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Ecology & ManagementVoices of Change: Narratives from Ranching Women of the Southwestern United States[☆]Hailey Wilmer^{a,*}, María E. Fernández-Giménez^b^a Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA^b Professor in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA

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ABSTRACT

The gendered contexts of rangeland decision-making in the southwestern United States are poorly understood. We conducted life-history interviews with 19 ranching women and analyzed the resulting transcripts using narrative analysis. Interviews revealed eight common themes in these women ranchers' experiences: 1) learning from older generations, 2) finding a personal career path, 3) operating livestock businesses, 4) breaking gender barriers, 5) leading communities, 6) aging and going on alone, 7) living close to the land, and 8) passing the ranching tradition to the next generation. Women's roles as ranch decision-makers, community-keepers, and business operators evolve throughout their lifetimes, as do their needs for decision-making support from outreach. We suggest that women's life stages and gendered contexts be considered in further rangeland management research, policy, and extension.

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Introduction

What's the hardest part about being a rancher? Putting up with droughts and endless wind and dirt blowing. But every time we go through one of those spells, [like] this year, then I think about a city. I think about buildings everywhere, and I think my gosh I'm glad I've got dirt blowing in my face, and I get over it right quick.

[Lucy, New Mexico]

The effects of the 2012–2013 drought weighed heavily on the minds of southwestern U.S. ranchers, like Lucy, whose livelihoods and way of life depend upon rangelands. Recently, the field of rangeland science has seen a marked social turn, an increased emphasis on exploring the connection between rangeland ecosystems and human decision-making (Bestelmeyer and Briske, 2012; Brunson, 2012; Sayre et al., 2012, 2013). Although previous scholarship has explored land-manager decision-making related to economic and innovation adoption decisions (Didier and Brunson, 2004; Habron, 2004; Kennedy and Brunson, 2007; Rowe et al., 2001; Smith and Martin, 1972; Tanaka

et al., 2005), little research has explored how those dependent upon rangeland systems of the southwestern United States experience change. That is, although we may understand ranchers' innovation adoption behavior and that many take an opportunity cost to stay in ranching (Torell and Bailey, 2000), we know little about the nuanced social processes and gendered experiences that drive rangeland system change from ranchers' perspectives. Understanding these processes is critical to developing policies and research that support the sustainable management of social-ecological systems (SEs), including rangelands (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2012; Beratan, 2007; Briske et al., 2011; Farnar-Bowers and Lane, 2009; Sayre, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

SES researchers have struggled to find research tools that link social and cultural knowledge from the members of ranching communities with ecological and technical knowledge (Brunson, 2012; Cote and Nightingale, 2011; Crane, 2010). A few studies have documented US ranchers' local ecological knowledge (Knapp and Fernández-Giménez, 2009; Knapp et al., 2011). This approach holds promise for incorporating the content of local knowledge into rangeland research and management, but the context of this knowledge is also important (Cote and Nightingale, 2011; Cruikshank, 2001).

By context we refer to the historical, cultural, and subjective meanings of knowledge from the perspective of those who are involved in the process of knowledge creation and application (Cote and Nightingale, 2011; Cruikshank, 2001). Research that attempts to understand and

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incorporate the historical, cultural, and gendered contexts of decision-making of diverse stakeholders in rangeland systems may help bridge a gap between the academic field of rangeland science and actual rangeland managers (Briske et al., 2011; Crane, 2010; Sayre et al., 2012). The contextualization of local ecological knowledge includes an exploration of the multidimensional social processes, relationships, and identities that influence decision-making in these systems (Cote and Nightingale, 2011).

In the following subsections we develop a theoretical framework for our study by reviewing past research on gender and rangeland and natural resource management. Gender is one category of social identity through which rangeland scholars can explore the heterogeneous social context of rangeland system change. Gender is an underexamined, complex, and deeply personal performance with implications for broader social power asymmetries. Thus it provides an important starting point in the effort to contextualize the social processes driving change on rangeland systems.

Diverse Perspectives: Why Gender Matters to Rangelands

Women are major stakeholders in rangeland systems, but the rangeland science literature is all but silent on women's contributions to rangeland stewardship in the United States. What we do know about the contributions of Western ranching women comes from a small number of studies on women in the livestock industry (Pilgeram, 2007; Pini, 2005) and from biographies and historical accounts, like the memoir of Alice Marriott, who efficiently noted, "The cattle business is a damn fine business for men and mules, but it's hell on horses and women" (Marriott, 1953). A sample of this literature is steeped in romantic imagery of the socially and economically empowered Western woman, working beside or without her husband on the land (Fink, 1992; Peñaloza, 2001; Stefanco, 1987). Recent explorations of women's experiences in ranching provide a more specific and nuanced view of ranching life, an existence blessed and challenged by traditional gender roles, rugged social and economic landscapes, and geographic isolation (Schackel, 2011).

Rangeland scientists still have a limited understanding of how women contribute to rangeland management. The dearth of research in this area was highlighted during a special symposium on Women as Change Agents on Rangelands at the 2013 meeting of the Society for Range Management (Coppock et al., 2013). This event came on the heels of decades of gender studies from the fields of agriculture, development economics, sociology, and natural resource management that explored the connection between women and natural resource systems around the globe (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2014).

Much of the research on women in agriculture and natural resources has been focused at the family-farm level (Sachs and Alston, 2010). This work considered the gendered divisions of farm-household labor, the impact of intrahousehold inequality on women's access to resources (Folbre, 1984), and women's roles in production and food security. At the community level, recent work has explored how women take leadership and governance roles in agriculture and forestry (Farmar-Bowers, 2010; Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 2001; Pini, 2005) and the gendered implications of numerous innovations and practices in natural resources and agriculture (Arndt et al., 2011; Kiptot and Franzel, 2011; Moser and Barrett, 2006). The gendered challenges of rural realities (Pruitt, 2007), including access to educational resources (Trauger et al., 2010) and credit (Anderson et al., 2002), as well as barriers to securing power in resource management (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 2001), have been well explored across disciplines and locations. Scholars have also celebrated the gendered contexts of cultural, economic, and spiritual connections to natural resources (Kassam and Soaring Eagle Friendship Center, 2001).

Gender has implications for environmental issues, beyond rangelands, where social inequalities are reflected in the impacts of climate change and access to natural resource management decision-making in two important ways. First, women's perceptions of vulnerability to, and efforts to address the impacts of climate change have been well explored from the perspective that gender is a demographic

variable that explains manager perceptions (Liu et al., 2014; Sakellari and Skanavis, 2013). For example, Liu et al. (2014) found that female farmers and ranchers in Nevada had a greater concern for the effects of climate change than did their male counterparts (controlling for climate change knowledge, regardless of political party affiliation). Glazebrook (2011) used evidence from Ghana to argue that climate change contributes to women's hardships because of the connections among gender, poverty, and environmental degradation.

The second way that gender has important implications for environmental issues is through the work of feminist scholars who have rethought the relationship between environmental science and gender inequality, the privileging of male epistemologies in policy and decision-making, male/female and nature/culture dualisms, and the link between environmental and health issues (Cheney, 1987; Harding, 2006; Seager, 2003; Smith, 1999). Arora-Jonsson (2004) notes that differences between men and women's perceptions of environmental issues arise not strictly from gender roles, but from the specific social contexts, networks, and relationships through which gender is performed. She criticizes social research on women and the environment that emphasizes gender binaries and women's vulnerability and virtuousness but neglects the issue of unequal access to decision-making (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). In the past decades, different scholars have called for a more nuanced analysis of gender and environmental issues. Like Arora-Jonsson, many feminist scholars reframe the discussion of gender through postmodern, de-colonial, and intersectional views of gender (e.g., Carr and Thompson, 2014; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Seager, 2003; Shiva, 2013).

The need to explore the gendered experience of rangeland systems originates from the almost complete omission of gender from rangeland social science literature. There is mounting evidence that women are key drivers of change within rangeland systems in the western United States and that the impact of change in natural resource systems is gendered (Coppock and Desta, 2013). There is concern that researchers have little understanding of the diverse perspectives, labor responsibilities, and needs of ranching and pastoralist women (Coppock et al., 2013). Concerns that women are vulnerable to change in natural resource systems contrast with the discourse about women as a source of labor and leadership in production, development, and conservation activities that help solve both social and ecological problems (Mayoux, 1995; Pilgeram, 2007; Sachs and Alston, 2010).

Gendered Management Contexts

We approach gender in rangeland management as one of many identities and diverse experiences that may contextualize ranching women's experiences of change and adaptation on rangelands (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2011). We do not look for trends among universal, binary categories of men and women or directly compare the roles of men and women (Radel, 2009; Sachs and Alston, 2010; Young, 1994). Instead, we explore gender as a category that organizes social experience but that does not necessarily dictate group status or activity (Young, 1994). We consider the existing research on rangeland decision-making to have described the experience of men, and this paper focuses on the specific experiences of women in the southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico.

Thus in this study, we address a gap in the rangeland social science literature and focus on an underexamined group of ranchers by exploring, through narrative analysis, the subjective experiences and roles of women ranchers in rangeland system change. We examine how women ranchers experience and facilitate change in rangeland systems over the course of their lifetimes.

Methods

Analytical Framework: Narrative Inquiry

Narratives are a way that humans make sense of the world; they are a reconstruction of stories across time and place and show

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