

Grassroots of Grazing: Ten years after (Reprinted from Stockman Grass Farmer, June 2010)

by Jim Gerrish

It seems as we grow older landmark events come faster than ever and become ever closer together. Birthdays seem like they come every couple months now. The New Year, 2010, is already nearly half gone. This column marks the end of my tenth year of writing for the Stockman Grass Farmer. One-hundred and twenty columns over one-hundred and twenty months without missing a beat. I guess that's significant enough to warrant comment.

However, there are other things that seem to change much more slowly. Like people's attitudes and management. While we have made great strides in some circles and in some areas, we still seem to be locked into the Stone Age in many other aspects. Or maybe I should say the Age of Iron and Oil.

It has now been 20 years since I first coined the phrase Management-intensive Grazing and I become increasingly convinced the majority of people, including many experienced graziers, still don't get it. While the acronym 'MiG' has become mainstream terminology, it seems few people actually understand what it means.

In his foreword to my first book, *Management-intensive Grazing: The Grassroots of Grass Farming*, Allan Nation explains the origin of the terminology. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the commonly used terminology was Intensive Grazing Management with the acronym of IGM. I will never forget as we sat in the bar of the Holiday Inn in Des Moines, IA following a conference, Allan and I were having a conversation lamenting how so many people seemed to have adopted the 'intensive grazing' without the 'management'.

They had built the fences and put in the stock water systems. They were moving livestock around the pastures now rather than just leaving them on the same pasture month after month, but all they were really doing was concentrating their poor grazing habits on a smaller piece of land for a lesser amount of time several times annually. Post-grazing residuals were still too short. Recovery periods were still inadequate. There was still too much reliance on iron and oil. In summary, management was still woefully inadequate.

The light switch came on and I said we needed to rearrange the words to emphasize it was management that needed to be intensified, not the grazing. Livestock will do plenty of 'intensive grazing' on their own; however, they never 'manage' on their own in any domesticated setting. Once we human beings domesticated animals, we took management out of the hands of Mother Nature and assumed that responsibility for ourselves. Most of us are still irresponsible.

This is how I like to explain the terminology. In higher education these days, you will often find courses described as being 'writing-intensive'. For example, you may have an American History class labeled 'writing-intensive' in the course catalog. That does not mean the course is just about learning to write. It is still about American History, we are just emphasizing to students they will be called upon to write several essays or reports on American History. There was a time

while I was at the University of Missouri when the Beef Capstone course taken by animal science majors in their senior year was labeled as a ‘writing-intensive’ course. The course was not about how to learn to write, it was about comprehensive beef herd management, but the students were given numerous writing assignments to hone their communication skills. In both of these course examples, writing assignments were being intensified, hence ‘writing-intensive’.

‘Management-intensive Grazing’ is still about grazing, but the emphasis of the intensification is on ‘management’, not ‘grazing’. MiG is not some recipe for setting up a grazing cell or rotating cattle through a bunch of pastures like clockwork. It is about thinking and trying to understand the many facets of the pasture-animal-soil-human interface and then managing effectively to accomplish your goals.

This lack of basic understanding of the ‘management-intensive’ concept has been brought to the forefront over the last several months as I have heard or read other graziers try to compare the relative responses to ‘MiG’ or ‘mob grazing’ or other in vogue terms. I simply ask does it involve an increase in management level and does it involve grazing. If the answer to both questions is yes, then whatever we are talking about is, by definition, management-intensive grazing. You can leave all the letters in lower case if you want, just don’t leave out the all-important hyphen between management and intensive.

Once again I find myself writing a column at 4:30 AM in a hotel room many miles from home. We are halfway through an 8-stop whirlwind tour of Alberta and I am increasingly convinced most people are afraid of tackling the basics of grazing management. It is far easier to just keep doing what you are doing, regardless the financial, environmental, and social cost, rather than changing direction. As Allan has oftentimes said, most people would rather fail conventionally than succeed unconventionally.

In my more recent book, *Kick the Hay Habit: A practical guide to year-around grazing*, about a third of the book is about the planning process. You will never beat the high cost of stored feed until you have a plan of how you will accomplish that goal. That plan may call for radical changes from what you doing now. Change is difficult enough, doing it without a plan is even more frightening and painful.

Until you firmly grasp the concept of intensifying ‘management’, rather than just intensifying ‘grazing’, you will most likely continue to be disappointed in your results. Once ‘management’ truly becomes your focus, you will find the ‘grazing’ comes very easily.