Let's Be Disruptive

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The final principle in our series is the Principle of Disruption. We may have a negative connotation of the word "disruptive" because we have heard that "nobody wants a disruptive kid" or we "have to be nice and not disrupt the meeting". However, sometimes it pays to be disruptive, to shake things up a little, or even a lot.

We practice a form of grazing that we call "adaptive grazing". Adaptive grazing is a form of grazing that allows the practitioner to be ultimately flexible and to address multiple goals and objectives all at once. It is not a routine or a rigid system, neither is it prescriptive. To be truly adaptive, we must be able to adjust to changing conditions. So, how can we best be adaptive? By being disruptive!

Nature and Athletes

Producers all over North America (and many other parts of the world) have had tremendous success with employing adaptive grazing practices and principles. But, there are many who want to turn adaptive grazing into a "system" or a routine. It is basic human nature to want to settle into a nice, neat routine and do things the same way every time. That is not the way biology works though. Biology is never routine. In fact, biology and nature are quite resilient. They have the ability to respond very well to direct challenges. This earth has survived for a long time with man's ill-fated interventions. Think of nature and biology like an elite athlete (are our bodies not biological?). If a person wants to be an elite athlete then how do they reach that level of performance, strength, speed? Do they start a certain exercise routine and then stick to that exact same exercise routine for the rest of their athletic career? Of course not. That would be a recipe for failure. Rather, they frequently change their exercise routine so that they are regularly "disrupting" the mind-muscle connection and challenging their bodies and their mind to reach greater heights of performance. Our bodies are quite resilient and respond well to challenges. So does nature.

One caution here. These challenges have to be reasonable and biological. Just as an elite athlete would never think of harming their bodies through poor nutritional choices or ingesting harmful chemicals, so should we never do these things with nature.

Adaptive Grazing

Adaptive grazing works not because of JUST higher stock density or JUST daily movement of livestock, but because of a combination of fluxing stock densities, adaptive management, keen observation, and development of intuition. If we set out to prove or disprove one single variable, such as stock density, then we are making a huge mistake. Adaptive grazing works

because of compounding & cascading effects, NOT due to a single variable. The problem for most scientists is that Adaptive grazing, or any regenerative ag practice, is not a linear "cause & effect". It is not strictly science. It is a combination of science and art (or craftsmanship). If you cannot master the "art" as well as the science, then you will not get the results desired. Simple as that. I have worked with several thousand ranchers and those who made the greatest progress were always those who understood that they had to decouple their thought process from a former "prescriptive" mindset to one of observation, adaptation, and intuition.

There will be high stock density grazers, or mob grazers, who have generated negative results because they were prescriptive in their approach, not adaptive. They settled on a certain stock density that they believed was "good" and stayed there or stayed within a narrow range of densities. They did not flux rest periods, did not tap the latent seed bank, did not alter stock densities in a significant manner. Their initial progress will be sudden, then slow down significantly, then stagnate, then go backwards. I have seen this happen time and again. Simply because they had to make Adaptive grazing fit their prescriptive mindset.

Adaptive grazing is first and foremost not a "practice", but a changing of the mind. I am in the primary business of changing minds, not teaching a set routine. Once I change their mind, then they can begin to understand the core principles of Adaptive grazing.

To be truly successful, one must understand the principle of compounding & cascading effects. Everything you do creates compounding and cascading effects, not singular or linear effects. To expect singular/linear effects, or to set up research with that intention, will lead to frustration and erroneous conclusions. Successful grazing involves building all aspects of soil health (aggregate, infiltration, microbial population, OM, Carbon, ...), plant species diversity & complexity (can never be highly successful with monocultures or near monocultures), macro-organism complexity & diversity (earthworms, beetles, spiders, pollinators, ...), water quality and abundance, Improved mineral cycle, plant secondary & tertiary compounds (very important and cannot have with monocultures). This requires the pulsing of livestock across the landscape. Just like nature did it.

Shaking Things Up

How then can we be disruptive in a way that elicits positive compounding and cascading effects (the Principle of Compounding), taps the latent seed bank to create diversity and complexity in our plant species (the Principle of Diversity), and builds resiliency into our soils and farms? By being incredibly flexible. In other words, don't do things the same way every time.

Planned, purposeful disruptions include things as simple as:

1. **Altering stock densities** through the grazing season and through the years. Do not settle on a specific stock density thinking that 100,000 lbs per acre or 250,000 lbs per acre is the magic bullet. Rather, consistently change stock densities to flux between

lower densities of 20K to more than 500K lbs per acre. Each stock density has a specific purpose and a specific impact on the soil and the surrounding biology.

2. **Alter the movement patterns** of your livestock through your farm. If you normally start your spring grazing in pasture A, then move to pasture B, and C, instead start in pasture C, then move to pasture D, or heaven forbid, even skip over several pastures and move to pasture G, then eventually back to pasture A. Starting grazing in the same area each year inherently creates a succession of plant species and soil response that become stagnant over time. If you have always grazed pasture A in April, then wait until May or June to graze it next year.
3. **Alter rest periods** of each paddock. By this I am not advocating less than full plant recovery in a paddock before returning. Rather, I am thinking providing a double of even triple rest period for selected paddocks. If our normal rest period is 30-40 days before returning to a specific paddock, give that paddock a 60 or even 90-day rest before returning. You will be amazed at the result of doing this from time to time. If you provided extra rest to pastures A and E last year, then provide extra rest to pastures B and C this year.
4. **Alter Grazing Heights** on and off your pastures. If you normally target a forage height of 10-14 inches before you graze a paddock, periodically wait until a paddock reaches 20 inches in height before grazing. I generally practice a "take 50 and leave 50" approach where I will leave 50% of forage dry matter in a paddock when I pull the livestock out. However, there are times when it is advantageous to take less or more. So if you turned in to a paddock at 16 inches average forage height, take it only own to 10 inches before moving to the next paddock, or take it down to 6 inches before moving to the next paddock. **Note:** I never want to take a paddock down below 5 inches in forage height unless I am purposely transitioning from warm to cool season forages or vice versa.
5. **Alter species order** through your pastures. If you are a multi-species grazer, you may think you always have to move the cattle through a paddock first, followed by sheep/goats, chickens, or hogs. Certainly, there are reasons to move certain species through in a specific order, but sometimes it helps to shake this up a little and move smaller species through first, then the cattle. You don't have to do this too often to realize big results. Remember that each livestock species releases certain classes of microbes onto the soil and plants when they are foraging through a paddock. These microbes are being released through their saliva, their urine, their feces, and even being shed from their bodies. Microbes released from the livestock communicate with microbes in and on the soil. This is called "quorum sensing" or microbe-to-microbe communication. This communication stimulates significant activity and induces microbial replication or reproduction. This is precisely what we want to happen.

There are many more ways to be disruptive, so experiment. The great thing about adaptive grazing is that you are moving the livestock daily or quite frequently. If you do make a mistake, then it is immediately recognized and immediately correctable. I would far rather make small, immediately correctable mistakes than make mistakes that cost me a season or years. So, go ahead and have fun. Be a disruptive person.

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