

Ranching and *querencia*: Your heart in the land

Some years ago I had the privilege of getting to know a few ranchers and traditional ranching operations while researching a report about public lands grazing. It was a time of acrimonious conflict between ranchers and environmentalists, with national organizations trying to end cattle grazing on public lands and small-scale local ranchers mystified about why these strangers would want to make their lives harder.

I have seen a few cow-burnt rangelands and backcountry watersheds impacted by overgrazing, so was skeptical about how sustainable ranching could be in the arid Southwest. I very quickly came to learn that, with a direct stake in sustaining healthy habitat, local ranchers not only have some of

FOR THE LAND



ERNIE
ATENCIO

the strongest land ethics around, but carry a wealth of traditional wisdom and ecological knowledge from so many generations on the land.

“The more you work the land, the more you get to love it, because your heart is in your land,” explained Andie Sánchez, and this sentiment eloquently expresses the local concept of *querencia*. *Querencia* means “affection,” “longing,” or “favorite spot.” In common usage around here it refers to a sense of reciprocal responsibility toward a familiar place, a strong connection and ethic toward the land. A rooted sense of place.

One scholar explains further, “They are at home in a place where they live and work and raise their families. This place provides them with the resources needed for sur-

vival, and, in turn, they feel a responsibility to care for that place. This is their *querencia*. It goes beyond the boundaries of legal ownership, beyond the promise of monetary return.”

More than some empty platitude, many local ranchers walk the talk. Andie is a member of the Santa Barbara Grazing Association, which participated in a voluntary program a few years ago to temporarily relocate its 203 cattle from the home allotment on the Carson National Forest to the Rowe Mesa Grass Bank on the Santa Fe National Forest. This added cost and uncertainty to an already challenging livelihood, but was an act of faith and stewardship that allowed the Santa Barbara Allotment to rest and undergo prescribed burning, thinning, reseeding and riparian restoration. There are a number of other restoration programs taking place in partnership with ranchers on nearby national forest and

BLM allotments, most notably along Comanche Creek in the Valle Vidal.

Norteño ranchers just keep a few cattle to make ends meet and help pay the kids’ college tuition, as well as carrying on ties to the land and cultural tradition, and no one around here is getting rich from public lands grazing. Sixty percent of current grazing permits on the Carson are for 49 animals or fewer - small, subsistence herds. Of the larger permits for 100 or more animals, 29 percent are shared within grazing associations, which carry on the old ways of communal cooperation (in our alienating modern world we could all learn something from that practice). This is not some rapacious and heartless industrial agriculture with no care for the land.

Like everything people do, ranching has its environmental impacts. Grazing practices could always be improved through rotational systems, herding and breeding for cattle

that are better adapted to our region. As George Maestas, another rancher with the Santa Barbara Association, said, “As with every other human endeavor throughout history, mistakes have been made. Nevertheless, we’ve learned from those mistakes and improved our management practices.” But with 10,000 years of pastoral tradition from around the world, it is one of the most successful and sustainable strategies yet. And it has been part of our local landscape and local *querencia* for over 400 years.

Download the entire report mentioned above at quiviracoalition.org/images/pdfs/723-Of_Land_and_Culture.pdf.

Ernie Atencio is a consulting cultural anthropologist and conservationist, outdoor recreationist and member of the Quivira Coalition board of directors. Contact him at atencio@newmex.com or learn more at landcultureconsulting.com.