



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Fresh eyes

Throughout my life, our family business has always carried “Land and Cattle Company” as part of its name. To be honest, during the earliest years of my involvement, it was the cattle that captured my attention and interest. However, over the years, it has become clear to me that the land enterprise provides my generation the most significant opportunity to leave a lasting legacy — both in terms of wealth and, more importantly, as a measure of our values.

Ultimately, the cattle enterprise is a tool that provides cash flow to improve and enhance the resources under our care. Thus, the great and exciting challenge is to determine the best short- and intermediate-scale management decisions that assure flexibility for the next generation of decision makers.

Find new opportunities

Repurposing undervalued assets, seeing opportunity where others find obstacles and generating solutions are the hallmarks of entrepreneurship. While these approaches have proven to be successful in the world of business and enterprise, do they also contribute a beneficial perspective to landscape management? As a case in point, we hired a young landscape designer and entrepreneur to take a look at a parcel of land and reimagine it. The outcome was extraordinary.

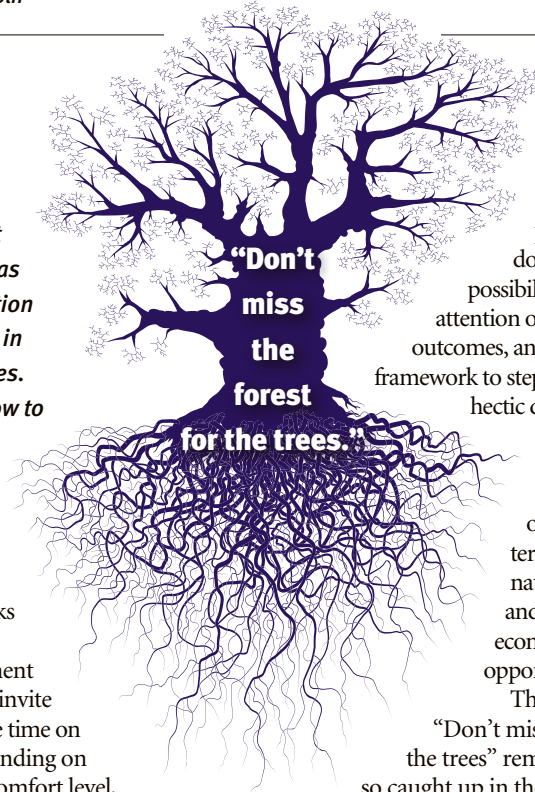
The first step he took was to conduct an in-depth conversation that focused on our values, desired uses and expectations. He then inventoried the plants, soils, topography and condition of the site. These steps were designed to develop a deeper understanding of the system. He then brought a fresh perspective to the site, and, by combining both technical knowledge and creativity, a very intriguing multi-phase plan was created to transform the resource.

Reflecting on that experience, I’ve wondered what would happen if we approached our total ranch from the perspectives of a landscape designer and entrepreneur. What would be the value of viewing our landscape from a different lens?

For example, how would have Lewis and Clark viewed our landscape, and does their experience provide a model for how to view a ranch? How would their keen observation skills and ability to describe what they had seen be useful to our process? If these concepts are at all intriguing, consider implementing an action plan.

Identify a few folks with expertise in landscape management or related skills and invite them to spend some time on your property. Depending on your network and comfort level, the available pool of candidates for this exercise ranges from successful ranchers to rangeland specialists, neighbors to retired professionals who once worked for governmental agencies, and perhaps even a newcomer or two to your community. Ask them to take a rough inventory of the natural resources, including the watershed and wildlife, to evaluate the soil and topography, describe the desired plant species and the invaders and noxious weeds, and to report back to you much as Meriwether Lewis would have done at the end of his famous expedition when he returned to Washington, D.C., to meet with Thomas Jefferson.

Follow up with a tour of your landscape with a successful entrepreneur or two, especially those who have a unique view of opportunities and have a history of bringing new enterprises to the market. It certainly wouldn’t be a bad idea to involve your family — let them take a fresh look at the resources by asking, “If we had just purchased this place but hadn’t decided on which enterprises to incorporate, what would you do?” Or perhaps you have your advisors and team members tackle the challenge of describing, in detail, their vision for how the landscape would look 10 or even 50 years into the future.



Why go to all this trouble? Because such a process opens the door to new possibilities, refocuses attention on desired outcomes, and provides a framework to step away from the hectic demands of the short term and allows our creativity to focus on the future in terms of both the natural resources and the potential economic opportunities that exist.

The old adage “Don’t miss the forest for the trees” reminds us to not get so caught up in the details that we miss the bigger picture and the opportunities therein.

It is easy as a manager to get caught with our head down, forging toward a short-term goal and in the end losing sight of the vision or opportunities emerging on the horizon. At the same time, if we are so focused on the future, it is entirely possible to miss the subtle clues in a landscape that deserve a more immediate response.

Granted, it is a bit unsettling to ask new eyes to look at our resources, enterprises and opportunities. To do so opens the possibility that we might discover the need to change our habits or to make course corrections. If this seems too daunting, then reflect on Jefferson. He purchased the Louisiana Territory, but would never step foot on 1 inch of its soil. He had the good sense to launch an expedition to explore and describe in exacting detail what was discovered. What good might come if we were to follow his example?

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