



Tradition, Stewardship and the Future of Grazing

As part of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef's (USRSB) monthly blog series in recognition of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), NatGLC, a USRSB member, guest contributed this article focused on August's theme of Indigenous and local knowledge, culture and innovation.

by the NatGLC

In honor of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), the National Grazing Lands Coalition (NatGLC) interviewed Delane Atcitty, Executive Director of the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA). Among many roles, Atcitty serves as an indigenous grazing voice on NatGLC's Board of Directors to guide the organization's mission to deliver assistance to grazing land stewards to foster the benefits grazing lands provide to family farms, ranches, local communities, and all of society. NatGLC's Director of Marketing and Communications recently interviewed Atcitty to better understand traditional grazing techniques and knowledge.

Across the grazing lands community, conversations about lowering inputs, improving water infiltration, increasing biodiversity, and building more resilient operations have become increasingly common. Practices like multi-species grazing, combining herds, and high-density grazing are often discussed as innovative approaches to the future of land management. For many Indigenous communities, however, the principles behind these practices are anything but new.

Atcitty has spent his career at the intersection of agriculture, conservation and Indigenous communities. His perspective is shaped not only by his cultural background, but by a desire to understand the entire agricultural system, from production and natural resource management to finishing and marketing.

Old Knowledge for New Challenges

As grazing land managers face rising input costs and increasingly limited resources, Atcitty believes the industry will inevitably have to become more efficient. There are lessons to be learned from Indigenous production systems that historically operated with few outside inputs and depended instead on flexibility and an intimate understanding of working in tandem with natural resources and systems. What might now be described as mob grazing, multi-species grazing or regenerative management often reflects principles Indigenous people have practiced for generations.

But Indigenous knowledge is about more than grazing techniques. It also reflects a relationship with the landscape that recognizes wildlife, water, livestock and people as parts of the same system. Atcitty pointed to the continued cultural and ceremonial importance of wildlife within Indigenous communities as an example of a worldview that does not separate agricultural production from the broader ecosystem.

Having a Seat at the Table

Indigenous producers manage a significant portion of America's agricultural landscape. Atcitty states tribal lands include roughly 55 million acres of rangeland and another 4 million acres of farmland. Yet those producers have historically lacked representation within many of the organizations, agencies, and conversations that influence grazing lands policy and conservation. Atcitty has intentionally invested his time in organizations including the INCA, NatGLC, and the Society for Range Management for the Native voice to be heard.

It took a long time, he said, for Indigenous voices to gain seats at some of those tables. Now, part of his responsibility is making sure those seats remain occupied. As he continues to serve as a connector, Atcitty is also trying to find ways to realize the dream of a Native Beef label.

While there has been historic underrepresentation, and difficulty accessing conservation programs, organizations like the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance can help bridge that gap by bringing Indigenous producers into broader conservation conversations while ensuring programs and partnerships reflect the needs of tribal communities.

Building Something Worth Passing Down

The future of Indigenous grazing knowledge ultimately depends on the next generation. Atcitty sees youth involvement as one of the greatest needs facing tribal agriculture. Preserving knowledge cannot simply mean asking young people to maintain the systems of previous generations. Agriculture and conservation must offer them a future they can see themselves participating in.

That challenge is not exclusive to Indigenous communities. Across the country, working ranches are being sold, removed from production, or converted into recreational properties. Grazing land managers everywhere are confronting questions about succession, profitability, and how to keep working lands working.

Those shared challenges may also create an opportunity for greater collaboration. Indigenous knowledge does not need to exist separately from the broader grazing lands community, nor should it simply be adopted as the industry's latest management trend. Instead, Indigenous and non-Indigenous producers can learn from one another while recognizing the history and knowledge each brings to the landscape.

As Atcitty put it: "We all put our boots and moccasins on the same way, one foot at a time. We need to work together. Native. Non-Native. We are sharing the same resources."