University of Buenos Aires.

He spent two years in the Peace Corps on cattle improvement programs in Colombia, several months on ranches in northern Mexico and a dozen years working for ranching interests in Houston and agricultural corporations in Kansas.

About a dozen years ago he returned to the family ranch at Matheson, which is jointly owned as a family partnership with his five brothers and sisters. He also raised two sons, both of whom graduated from college; one is now working in Mexico, the other in Hong Kong.

Lasater has about 1,400 head of cattle on the 28,000-acre ranch and

has 30,000 acres of leased land in southeastern Colorado.

The "back to nature" philosophy was a natural for Lasater because his father had started a limited, non-structured form of the holistic philosophy back in the 1940s, without giving it a name.

"He was ahead of his time," Lasater said.

"Now we have a number of people around here involved in Holistic Resource Management, which makes us focus on all aspects of managing the land — wildlife, domestic animals, people, finances. None of those things are separate.

"We used to approach each separately. We worried about money with the banker, focusing on cattle only, while everything else — soil erosion, noxious weeds, wildlife — were separate items.

"We didn't see it as all one."

Savory advocates grazing cattle on small sections or "cells" of pasture and rotating them to adjoining cells as the best-quality forage is consumed.

"It's like when herds of buffalo, elk, deer and antelope used to range through this area," Lasater explains. "They stayed only long enough to eat the tender plants, then migrated on."

He said modern ranching mimics "migration" by fencing different portions of the pasture and rotating the animals through cells.

He watched as two chubby coyotes loped out of a drainage, veering from a grazing herd of Beefmasters that barely gave notice.

In the distance, he pointed to a herd of pronghorns on a hillside.

"Antelope and cattle, even sheep and goats, eat some of the same plants, but they also eat different plants," Lasater said. "Overall, they compliment one another's eating habits rather than compete with one another."

Saving land by rethinking how it's used

Concerned primarily with the desertification of lands, Allan Savory's controversial holistic system involves the management of entire ecosystems, including human, financial and biological resources.

Savory, founder of the Center for Holistic Resource Management, based in Albuquerque, offers courses for \$200 to \$300 to teach ranchers how natural systems interrelate and how management affects those relationships.

Part of the philosophy is that cattle are the heirs of bison, elk, deer, pronghorns and other wild animals that once roamed the West in herds, aerating soil and trampling grasses to release seeds.

Those migratory herds didn't stay in one place long enough to overgraze.

The effects the herds' migrations had on the land can be simulated by moving cattle from field to field. Wild herds banded together for safety. This caused the soil to be churned, which can be achieved by bunching cattle in small, fenced cells.

Savory's beliefs include:

■ Outdated grazing methods maximize annual yields but inflict long-term problems on ranges.

■ Overgrazing is not a function of stock numbers.

■ Domestic livestock are the cheapest and most natural tools for restoring devastated lands.

■ If herding is not possible, more fences must be built and cattle moved from one "grazing cell" to another, with each cell grazed by large numbers of cattle for just a few days.

■ The goal is to halt desertification, not to double cattle numbers. Cattle merely are the most accessible tool for halting desertification.

Critics of Savory's methods claim that the West is too brittle to support intensive grazing cycles, that there never were huge herds of bison and other ungulates in the region, and that the number of fences required to accomplish the goal is too expensive.

Cattlemen also complain it is too expensive to hire the help to return to intensive herding as a way to minimize fencing.

— Gary Gerhardt