

# *Grupo La Báscula*

Community-based planned adaptive grazing to improve vegetation and soil health, support wildlife, and increase economic success and opportunity



*“We can value livestock for more than just how much they weigh. They can also provide very important ecosystem services.”*

— RODRIGO SIERRA CORONA

Ranching in the arid grasslands near Janos, Chihuahua Mexico is difficult. However, in the Ejido San Pedro a grazing cooperative called the Grupo La Báscula has worked together to find ways to do so in an economically and ecologically regenerative way. Starting in 2012, local ranchers began collaborating with researchers and advocates from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Alianza Fundación Carlos Slim-World Wildlife Fund, IMC Vida Silvestre, and the Savory Institute (Queretaro Hub) to gather, test, and adapt strategies that would help them more effectively and efficiently work with the brittle natural environment to improve their livestock enterprises and the long-term resilience of the land, wildlife, and local community. This collaboration has been a tremendous success for the ranchers who have seen significant increases in forage production, quality of life, and access to land and opportunities.

## THE RANCH

Ejido San Pedro is located in the Janos Biosphere Region (JBR), a federally designated conservation area in Chihuahua, Mexico. The region is home to one of North America's largest prairie dog colonies, the only free-ranging herd of bison in Mexico, as well as 79 species of mammals, 257 species of birds, 34 species of reptiles, and 13 species of amphibians.

As a result of the Agrarian Reform in Mexico, which distributed large areas of federal land to landless peasants, cattle ranching is the primary productive activity in the JBR. However, many of those receiving lands as well as private ranchers did not have experience raising cattle or managing land and relied on inaccurate or outdated federal set stocking rates to inform their management. Sadly, subsequent persistent overgrazing and severe droughts degraded the productivity of the land and brought many of the ranching enterprises into conflict with not only the conservation goals of the region, but also with each other.

## REGENERATIVE PRACTICES

In 2012 the Grupo La Báscula was created to help support community solutions to these challenges. The local grazing cooperative started in Ejido San Pedro was in large part catalyzed by Dr. Rodrigo Sierra Corona, who had been conducting research in the area on the relationship between prairie dogs and cattle. Rodrigo had been inspired by his findings that moderate and well-timed cattle grazing that mimicked the historical grazing habits of bison actually supported the health of prairie dog communities. Excitingly, the presence of healthy prairie dog communities also promoted high-quality vegetation that benefited cattle in turn. This synergistic relationship motivated him to purchase his own cattle and work with small ranchers in the area and the regional Savory Institute Hub in Queretaro to explore grazing strategies that could support the needs of human and wild communities alike.

The biggest changes to the rancher's cattle management to come out of this work was the adoption of adaptive planned grazing. With the goal of improving forage



#### HIGHLIGHTS

**5**

YEARS TO  
SELF-  
MANAGEMENT

5 years after its creation, the Grupo La Báscula is now able to sustainably manage itself and only relies on the scientists, teachers, and conservationists that helped start it for advice.

**18,000**

HECTOR  
LAND-BASE  
INCREASE

Recently, El Fondo Mexicano para la Conservación de la Naturaleza partnered with the Grupo La Báscula to graze its herd on 18,000 additional hectares of land in the area and help to manage it in return.

**270%**

INCREASE IN  
CARRYING  
CAPACITY

Before adopting adaptive planned grazing, the land around Ejido San Pedro could sustain approximately 30 cows annually. The Grupo La Báscula now reports that those same lands can support roughly 80 cows annually or 140 cows for 7 months during their planned grazing cycle.



production and supporting wildlife and vegetation communities, the ranchers in the Grupo La Báscula began grazing their animals as a single, cooperative herd. They used electric fencing to subdivide the land to provide more bison-like grazing impact and typically more than a year of recovery and regrowth time.

### SEEING THE BENEFITS

The positive effects of these changes materialized quickly. With short concentrated grazing events and long recovery periods, the health and diversity of vegetation and availability of forage improved markedly. This increased the capacity of the land to support wildlife and livestock and also improved the adaptiveness and resilience of the cattle enterprise during periods of drought. Additionally, the group's new grazing program that blended conservation and production helped them win desirable

leases from neighboring conservation organizations including The Nature Conservancy and Fondo Mexicano para la Conservación de la Naturaleza.

Importantly, the community itself has seen significant cultural benefits as well from the creation of Grupo La Báscula. Initially, fractured management of the land based on federally-prescribed stocking rates and poor fencing infrastructure put many ranchers into conflict as they independently dealt with drought and overgrazing. However, as the community began to learn new management practices together and work collaboratively, their increased sense of ownership and economic opportunity improved local relationships and overall quality of life. As Dr. Rodrigo Sierra Corona, who now works with the Santa Lucia Conservancy notes, "Now [the ranchers in the Ejido] are a family... just by working the land together. They are sweating together. That's what good work gives you." ■



The Profiles in Land and Management Series features the work of innovative ranchers and land managers who are achieving economic and ecological benefits on working lands.

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