

Trail Equestrians as Conservationists¹

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Three conditions must be addressed in the identification of a “conservationist:” 1) how the individual thinks about land (ecosystems), 2) how the individual views human-land interactions – appropriate versus inappropriate, and 3) how the individual plays out his/her own personal relationship with land. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) believed that the third element included the summation of the first two. In his words: “A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke [action] he is writing his signature on the face of his land.”²

For the trail equestrian, perhaps these points might be framed in the following questions:

- 1) In the process of thinking about trails, at what point do we begin to think about land, i.e., the ecosystem with us playing an active role in shaping it?
- 2) How do we define the equestrian trail experience?
- 3) How do we harmonize our trail designs, construction and usage with the rest of the ecosystem components and processes?

The first aspect of a landscape that catches our attention is its physical qualities. As people whose dreams revolve around our activities with saddle and packstock on trails, we want to ride across many landscapes. We want to experience the land from the back of a horse or mule. Some lands even seem to beckon us to come and immerse ourselves in them. But some of these perceptions of invitation may be the calls of the sirens of fanciful desire. In some places, our presence is inappropriate.

The equestrian trail rider that is a conservationist will be attracted to the aesthetics of the landscape, but he/she will be quickly mindful of concerns for the ecological implications of taking horses into these systems. Does the land have the capacity to accommodate us and our horses without significant disruption of its aesthetic qualities or its ecological processes? To what extent, in whole or in part, is it fragile, and to what extent is it robust? What are its capacities for self-renewal? Will our entry there be in a mind-set of conqueror’s conquest, or admirer’s pursuit? Do we love this land enough to want to be one with it, or do we merely seek to subdue it for some transient pleasure?

How the equestrian trail rider reacts to the land during the ride is a highly visible clue as to his/her personal objectives for the rider-land interaction, i.e., the trail

¹ A presentation given at the 2002 Western States Horse Summit, Sacramento, California, May 29-30, 2002.

² From the essay Leopold, A. 1949. *Axe-in-Hand in A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, Oxford University Press, New York. 226 pages.

experience. To the mere rider, steep slopes, canyon walls, rocks, streams, bogs, and thick or spiny vegetation are obstacles to be overcome in the most expedient manner. To the rider-conservationist, these are the assets and the liabilities of the system of which he/she has chosen to be a part. For the conservationist, the trail experience is not one of over-coming and defeating an adversary, but a matter of dealing with a friend. For the mere rider, the best way to get from Point A to Point B is the quickest way. For the conservationist, while expediency is a concern, aesthetic and ecological degradation are matters of greater importance.

How many trail riders go on rides and rarely see more than the rear end of the horse in front of them? How much of the trail ride conversation is about tack, breed lines, the bad habits of someone else's horse, and who won what show? How much of the conversation is about the land on which we ride? How much time do we worry about the riding manners of other riders versus how much time do we worry about manners designed to avoid land abuse? How much time do we think about the feet of our horses versus how much time do we think of the soils and stream beds where we direct those feet to be placed? How much time do we spend wondering about the historical cultural and ecological aspects of the land on which we ride, and how much time do we spend wondering how much longer the ride will last? These questions will separate mere riders from the rider-conservationists.

The third element that defines a rider-conservationist is how he/she plays out his/her role in designing to create, manage and use a trail. Land managers are frequently confronted with a request (sometimes a demand) for an equestrian trail across the lands that they manage. The "I want" approach to the land manager is hardly the approach of the conservationist. The conservationist's approach will be framed first in wanting to know if there are ecological or historical site protection reasons why an equestrian trail should not cross a certain landscape. Presumably the officials of the managing agency will be forthright and honest in their response to such a question. However, even the conservationist must keep in mind that there are sociological and financial constraints that may still preclude the installation of a new equestrian trail.

The same sequence of thinking should be followed in questioning trail closures. Are there ecological or cultural site protection reasons for closing this trail? Are there possibilities for avoiding, minimizing or mitigating these adverse impacts through trail realignment or other management processes? However, even if the answers are affirmative, sociological or financial forces may still prevail.

In my travels to equestrian trail conferences and other activities around the nation, I have never met anyone who unabashedly declared that he/she was not a conservationist. On the contrary, most people profess their strong beliefs in conservation or environmentalism. But what comes easily to ones' tongue, may or may not be deeply embedded in the heart. And even those things embedded in our hearts may seem unreasonable to adhere to in the real world. For instance, I have

heard numerous complaints about my recommendation that when the soils are too wet, events such as endurance or competitive rides should be canceled. Some event organizers complain bitterly that they have a lot of money at stake if the event can not go on as scheduled. I would no more allow the land to be challenged in this way than, if I were a coach, I would send a debilitated athlete into the storm of athletic competition. There is a lot more than today's game at stake!

I am also aware of a situation in which a group of riders and a political representative demanded that 900 horses be allowed on a state forest trail that was only 15 miles in length in one weekend. The political leader stated in a local newspaper that if they destroyed any resources, they would pay to have them replaced. I found this to be an interesting concept that nature could work overtime in rebuilding soils, streams, and root systems if given enough money.

Recently, I read through a copy of one of my favorite horse magazines to find three well-written articles that focused directly on trail riding and one which dealt with a health issue that a trail horse might face. Not one mentioned any natural resource conservation concerns. In fact, one pictured four trail horses using a streambed for a trail. It was not a shock when the author revealed that one of the local residents was trying to get the area closed to trail horse use.

All of the problems are not caused by insensitive riders. I recently camped and rode at a public area known for its equestrian activities. Both the managers and the users were cooperating in maintaining immaculate camping areas, restroom and shower facilities, stables, and roadsides. The trails were impressively almost litter free. Yet trails were so poorly designed that they were largely incurable mudholes. As far as I could see, riders were in general staying on designated trails as they should, but the trails that they had to stay on were atrocious by almost any standard.

Finally, some riders will offer the rationalization: "What's a few chewed trees and eroded trails compared to the impacts of logging and livestock grazing?" The comparison is that of "apples and oranges." There are no adequate excuses for inappropriate logging or grazing. Appropriate forest and rangeland management practices are backed by a foundation of science accumulated over a century of effort. Timber can be harvested and livestock can be grazed in a manner that does not degrade ecosystems and that supports the needs of the nation to be fed, clothed and sheltered.

We can not justify our own poor behavior on the basis that someone else behaved in a worse manner. For example, poor driving practices on the part of one group of motorists does not alleviate in any way the requirement for each of the rest of us to drive responsibly. The reasons should be obvious, although they are frequently ignored.

For trail equestrians to be practicing conservationists they must recognize and adhere to a code of ethics that will guide decisions that separate appropriate from

inappropriate trail design, construction, management and usage. Such a code has been offered by Back Country Horsemen of America³ and the National Outdoor Leadership School⁴. Perhaps the Seventh of the Back Country Horsemen Commandments offers the summation of all of the conservation points of these codes: “The horseman shall recognize the fragility of the back country environment and practice minimum impact techniques at all times.”⁴

But no code of conduct, no matter how eloquently written, has value without a conscience present in each person professing that code. In matters of conservation, the force that will cause adherence is the ecological conscience. For the trail equestrian, that conscience struggles to separate appropriate from inappropriate trail behaviors in an attempt to harmonize the horse and rider with the rest of the elements of the landscape on which they travel.

³ Pages 38-39 in Back Country Horsemen of America Guidebook published by BCHA, P.O. Box 1367, Graham, WA. 44 pages.

⁴ “Leave No Trace” Skills and Ethics: Backcountry Horse Use. National Outdoor Leadership School, 288 Main Street, Lander, WY. 24 pages.