A Visual Cue for Land Stewards

The bumper crop of grasshoppers was evident. As our ATV traveled down the pasture road the little kamikazes struck us with reckless abandon. I dodged hoppers, evaluated range condition, and took notes on the overall lack of nesting and fawning cover. I began to notice that the taller warm season grasses could be found in every clump of prickly pear and every downed cedar skeleton, where grazers couldn't reach. As I searched for the right words to let the landowner know that the pasture was overgrazed, and livestock deferment was sorely needed, he remarked "look at what the grasshoppers have done to this place." Now, I know that grasshoppers are particularly bad this year, and they take their fair share of forage, as evidenced by the defoliated ornamental plants behind my house, but that didn't fully explain what happened to the forage in his pasture.

Good land stewards want to maintain plant health, watershed function and have plenty of nesting and fawning cover. But like the proverbial frog being boiled alive without realizing it, forage can be over-utilized by livestock, deer or exotics before the realization occurs that animals need to be removed. Grazing exclosures can be a practical method to help landowners estimate forage use, determine appropriate stocking rates and pasture recovery periods and understand the role of environmental conditions. They exclude ungulates from small, representative areas so vegetation changes outside the cage can be compared to changes inside the cage.

A simple exclosure can be constructed with 2 – 16' cattle panels (4-foot tall, 4" openings) pulled into a circle with the overlapping ends wired together. Each exclosure is then wired to 2 - 4 T-posts driven into the ground for support. You can also build 4' x 4' or 8' x 8' square cages wired to T-posts at the corners. Regardless of design, they need to be tall enough to discourage grazing and browsing use, but yet small enough (in terms of square footage) to prevent deer from jumping inside.

One exclosure should be placed in each pasture, but you can place more according to changes in soil and vegetation. You can also place a few around small woody plants that receive browsing pressure from deer, goats or other browsing animals. With a little practice you will be able to discern browsing pressure on woody plants outside, as compared to inside the cages.

Placing cages in food plots can help you determine how much grazing pressure the plot is receiving. A few years ago I met with an absentee landowner who complained that his food plot didn't do too well. After placing a cage in the plot the next year he found that seed germination and plant growth were fine inside the cage. Outside of the cage there was just too much foraging from deer for the new plants to thrive.

Plan to visit the exclosure cages a couple times each year, and take pictures. You may want to visit during the growing season (May/June) and during the dormant season (Jan/Feb). Take pictures from about 10 feet away, looking north so that some area outside of the cage is viewed within the picture. Not only can immediate comparisons be made inside vs. outside of the cages, but you can begin to evaluate vegetation trends by examining pictures over time.

Exclosures provide a visual cue for adjusting livestock management practices and/or reducing deer numbers to accomplish your forage and wildlife cover goals. Like the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words", exclosures tell a story that can help you become a more effective land steward.

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