

## **Trail Riders: Hopes, Dreams, Values, Perceptions, and Peril<sup>1</sup>**

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*“It is the expansion of transport without a corresponding growth of perception that threatens us with qualitative bankruptcy of the recreational process.”*

- Aldo Leopold (1949)

Two of the most important features of being human are our abilities to contemplate the past and to envision a future. The past, we call history. For Americans, at the center stage of our history are men and women with their saddle, pack, and draft stock answering the calls and challenges of wild landscapes.

The irrevocable image in our psyche of American horsemen stirs, at least for some of us, an unrequited need to reach back to times and places to which we can never return. Larry McMurtry (1985) in his book *Lonesome Dove* quoted T.K Whipple who may have best captured the phenomenon:

*All America lies at the end of the wilderness road. Our past is not a dead past, but still lives within us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live. What they lived, we dream.*

Recreational horse trails on wildlands offer us opportunities to visit the dream. Without these opportunities, the dream becomes a mere fantasy devoid of the realities of horses, soils, rocks, streams, weather, daylight and dark, and the thousands of plants and animals that both aggravate and enhance the pleasure of the experience. On these trails we reenact our history. We seek to preserve these reenactment stages for future generations. Re-creations of who we were likely sharpens our awareness of who we are and where we came from.

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The consummate conservationist, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) proclaimed that progress was a relentless aggressor. While the advancements of civilizations have always been driven by progress that made human lives more comfortable and more secure, too much progress might make us too comfortable, too secure, too unrealistic about our true relationship with nature, too far removed from our origin – the land. As trail horsemen, we reach back in our recent history to rediscover and reinforce certain values. However, we are not alone in our pursuits of being re-created on wild

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landscapes. Indeed, all Americans have values for these landscapes - even those who never experience them first hand, and they are in the majority.

Progress has brought, in vivid color enhanced by eloquent prose, wild landscapes into every American home that has television. Almost every American has ideas of how these landscapes should look “forever.” Almost every American has ideas about what constitutes evidence of the desecration of the perceived sanctity of these lands. Yet very few of those with strong perceptions and opinions intimately know land. In this broad array of values and perceptions lie both the strengths and risks of decision making for land management in our democracy.

Thomas Jefferson saw American democracy as a great experiment. Decisions for the common good would be based on the perceptions of a plurality. That plurality did not need proof of its correctness or justification for its perceived moral superiority. It only needed to be a plurality. So far our system, as perilous as it may appear, has not only survived, it has prospered for over 200 years. On the other hand, the challenges seem to be increasingly difficult, particularly in the arena of natural resource utilization and conservation.

As trail horsemen we find ourselves immersed in a struggle that may have no end. We seek what is precious to us on public lands owned by an American citizenry that has little first hand experience with wildlands, much less the use of horses and mules on wildlands. We are at a crossroads in conflicting public opinions on the compatibility of recreational use of saddle and pack stock with basic natural resource conservation. As horsemen, our only hope for preserving the recreational horse trail experience lies within us. That hope is welded to what we are willing to do to make horse trails compatible with other ecosystem components and processes and the values that other people have for ecosystems.

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In the most fundamental sense, a recreational horse trail on wildlands is the artifact of a human idea embedded in a matrix of “natural” ecosystem components and processes. The design, construction, maintenance, and regulation of this contrivance should be focused on the compatibility of the trail and its use with the ecological integrity, stability, and beauty of the matrix. Yet many, perhaps most, land managers perceive our sensitivities to these qualities as dull, and perhaps the dullest among non-motorized trail users.

While there is no quantitative evidence to support the above assertion, in a recent meeting of the recreational directors of the federal land management agencies, there was general agreement that recreational horse use was one of the highest profile and contentious issues they currently face. Why do we increasingly seem to be the bad guys?

There is some validity in the explanatory assertion that increasingly the management agencies are staffed with people whose home-life experiences were based in suburbia. Their experiences with land while growing up were based on summer camps largely grounded in hiking and canoeing. They have no personal connection to agriculture or any other working landscape processes. In the universities they are taught by professors with similar background experiences and values. Their ultimate achievement in outdoor etiquette is “Leave No Trace.” It is obvious to them that horses leave lots of traces. It would not be uncommon for a student taking a university course in wilderness management today, if he/she passes the course, to come away convinced that recreational horse use is incompatible with wilderness values.

The adage “Perception is reality. Reality is truth; therefore, perception is truth” is at its zenith in the world of recreational trail horse use. However, we should keep in mind that while perception is not necessarily truth, it can be truth. To what extent have we been honestly and deeply introspective in examining our values for the lands in which our trails are embedded? The same question can be asked of our concern for social compatibility with other trail users and the nation’s overall values for its public lands.

According to the American Horse Council, of the 300 million people in the nation, only about 1.9 million (0.6%) of us are horse owners. Horse owners that are primarily or exclusively recreational users are some fraction of this number, but we own about 3.9 million horses that are used primarily for recreational purposes. This translates to a demand for trail use of about 32 horses per mile of managed trail available for horse use on federal and state lands in the nation. In other words, while we are a relatively small portion of the public land resource owners, we have a relatively large appetite for public land trails. Only the most uncritical thinkers among horsemen would not give pause to consider this situation.

The perception-reality-truth conundrum is inescapably our burden. We are our only hope in changing perceptions of us. We will begin changing that perception when we begin to clearly demonstrate love and respect for the land. We will not respect anything that we do not love. We will not love anything that we do not respect. The manifestation of love and respect is an ecological conscience. Our “finishing schools” in outdoor ethics will have only mechanistic meaning without an ecological conscience. The conscience must be informed of the *why* one thing is ecologically wrong and another is right, i.e., what is ethical and what is not in terms of ecological process.

In summary, we might springboard from Aldo Leopold’s concluding statement in his essay “Round River” where he clearly characterized humans as ecosystem component and human activity as ecological process. What we must build is an ethical underpinning for recreational horse trail use and a universal curiosity among horsemen to understand the ecological matrix in which these trails are embedded.

**Perhaps then perceptions of us will be that we honestly strive to preserve a cultural heritage in a natural heritage setting.**