

Bridge Creek Estate: Environmental Stewardship Award 2001

STEWARDS OF THE LAND

Bridge Creek Estate ranch has been a family operation for over 100 years. Fourth generation on the ranch, Anthony Cecil, and Don Savjord, ranch manager, have made a commitment to being stewards of the land. District Agrologist Peter Fofonoff summed it up when he said, “Bridge Creek Estate demonstrated how ranch operations can contribute to a healthy environment.” Environmental improvements seem onerous and costly but Bridge Creek Estate has 'bridged the gap' with this project.

Needing cleaner water for livestock and wanting to protect special wildlife features around the many small lakes such as a red-listed fish population and a Great Blue Heron rookery, ranch manager Don Savjord began attending some riparian workshops hosted by Ducks Unlimited and reading about what other ranchers were doing.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Maintaining Michael Cecil's goal of a working ranch with sound environmental practices guided Don and Anthony when outlining the ranch priorities.

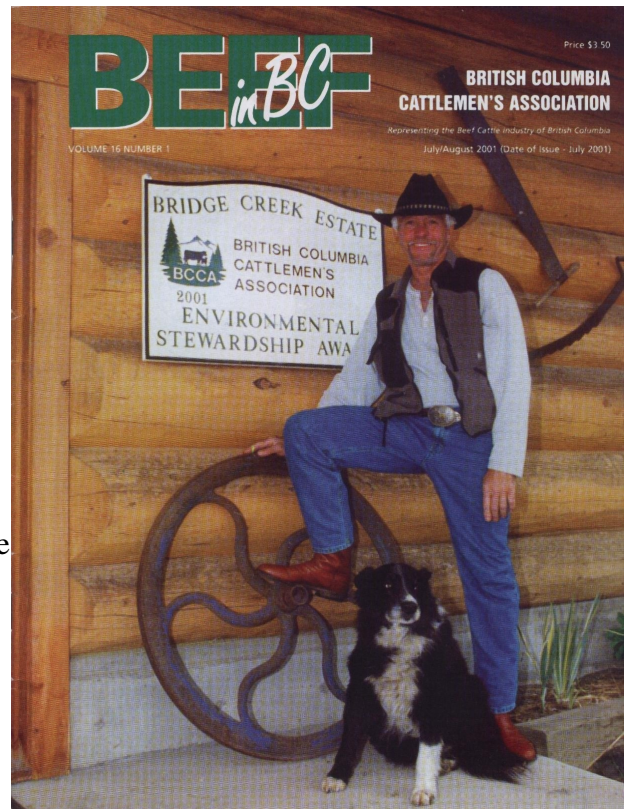
“Our first goal was to improve water quality. Recognizing that degradation of the water quality was not only a liability but cattle were not gaining weight as well as expected. Next, we searched for project funding because adequate funds for capital projects is always a challenge on a ranch.” Don further explains that because there is little immediate financial return justifying the funds for environmental projects is difficult.

Recognizing that the ranch could not bear all the costs of these improvements, other stakeholders were approached, making this a joint venture. Ducks Unlimited, Forest Renewal BC, Ministry of Environment – Fish and Wildlife Branch, local businesses, high school students, and local conservation groups all contributed to improving water quality. Initiating the project with \$10,000, Bridge Creek Estate gives credit to the other players that contributed six times their initial start-up money.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Staff at Bridge Creek Estate were joined by helping hands that wanted to see this project through to completion. Mike Ramsey and Darren Sollitt, fish and wildlife technicians were able to help identify culverts that were barriers to fish migration. As well, they provided some high-tech equipment for measuring water temperature. High school students planted willow shoots along the creek bank to help lower the water temperature for fish and stabilize the bank. Rick Jones, ranch hand, worked with the technicians in building natural fish ladders. “Each step in this ladder was designed and measured. I never knew there was such a science to creating fish habitat,” describes Don.

Several small bridges, covered in filter cloth and gravel were constructed across the creek to minimize cattle impact when they cross to greener pastures. Larger fenced areas were built well back from



the creek to use this riparian zone as a limited grazing pasture.

Stewardship is an ongoing process. Bridge Creek Estate continues to make improvements and are now in the process of creating more water sources for the cattle. Using shallow wells and troughs to capture natural spring water has worked well for them but does not carry them through the dry summer months. Don continues to look for alternative water sources after the funding.

Don describes, “Two things that I was pleasantly surprised by were the fresh faces in many of the government agencies who were a cooperative group of individuals to work with. The field technicians are very keen to work with producers and help us achieve a common goal of cleaner water. Secondly, challenging my traditional way of thinking about fencing and livestock movement helped us meet our ranch goals.”

THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX:

Being open to new ideas is difficult but important. Don Savjord used larger set backs for the fences along the creek with the reasoning that the loss of pasture would be offset by the reduction of fence maintenance, and could minimize animal health concerns like foot rot. “Building straighter fences with wide corridors for moving cattle actually worked better for us.” Bridge Creek Estate has proved that riparian fencing doesn't have to be complicated. Don reveals, “We have been criticized by other ranchers for having such large setbacks and wide riparian corridors, but the pastures and corridors are more usable with less impact on the creek.”

Rather than waiting until forced, they have chosen to begin making significant changes now. The ranch has entered the next hundred years of operation with a new and practical outlook toward environmental concerns.

“Coordinating with other stakeholders is the reality of accessing funding in order to make improvements to the land. This ranch is only one small part of this large watershed but we want the water that flows through our valley to be just as good leaving as when it first appeared on our land.” A goal shared by many ranchers.

-- July 2001 issue of *Beef in BC* magazine of the BC Cattlemen's Association