

Alberta Wilderness Association's 2017 Wilderness Defenders

Wilderness Defenders, Ranching Pioneers: Colleen and Dylan Biggs

By Andrea Johancsik (with Ian Urquhart)

Alberta made quite the impression when it participated in the 40th annual Smithsonian Festival in Washington D.C. in 2006. That was the year the Alberta government thought festival attendees would be impressed favourably if they could see first-hand the gigantic trucks used to mine the tar sands. Tourists were indeed impressed, but not in the way Alberta hoped.

In the shadow of the trucks and the controversy Dylan Biggs was showing the public another side of Alberta, one AWA always has supported and encouraged. Dylan, who runs TK Ranch near Hanna with his wife Colleen, was in the U.S. capital as part of the province's effort to showcase sustainable approaches to ranching and farming. The Biggs' TK Ranch was one of the family ranches featured at the Smithsonian Festival because of their commitment, as the Smithsonian put it, to "(o)rganic and low-stress methods of raising livestock, as well as the preservation and stewardship of Alberta's fertile but fragile rough fescue grasslands."

Dylan is renowned for his dedication and enthusiasm for low-stress livestock handling. When he's not in Hanna you're likely to find him somewhere in Canada or the U.S. offering a course on low stress livestock handling. As he explained to the Voice of America in Washington, this approach is important to consumers who care about how their food is raised. Biggs' approach certainly impressed... positively... the tourists who attended the Alberta exhibits and saw him in action.

Holistic management is another term used to capture the sustainable ethic the Biggs inject into their cattle and land management



2017 AWA Wilderness Defenders Dylan and Colleen Biggs

operations. In Wendy Dudley's *Alberta Views* article on sustainable ranching Dylan credited the cattle rotation demanded by holistic management as increasing the biodiversity of his land. He believed it was a real benefit to the health of native rough fescue on the Ranch.

The pioneering approach the Biggs' bring to land and cattle management extends to the processing and marketing of their products. TK Ranch boasts meat and dairy products using no GMO feed, no antibiotics or drugs, no added hormones, no animal by-products, and no chemical insecticides. The Ranch owns and controls everything from pasture to plate including the animals, land, facilities, and brand. This commitment to think outside of the traditional ranching mindset also makes TK Ranch so unique.

The ranch itself is in the Special Areas of Alberta, a region in the prairie that has a tragic history. In the early 1910s, the federal government encouraged Canadians to settle the

west and gave them cheap land so long as they farmed it. Although the first few years of harvest were good, bad years soon followed. People faced starvation; some resorted to eating grasshoppers, rodents, and anything they could find to survive. When people couldn't pay the taxes they owed, the government gave these desperate homesteaders a way out. It would waive their taxes if the homesteaders returned the land to the Crown. This is called tax recovery land, and much of it formed the Special Areas, a region roughly north of Medicine Hat and east of Red Deer and Calgary.

A Special Area requires special stewardship so the land doesn't return to the "Dust Bowl" state of the early 1930s. The Biggs' love and stewardship for Alberta prairies comes honestly, as both their families came from a long line of pioneers. Dylan's mother was dedicated to the conservation of native prairie and thought it should never be farmed, a belief that was unheard of at the time. "Dylan," Col-

leen says, “lives and breathes cattle ranching.”

The TK Ranch describes its location as “truly in the middle of ‘everywhere’” as it is located roughly equal distance from Calgary, Red Deer, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge. The ranch is on rare native northern fescue grasslands – only four percent of the historical range of these grasslands across the planet remain today. “It’s been so lovely living there for the past twenty-seven years,” Colleen said, “because I have the luxury of looking out my front window and seeing species-at-risk.” As she was telling me this a text message interrupted her in mid-sentence. It inquired about the ranch’s wildlife rehabilitation program. “Isn’t that funny!” she laughed. “I just had the Medicine River Wildlife Rehab Centre asking me if we have thirteen-lined ground squirrels, because she wants to release one.”

While a visitor will definitely find cows, chickens, and pigs on the farm, it’s also a haven for wildlife. It is possible to encounter cougars, rare or threatened amphibians, and plains garter snakes. Signs of human and natural history, as seen in teepee rings and ancient bison trails, are also plentiful. Even wolves passed through the ranch just four years ago only to be killed by a nearby resident. Colleen and Dylan manage predators with livestock guard dogs instead of bullets. Coyotes have learned to respect the dogs. This type of predator management, featured in the June 2015 *Wild Lands Advocate*, is not a usual ranching practice. Colleen believes some people feel threatened by what the ranch is doing. “We have been shunned. Shunned is a good word,” Colleen said of some of the reaction to the fact the TK Ranch operates differently from conventional agriculture. But Colleen isn’t afraid to set an example and pioneer a new path. “I learned very quickly, when you believe in what you do, you have to be strong enough to deal with the people that don’t like you,” she said. “We are now setting an example in the livestock industry and sector that works.”

Despite different approaches, TK Ranch shares the concerns of traditional operators about the bottom line. The view Dylan

shared with tourists in Washington in 2006 made ecological and economic sense then and makes even more sense today. It animates a business model that believes that more and more of food consumers look for assurances that the land and animals are treated well. While Colleen knows many ranchers who share her conservation ethic, she knows just as many who want to farm the prairie after over-grazing has drained the life out of the land. The TK Ranch production model may not be popular yet, but it is an important step forward towards a new agriculture model that takes seriously both the economic and environmental demands of sustainability. Its success depends in part on the growth of consumer belief in the importance of the welfare of animals and the land.

“Really, they should be happy,” Colleen said about naysayers. “We’re marketing to a sector of society that wouldn’t eat meat otherwise.” Indeed, some vegetarians have made the switch to eat meats from TK Ranch because of its Animal Welfare Approved certification. When some vegans based in the United States recently attacked TK Ranch online, loyal customers weighed in and defended them. Colleen eventually responded to the trolls’ attack. She tried to bring a holistic perspective into the conversation by emphasizing that monoculture farming to support a vegan soy diet destroys habitat and wildlife even if the animal deaths were unintentional. “Every time you eat, you are part of killing something, that’s just bottom line,” she tried telling them. “That to me is the big message, the most important one, maybe, is being a part of the ecosystem, understanding that as humans, we are a part of everything, and every choice we make affects our place in that ecosystem. So many people are separate... they’re very disconnected from the life cycle and understanding their connection to the land.”

That’s not to say it has been easy for the Biggs family to change the status quo; challenges in agriculture have hit the Biggs family too. When the cattle market crashed, the Biggs had three little girls and their equity went down 50 percent in one week. Dylan was managing his father’s ranch fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, so he couldn’t get

an off-ranch job in the oil patch like other ranchers did. Colleen’s only choice was to split up the family and move to a city to find a job with her university degree, but “it wasn’t really an option.” The family decided to go into direct marketing instead, and although she made sure I understood the ongoing challenges of that kind of business model, TK Ranch remains committed to making a go of its pioneering perspective.

Making a profit isn’t easy either when an animal takes twice as long to go to market as conventional ranching. This is one of the costs of the ranch’s more sustainable approach. In return for the ranch’s greater expenses in feeding livestock, the customer gets more nutrient-dense food that benefits grasslands, wildlife, and livestock. Because of the ranch’s additional expenses, it can be frustrating for the ranch to see greenwashing by producers when they sell a product that uses misleading terms like “grass-fed” rather than “grass-finished,” or meaningless terms like “pasture-raised pork” and “organic.” Colleen believes this greenwashing happens because consumers don’t know the right questions to ask, rather than it due to a failing regulatory system. Her solution? Voting with your dollar. “Everybody eats three times a day or more. They’re making a choice, and every choice they make contributes to one way or the other.”

When thinking about the future of agriculture, Colleen admits she’s concerned. An aging demographic of ranchers whose children don’t want to take over the ranch means more opportunity for multinationals and foreign investors to turn native prairie into monoculture farms. Such a future is a very troubling one. But her practical, environmental, and solution-focused ethic has her already thinking of a way to fix this problem. Colleen’s next project is to start a sort of “food trust, for lack of another word,” where Albertans are actively involved with the future of agriculture by purchasing a plot of native prairie. With TK Ranch’s success so far, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Biggs are instrumental in making that dream a reality.

To see TK Ranch products and learn more about the ranch, visit www.tkranch.com. ▲