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Bridging the Divide: Implications of Social Variations Between First- and Multi-Generational Ranchers

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Abstract

California's ranching landscape is shifting as new ranchers enter, often with differing socio-economic backgrounds and goals. In contrast to multigenerational ranchers (MGRs), first-generational ranchers (FGRs) are more likely to be younger, highly educated, non-White, non-Hispanic and female (Ahearn and Newton 2009). This talk will explore how FGRs' operations, values, concerns and information sources from MGRs within California. Identifying these differences, as well as the nexus of similarities is critical, as previous research has indicated that understanding variations in FGRs operations and decision-making is key to crafting policies and initiatives to support these beginning ranchers and the health of rangelands (Huntsinger and Oviedo 2014). This presentation will conclude with an exploration into how beginning ranchers' success is enabled, and offer potential lessons for other rangelands undergoing demographic transitions.

Background

There is a crisis in U.S. livestock production, marked by climatic extremes and rapid aging of the rancher population. Amid this crisis, there is both a critical need and an opportunity for a new generation who practice climate-smart ranching. Research has shown that the extent to which ranchers are able to improve their resiliency to climate change is heavily influenced by their values and approach to decision-making, which in turn influences how they manage their operation, and ultimately the viability of their ranch (Lubell et al., 2013). Inwood, et al. (2013) argue that scholars like Lubell et al. (2013) need to go a step further in their investigation into producers' ability to adapt to climatic change, by understanding how their demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age) influence their decision-making. Understanding how first-generation ranchers values and demographics differ from multi-generational ranchers can assist in targeted outreach and engagement.

Existing research on first-generation ranchers is scarce, as the majority of work focuses on beginning and first-generation farmers. Research on first-generation farmers has found that operators differ demographically and have different personal values from multi-generational farmers (Inwood, Clark, & Bean, 2013). These findings have the potential to play a key role in crafting effective outreach and policy that align with the goals of new ranchers. However, it is unknown if these findings can be extended to first-generational ranchers, who have quite different knowledge and infrastructure needs than farmers, and are hypothesized to be similar in values and demographics to multi-generational ranchers.

Research

Findings are from a 2011 mail and online survey of 507 California ranchers (33% response rate) that was distributed by the California Cattleman's Association, a non-profit trade group that advocates for ranchers and beef producers in California. This research project first set out to determine if first-generation ranchers vary demographically, and if they have different values than multi-generational ranchers in California. A second goal was to understand if first-generational ranchers were utilizing existing information sources and drought adaptation strategies. In order to understand how the goals, values and management practices of ranchers may differ, I analyzed sections of the survey that asked about decision-making, management goals and practices, and social networks.

This project uses a socio-ecological framework in order to understand rangeland decision-making. A social-ecological framework views rangelands as both social and ecological systems, with the operator making multiple decisions to support ecological, social and economic values and goals (Sayre, 2006; Schohr, 2014). This framework is useful as it allows researchers to understand how different social and ecological systems impact outcomes on-farm, as seen in Figure 1. (Lubell et al. (2013). The box titled "individual adaptive decisions" was the focus for this project, with a future project to examine the interaction of components within this system.

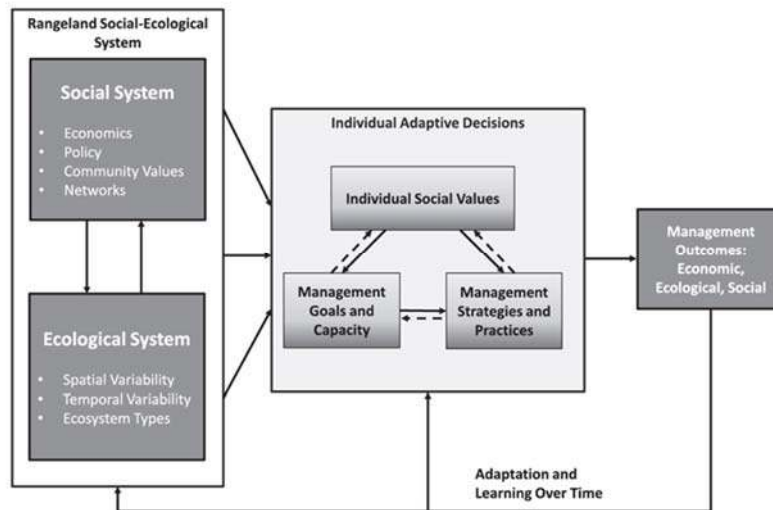


Figure 1. Adaptive decision-making for rangeland management (Lubell et al. 2013)

Findings

Unlike other studies on first-generation farmers, I found that California multi-generational ranchers (MGR) and first-generational ranchers (FGR) are quite similar demographically. There were no statistical differences in education level, age or gender between FGRs and MGRs. Both groups were on average in their early 60's, and over 80% of respondents are male. While similar in many respects FGRs are much more likely to have lived the majority of their lives in cities and towns. This difference suggests far different life histories and socio-ecological knowledge of the rural and peri-urban areas in which they currently live.

Both FRGs and MGRs in California use a diversity of land tenure, with both relying predominantly on a mix of privately owned property (FGRs: 84%; MGRs: 85%) and privately leased land (FGRs: 54%; 60%). However, MGRs are more likely use public leased land (FGRs 11%; MGRs: 22%;), use a creative leasing structure (FGRs: 25%; MGRs: 39%) and have higher acreages of both private owned and privately leased irrigated land.

When asked about their operation priorities, first-generation ranchers were found to have the same as multi-generational ranchers. However, FGRs used far fewer management practices and drought adaptation strategies to meet these priorities. A suite of questions sought to understand the intersecting variables at play when making decisions on their ranch and potential reasons for this difference. In general, both FGRs and MGRs tended to have similar values and views on their operation, with a few notable differences. Interestingly, while MGRs are far more dependent on the ranch for their income, there was no difference in total income between the groups, perhaps because FGRs secured more of their income off-ranch (32%) compared to MGRs (22%). Unsurprisingly since FGRs are less dependent on their ranch, FGRs were far more likely to take financial risks and MGRs far more likely to choose management options with lowest risk. FGRs are potentially using non-traditional management and drought practices that were not asked about in the survey.

Social networks prove to be a key component in understanding why FGRs are using fewer drought adaptation and management practices. MGRs are more aware and use more traditional information sources and initiatives than FGRs (including government assistance programs). This finding makes sense as MGRs stated they feel that participation in formal ranching organizations is more important than FGRs, and that organizations overall (public, private) are more useful. However, this cannot be simply attributed to the lack of knowledge of these sources, as many FGRs who are accessing information sources found the resources less useful than MGRs. This finding is particularly concerning as it implies that not only are organizations ineffective in outreach to many FGRs, but the existing information is not meeting their needs. It makes sense then, that FGRs responded that they were far more likely to feel that there was no public support for ranching in California.

There were several sections where respondents were given a chance to write in their primary concerns and any actions they had taken to address concerns. These written responses were coded, and revealed that both FGRs and MGRs have the same top three concerns: government regulations,

economic sustainability, and land tenure. However, FGRs may see these concerns as individual ranch issues as they tended to list on-farm management changes as the primary action taken to resolve their concerns. MGRs on the other hand saw these as political issues, and took action both individually and through their organizations, working collectively with other ranchers.

Implications

Many of the implications of this project are worrying for the next generation of California's ranchers. Environmentally, FGRs operations are more susceptible to climate variability due to their lack of drought adaptation strategies and from exclusion from ranching organizations that share best practices.

Outreach organizations are currently underserving FGRs who are most likely being left out of collaborative governance structures. Collaborative governance projects in California facilitate collective efforts to ecologically manage existing rangelands by coalitions of environmental groups, ranchers, regulators and researchers. While previous research has established that FGRs are entering ranching without a legacy of ranching knowledge and physical infrastructure (Ahearn, 2011), this study reveals that strategies for integrating these new ranchers into organizations has not been successful across California.

As this survey was distributed to those FGRs who are members of the California Cattleman's Association, I hypothesize that those who are not members are likely to have even stronger differences in social networks and lack of adaptation strategies. The limitations of this survey did not allow for an understanding of why FGRs are not accessing information, nor why they are not finding the existing resources useful.

Further research

Methodologically, mixed-methods research that targets first-generational ranchers is needed in order to understand how to strategically support these new ranchers and include them in ranching social networks. Using quantitative methods, like surveys, is useful in gathering a broad sample and obtaining descriptive information. However, making use of qualitative techniques, like interviews, in tandem allows researchers, rancher organizations and policy makers to approach these complex issues in the necessary depth to understand why current organizational and policy structures are failing many FGRs.

Future research topics are needed that examine why FGRs are entering the field, and the creative ways in which they are they accessing land and markets, specifically younger ranchers who lack access to capital and family land. Understanding what the characteristics of successful social networks and collaborative governance schemes that incorporate FGRs could offer valuable insights for other groups.

Expanding beyond a socio-ecological framework into one that includes an analysis of how multiple geographic scales of social and ecological systems are interacting would contextualize variables spatially. Geographers have been relatively silent on livestock production in the developed world, but have valuable insights into how these production systems are reciprocally shaped by macro-level structures and regional processes. While political borders have clear boundaries, social and ecological scales have fluid borders that are constantly shifting. Research is needed that seeks to understand how collaborative governance schemes can take be both inclusive of the diversity of ranchers in their region, but also maintain a flexible framework that allows for regions to shift and adapt to changing rangelands and populations.

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