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## In Concert with the Ecosystem

Edward P. Bass

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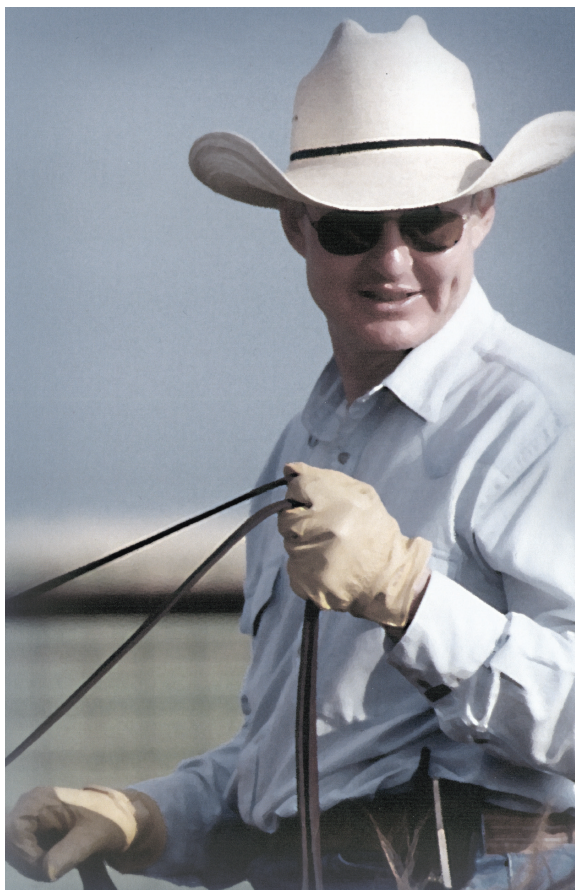
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Rhonda Hale

ED BASS

## *In Concert with the Ecosystem*

I first “discovered” the Flint Hills of Kansas in the mid-1980s after working for a period of ten years to develop sustainable rangeland practices for a challenging grassland system located in the dry tropics of northwestern Australia.



To be truly sustainable in ranching, one must satisfy two goals: 1) to harvest through grazing a portion of the natural production of the grassland system in such a way that the ecosystem maintains its essential features and productivity, year after year, decade after decade, century after century; and 2) to operate an economically viable business over the long term, i.e. consistently making a return in the fair-to-good years while not going broke in the bad years.

In Australia I learned it was exceedingly difficult – perhaps not even possible – to ranch in a truly sustainable fashion in an ecoregion

where the vegetative system, including the grasses, had evolved over time without any large animals present to graze them – no vast, migrating herds as found in Africa, no bison and elk as found in North America.

The tallgrass prairies of North America, on the other hand, constitute an ecoregion where it is eminently possible to work with the natural ecosystem in a sustainable fashion. Here the grasses and other elements of the vegetative system, together with the animals that populated the region in both historic and geologic times, coevolved and adapted in mutually

beneficial ways. When managed carefully and properly, the tallgrass prairie thrives with cattle-grazing just as it once did with bison and elk before the arrival of European settlement. I must not oversimplify when I say “managed carefully and properly.” My colleagues and I are still

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learning, discovering and developing the rangeland management approach that we practice. It has been built on a foundation of the traditional practices of Flint Hills ranching, has drawn on decades of research at Kansas State University, and has evolved through 25 years of hands-on experience.

With my long-time partner and

mentor Bill Haw, we have come to understand that in order to sustainably manage within this ecosystem we must work with the five essential elements that define the tallgrass landscape: the geology (soils and terrain), the climate, the biodiversity, grazing and fire. The first three are our givens – they are here as they have been for millennia. The last two are our responsibility – elements that are essential to the ecosystem but would not be present today if it were not for the 150-year tradition of ranching in the Flint Hills.

When I visit the Flint Hills and travel through my pastures during the grazing season, my primary focus is on the grasses and plant population, far more than on the cattle. Once the cattle are bought as yearling steers and “migrate in” on trucks from Texas and Mexico in April (just as the bison once did on hoof from their wintering grounds), they are for me a given. My real responsibility is to manage the “harvest” and ensure not only that the primary forage grasses



ED BASS GATHERS CATTLE ON THE TALLGRASS PRAIRIE  
OF WINSCOTT RANCH NEAR CRESSON, TEXAS.

sustain with healthy populations of big and little bluestem, Indian and switch grass, but also that all the biodiversity thrives. Just as annual variation occurs in nature, our management strives to give different pastures variations in regime from year to year. For example, we may burn a pasture in some years and in others graze down the old growth with intensive stocking prior to the growing season in the early spring. We vary stocking rates as well as in-dates and out-dates for the cattle. We do this because variation encourages biodiversity, which we value – we are not trying to create a monoculture of prime forage grasses. Almost always we graze intensively in the first half of the growing season, April through July, for a nominal 90 days. The cattle then “migrate out” on trucks to feedlots elsewhere in Kansas, leaving the prairie undisturbed through the second half of the growing season when the tall grasses focus on their propagation strategies.

You could say that we are harvesting

off the prairie using cattle instead of combines. Just as in farming, the economic value of the harvest can be measured in terms of yield per acre; however, instead of bushels of corn per acre, our measure is pounds of gain per acre – the weight we put on the cattle from the time they arrive in the spring until they leave in the summer. Interestingly, the early intensive, 90-day grazing regime not only optimizes harvestable gain – often as much as 100 pounds per acre – but also provides enormous benefit to the grass populations and other elements of the ecosystem.

My “discovery” of the Flint Hills 25 years ago has led to an extensive involvement in the life, economy and future of this remarkable region, spawned initially by the challenge of ranching in a truly sustainable way and then fueled by a passion for the place itself. We face enormous challenges in conserving the Flint Hills as North America’s last great landscape of

tallgrass prairie. The greatest threat going forward is fragmentation. Preserving both the prairie ecosystem and the remarkable, unbroken vistas of rolling tallgrass will require not only sustainable practices on the part of ranchers but also vision, determination and vigilance on the part of all of us.

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*Edward Bass is a businessman, rancher, philanthropist, and environmentalist who lives in Fort Worth, Texas. He is the owner of the South Clements pasture, site of the 2010 Symphony in the Flint Hills.*

