



"We can vote for good food,
raised sustainably
by stewards of the land,
three times a day, at least."

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MANAGEMENT SOCIETY)

REAL Beef: Linking Food Consumers with Land Stewards

Patricia Macklin

After another full day at work, you come flying into the house, slap a couple steaks on the barbeque, wolf down the meal before rushing off to kids' sports, music lessons, community meetings . . . sound familiar? If, in the constant swirl of life's activity, you had put any particular thought into your steak purchase, it might have been that you wanted to eat Alberta beef. But what does that really mean? It probably engenders some vaguely Hollywood image of the lonesome cowboy driving his herd through the foothills. At sunset. With a sparkling creek chattering its way out of the mountains. But that's only if you really thought about it.

So many of us now have no connection to farms or the source of the food we eat. A generation ago, we would have had at least a close relative who farmed, and would have had some linkage to the land and food production. But the farm population shrinks with every census and most of us have lost that vital connection to our food, where it's produced and who grows it.

The Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society, better known as Cows and Fish, has spent the last 15 months working on REAL (Ranchers Enhancing Alberta's Landscapes) Beef, a project to reconnect us with our food sources. The core work of Cows and Fish is promoting and educating producers on sustainable riparian management; the intersection with local food is one way to address that mandate.

"Our objective with REAL Beef is to help rural communities and agricultural producers link to urban, consumer communities by developing and delivering a framework to showcase and promote sustainable food production," says Norine Ambrose, Executive Director of Cows and Fish. This project, funded by the Government of Alberta's Rural Community Adaptation Program and the W. Garfield Weston Foundation, provided insights to consumers that agricultural and environmental sustainability can be met in food production.



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The REAL beef pilot project involved 6 producers. Each producer's operation received Cows and Fish landscape health validation. Several sustainable food workshops were organized to link those who eat with those who produce. The workshops involved an educational component for the consumers who attended. Consumer tours of sustainably managed riparian pastures, followed by a meal with beef and other locally raised food, led to sincere and meaningful interactions between producers and consumers. Many arrived with a limited understanding of managing riparian area rangelands but by the end had a greater awareness of the challenges and progress in sustainable grazing practices.

While face to face interaction is ideal for creating relationships and increasing understanding, it is more challenging to arrange and has limited reach. Enter the second part of the project: digital stories. These are video-narratives combining recorded voice with still or moving images and music. Working with facilitators from the Centre for Digital Storytelling, the six producers and one food consumer created stories about aspects of production and consumption that invite the viewer into their worlds.



© RUZICKA SUNRISE FARM

[Sunrise Farm](#) is an 800 acre mixed-farm in the Killam area that is holistically and organically managed by Don & Marie Ruzicka. The Ruzickas believe if the land is managed well, it will reflect on the health of the plant communities, resulting in healthy, nutritious and great tasting meats. Don, who direct markets beef, chicken, turkey and pork says, "I wanted to do a [story of our farm](#) for consumers to understand both what I'm doing and why."

Sean McGrath of [Round Rock Ranching](#) wanted to tell a [story](#) because so often the media portrays farmers as angry or protesting on Parliament Hill or as receiving government handouts. "I wanted to show that this is my family farm. We're not angry and if you want to engage with us, we'd be happy to do that." They do a little direct marketing, but he believes that in the future, verifications are going to be a critical part of marketing through any channel. "We might be 25 years ahead of things, but eventually verification like the Cows and Fish landscape health verification is going to be a requirement even for selling through conventional means," says McGrath.



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The consumer perspective is also part of the sustainable farming story. Brenda Barritt produced the [consumer story](#). "Meeting the producers, I didn't feel like I had a story," says Barritt, "but being coached through the process I started to see the power of my story. Then, once I watched it along with the producer stories, I saw even more how my consumer story tied in with theirs."

The stories were premiered in Edmonton at Farm Fair and have been presented at several conferences. They are also available [online](#). And the buzz around the stories is spreading. Both Ruzicka and McGrath have had people asking about the stories and know of them being spread through social media. Cows and Fish have had Watershed groups and local food groups contact them to come and present the stories at meetings.

Producers are also using both stories and landscape health validations on their own websites to help communicate their story to the world.

Moving forward, the REAL beef project is working with producers and consumers to create more stories. Plans are afoot to hold another premiere event in Lethbridge in the first quarter of 2012.

If your group is interested in working formally with Cows and Fish to help develop and promote REAL beef stories, contact Norine Ambrose (403 381 5538).

Too busy to be otherwise, often those of us who eat stand complacent about our food sources. Thanks to the stories of REAL beef ranchers, we have the opportunity to be a little more knowledgeable, a little less complacent and a whole lot more connected.