

Ranchers put their heads together

Conservation ranching may be an oxymoron to some, but the Sonoran Institute is known for encouraging all to participate in sharing local knowledge and making local land-use decisions more sustainable.

In the Santa Cruz watershed of northern Sonora, Mexico, ranching is the main economic activity and use of land. Six years ago Institute staff began sharing information on pasture restoration, erosion control, native seed banks, native grass management and other conservation measures with a small group of ranchers.

The group's leader, Ventura Rivera, said at the time, "The Sonoran Institute has come with a healthy intent to share knowledge, helping us take care of the river, the vegetation, the birds, wildlife and native grass seed. More people every day are interested in what we are trying to achieve."

Gradually, more ranchers tentatively agreed to try new approaches. The leader of a group that grazes cattle along the Santa Cruz River told Institute staff, "Look boys, here you have two kilometers of river in which you can implement your conservation, restoration and monitoring activities, but don't forget that I am a rancher and I like cows and the grass that they need, so if we could combine our efforts here that would be good."

The Institute's conservation ranching efforts expanded in 2005 with the Rancher-to-Rancher Exchange, which brings together cattlemen in Sonora and Arizona to share knowledge and techniques that are good for the land and good for the ranchers.

Sometimes the focus is on traditional knowledge about conserving water or improving soil. The Santa Cruz watershed ranchers built gabions — small curtains of rock — across gullies to slow water flow, thereby reducing erosion, retaining more moisture and increasing vegetation. Ranchers from the nearby San Pedro and Sonoran watersheds visited recently, saw the results and are beginning to build their own gabions.

In November, several Sonoran ranchers visited southern Arizona, where cattleman Mac Donaldson explained how his family manages grazing on the Empire Ranch with consideration for the environment and for recreational use of the land.

Donaldson enjoyed the opportunity to talk about different ways of doing things. "There's always a need for changes and to try to solve problems creatively," he said. "You damn well make mistakes. You gain knowledge from them and adjust."



Ventura Rivera (r.) shows fellow ranchers photos of conservation ranching projects.

*A [person] of knowledge
lives by acting,
not by thinking about acting.*

Carlos Castenada

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