

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 5 *Ecosystem Management of Natural Resources in the Intermountain West*

Article 18

1995

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Recommended Citation

Dombeck, Mike (1995) "BLM's ecosystem approach to management," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 5 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol5/iss1/18>

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BLM's Ecosystem Approach to Management

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Abstract

Ecosystem management is about maintaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the land, i.e., clean water, abundant native perennial grasses, sustainable fish populations, healthy watersheds. We will use the ecosystem approach to streamline administrative processes and improve fiscal and environmental accountability. It involves coordinated planning at the local level, forming partnerships, and using good information to manage the land. Education is key. The principles of ecosystem management form the philosophic underpinning of a new land ethic with roots in the philosophies of Roosevelt, Pinchot, Leopold, and others.

INTRODUCTION

My crusade in the BLM is to get a bureaucracy back to basics, to cut process and keep things simple. The ecosystem approach is often greeted with skepticism, outright distrust, or confusion. People don't trust things we don't understand. Ecosystem management is a good case in point.

What we have to do is not complicated. It's not mystical. It's plain common sense. It's doing what's good for the land. One of the greatest challenges facing land-management agencies today is achieving and keeping a clear focus and vision of where we want to go from here.

I'd like to take this opportunity to discuss four issues related to ecosystem management with you today. First, I'll talk about what it is. Second, how the concept evolved. Third, how it will translate to on-the-ground decision-making. Fourth, and most important, what you, our customers, can expect from the public lands under an ecosystem approach.

We need to work very closely with people. To me ecosystem management means healthy, functioning watersheds or landscapes that provide social and economic stability to local communities.

ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: WHAT IS IT?

We tend to be our own worst enemy by making definitions of ecosystem management more complicated than they need to be. But when you cut through the verbiage and fodder, there is nothing mysterious or uncertain about it.

Put ten biologists, ranchers, and conservationists in a room and they'll come up with ten different definitions. It's not the definitions or lines on a map that are important. What matters is how we treat the land.

I always like to start discussions from common points of agreement. And I guarantee you when the smoke clears from that room of biologists, ranchers, and conservationists, they'd

all agree on at least one point: We have to maintain the health and productivity of the land. That's what ecosystem management is really about—maintaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the land. If we can all agree on that, and I think we do, the ecosystem approach provides common ground from which to develop consensus-based decision-making.

“Protecting ecological sustainability,” “conserving biological diversity,” and “preserving ecologic integrity” are all fancy ways of talking about lands with clean water, an abundance of perennial native grasses, sustainable populations of extraordinary fish like salmon, and healthy watersheds. All Americans recognize the value of these things.

A century ago, Theodore Roosevelt put it nicely when he said:

If we of this generation destroy the resources from which our children would otherwise derive their livelihood, we reduce the capacity of our land to support a population, and so either degrade the standard of living or deprive the coming generations of their right to life on this continent.

And that's what it's all about, isn't it? Maintaining healthy, diverse, and productive watersheds so that present and future generations may continue to derive benefits from the land. Simply said, ecosystem management is the application of common sense to common problems for the common good.

ON-THE-GROUND DECISION-MAKING

Here we stand today, two years shy of the BLM's 50th anniversary, rapidly approaching the year 2000. The West has changed dramatically since the early days of the General Land Office. In the 19th century, we thought we had limitless supplies of fish and wildlife, wood fiber, forage, and minerals. Historical land use policies helped to settle and develop a growing country.

No frontiers remain in the American West. And development has not come without cost to the health and sustainability of the land. We may never know the true extent of incremental and cumulative changes to the landscape. But their effects are real and visible.

Today the West faces the explosive spread of noxious weeds, threatened, endangered, and extinct species, stream courses and rangelands in need of repair, impaired water quality, and fundamental changes in the way we view and administer the land. But we are not starting from ground zero. I believe the catalyst of change is ecosystem management. To me there are nine operating principles to guide implementation of the ecosystem approach. They are:

Sustain the productivity and diversity of ecological systems. Or simply put, keep the land healthy. Know the condition of the land. Communicate with and involve all interested publics. Have common goals. Fix what's wrong. Use and have available information and the best science. Base planning and management on long-term horizons and goals. Or, think ahead. Reconnect isolated parts of the landscape. Or, look at the big picture. Practice adaptive management. That is, be flexible.

Albert Einstein once noted that "the significant problems we face today cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." I think that's the right attitude from which to approach our task.

Our laws direct us to manage natural resources without impairing the long-term health of the land. I think we all agree that's an appropriate goal. Is our approach to land management based on yesterday's demands of a society whose values and needs have changed? We now know that overemphasizing commodity production, commercial use, and intensive development can compromise, and ultimately jeopardize, the land's health.

The agencies have created excessive and often conflicting policies, rules, and regulations. We will use the ecosystem approach to streamline administrative processes and improve fiscal and environmental accountability. I envision a BLM that can effectively serve our customers while efficiently accounting for taxpayer money spent. We will measure our effectiveness by the condition and health of the land. It is high time that the Bureau begins to uncomplicate our bureaucratic process. I believe what we need to do is not complicated or abstract. It's straight-forward common sense.

WHAT THE PUBLIC CAN EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC LANDS

Charles Wilkinson believes that "it should not be so hard to mesh the needs of the lands and waters and the people. They ought to be the same."

We must always consider the health of the land. How much forage is available to wildlife or cows from rangelands infested by leafy spurge or cheatgrass? What good to a community is a watershed contaminated by runoff from an abandoned mine? Or a fishery ruined by excessive sedimentation from erosion?

We must respect the limits of the land. We must acknowledge that we don't know everything and be adaptable to new information and changing circumstances. An ecosystem approach will not eliminate the need to make difficult decisions to accomplish social and economic goals. We must have the information to make these decisions—and know they are not likely to impair the health of the land.

Here's what we should expect: Clear, cool streams filled with fish. Stable soils that help prevent erosion. Riparian areas that keep streams clean and provide habitat for wildlife and birds. A healthy mix of native grasses and heavier calves. In short, productive, diverse, and healthy lands that maintain sustainable levels of forest products, minerals' development, forage use, and provide a wide variety of educational and recreational opportunities. Education is key.

Simply put, ecosystem management is a way of doing business. It involves coordinated planning at the local level, forming partnerships, and using good information to manage the land.

We must lead by example. We must sit down with other federal, state, and interested private land owners to develop a consensus vision for the land. A vision based on maintaining healthy watersheds and diverse and productive ecosystems. I'm asking for your help. We need the active participation of stakeholders and other interested parties.

If we do our job right, local communities will be in the lead. People will recognize and appreciate the social and economic benefits of maintaining healthy and diverse ecological systems.

We must know the condition of our lands, and work together to achieve their health.

CONCLUSION

The principles of ecosystem management form the philosophical underpinning of a new land ethic. An ethic with roots in the philosophies of Roosevelt, Pinchot, Aldo Leopold, and many others. An ethic designed to maintain ecosystem health so that future generations may continue to enjoy benefits from the land. Remember the old proverb: "We have not inherited the world from our forefathers—we have borrowed it from our children."

Thanks for being here today. I'd be happy to answer any questions.

HORIZONTAL SYNTHESSES OF SPEAKERS' COMMENTS ON THE FOUR THEMES

THEME 1

WHAT IS ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT?

THEME 2

**WHAT ARE THE TECHNICAL, NATURAL-SCIENTIFIC PROBLEMS OF IMPLEMENTING ECOSYSTEM
MANAGEMENT ON THE GROUND?**

THEME 3

**WHAT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MECHANISMS WILL BRING DISPARATE GROUPS TOGETHER IN AGREE-
MENT ON MANAGEMENT GOALS?**

THEME 4

**WHAT ARE THE LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS SURROUNDING THE ISSUES OF MULTIPLE
LAND OWNERSHIP, FEDERAL, STATE, AND PRIVATE?**