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By John Peel

Durango man brings knowledge to Maasai people

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The world's population continues its march toward the urban. But our livelihood remains in the rural.



Courtesy Samuel Langat

Craig Leggett, who says he draws plenty of attention in Maasai areas with his cowboy hat and white government truck, talks to ranchers during a community visit. They're discussing methods of grazing management that will improve the land. The man in the white T-shirt is Leggett's interpreter, Marias Ripau.

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attention."

The white guy in the cowboy hat would then ask the attendees, often through the translator, what difficulties they were having and what was going well.

"I try to build upon their indigenous knowledge," he says. "It's still at the point where I can come in and draw from what they already know, from what they already do. Then just introduce the ideas that are unique to holistic management and see where they blend

We must take care of the land, preaches Craig Leggett. "When the land benefits, we all benefit. When land goes downhill, we all lose. We all suffer."

The 49-year-old Durangoan practices that preaching, and he's willing to roam the world to share the ideas of managing land in a holistic way. He returned earlier this month from a year-plus sojourn in Kenya, where he imparted his knowledge to the Maasai people, who have seen much of their land wasted by mismanagement.

In August of 2005, Leggett began a new job with Holistic Management International, a non-governmental organization founded by Allan Savory, a white man who grew up in the defunct African country of Rhodesia. When war broke out there in the 1970s, Savory was exiled for supporting blacks in government. He relocated to the U.S., and now lives in Albuquerque.

Africans get aid from around the world, but what they really need is knowledge, Leggett says. And that's what he delivered in his year among the Maasai.

Droughts have increased in severity; rains bring floods and erode the land; diversity among species is decreasing and that brings increased problems, including disease. Those are Africa's woes, but they're not unique, he points out.

"Much like here, you run into many of the same problems," Leggett says during an interview at his home east of Durango. "It's getting harder and harder to make a living off the land."

The Maasai are traditional pastoralists, with knowledge of how to work the land. But over the last 100 years or so, with colonialization and Western thought intruding, some of their traditions have eroded. But, Leggett says, they've retained enough of that knowledge that they grasp holistic ideas quickly.

On a typical day, Leggett, his driver and interpreter would load the Land Cruiser and head to one of eight communities in their development program.

"It would be prearranged. We would get there 10 o'clock usually," Leggett says and begins to laugh. "We'd be the only ones there. (Full-blown laughter.) We'd wait for an hour. People would start to show up because we do attract a lot of

together. They pick up on it."

How the animals graze is crucial, he says. Ruminants - cud-chewing animals - naturally move in herds, grazing an area and returning when plants recover. But with no predators around, the grazers spread out, leaving land no time to recover.

"We work on recovery time - how much time does a plant need to recover?" Leggett says. "It's mimicking nature. You manage your herds and where they are according to that."

Leggett opens his laptop to show photos of soil devastation. On barren land, now incapable of holding moisture, new rivulets grow deeper and will soon create washes. One recovery technique is to gather the cattle on this barren land. They will grind seed- and nutrient-containing dung into the soil, bringing back grasses and other plants the cattle can then graze.

Leggett, who has a degree in plant and soil sciences, grew up on a small farm in the Northeast. He, wife Jessica and their three boys moved to Albuquerque in 2001, then to Durango two years later. He's involved in the La Boca Center for Sustainability, an attempt to help farmers and ranchers implement practices that keep land healthy. It's in La Plata County near the New Mexico border.

When the phone rang in mid-August 2005, the next thing he knew he was being asked to go to Africa's Great Rift Valley in two weeks.

"I said, 'Sure. Let me tell Jessica I'm going.'"

And how did that go over? "I was thrilled," Jessica says. "He just asked for flexibility. They let him come home every few weeks."

He will return to the Maasai every six months for the next couple years to teach "intensives" - sessions to instruct Maasai who will become teachers of holistic practices. Another Holistic Management International project in the works could have him traveling to Australia, South Africa, Mexico and Canada to manage new holistic learning sites.

For the Maasai, the stakes are high. They succeed and they maintain their way of life. They fail and they disperse to Nairobi or other cities for work opportunities.

"Here's people who are living on the edge," Leggett says. "Their life is livestock. So their life is their land. It's a very fine line between life and death, between prosperity and poverty."

"To take what little I know and share it with them, to empower them, that's quite rewarding."

johnp@durangoherald.com John Peel writes a weekly human-interest column.

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