

“Ranching is a lifestyle that seems to get in the blood.” This is a quote from Madeleine Murdock, a local landowner and rancher in Sublette County. Ranching is the blood that pumps through our great state of Wyoming. A rich ranching history and culture run deep in the veins of this place we call home – Sublette County. While some of us were born with ranching in our blood, others chose to walk into it later in life. For many years, ranching defined this community. If you weren’t a rancher, you were related to one, friends with one, or neighbors with one.

Ranching has always been a community effort. It is one of the few lifestyles in which the sense of kinship is still strong. Ranchers look out for one another and help each other, whether it is running the mower during haying season, waking up in the early morning hours during calving season, or helping wrestle calves during branding season. Those who have let ranching get into their blood understand that it is more than the delicious barbeque dinner after a branding – it is the process of helping one another and reaping in the benefits of their tireless labor.

Madeleine Murdock is one of those ranchers who wasn’t born with ranching in her blood. Madeleine came into ranching when she chose to marry her late husband, Stan Murdock. Coming from Scotland, the pace of life on the ranch took some getting used to. But looking back on that decision, she doesn’t regret it at all. For Madeleine, the rewards of ranching extend beyond the lifestyle and interaction with other ranchers. “To see new life each spring, whether fawns or calves, ducklings or sandhill chicks, makes one more aware of the Earth itself and our responsibility to care for it.”

Madeleine, Stan, and their son Scott recognized the benefits and importance of ranching and decided to conserve their right to ranch for the rest of their lives and the lives of future generations. In 2007, the Murdocks decided to conserve 25% of their 3,000-acre ranch, which lies four miles northwest of Pinedale, with the Green River Valley Land Trust, now the Wyoming Land Trust. The Murdocks’ reasons for conserving their ranch under easement were simple. They hoped to strike a balance for wildlife, a balance under the looming threat of land development, and a balance that would preserve a rich agricultural heritage that is too precious to be lost.

The threat to open space is strong and imminent. Reports show that America is losing land to development at the rate of 1.5 million acres per year. More specifically, more than 336,000 acres of rangeland are predicted to be converted to residential development by 2020. The American Farmland Trust estimates that Sublette County is the most at-risk among Wyoming counties for the conversion of private agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses. These statistics are alarming, and as a state that receives a significant portion of its income from hunting and fishing license revenue and tourism, we cannot afford to allow valuable open space be lost to development.

In a world with a rapidly increasing population rate, Madeleine raises the issue of how long we will be able to feed ourselves. “Ranchers raise livestock to provide meat, on lands which do not support the production of fruits, vegetables and grains,” noted Madeleine. Development poses a threat to ranchers’ ability to raise livestock and produce food. For this reason, land conservation couldn’t be a more current and critical issue.

Land conservation is a partnership between people and wildlife, between agriculture and natural resources, and between generations. Land conservation is not a linear process, but one that is cyclical and regenerative, and can be carried out using tools such as conservation easements.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and land trusts that restrict certain uses of the land in order to conserve its agricultural and natural values forever. Landowners exchange their right to subdivide or commercially develop the land for tax benefits or cash. The tax benefit was recently bolstered when Congress renewed an enhanced conservation tax incentive. The renewed incentive applies to a landowner’s federal income tax. Under the tax code, the incentive:

- Raises the deduction a donor can take for donating a voluntary conservation agreement from 30% of their income in any year to 50%;
- Allows farmers and ranchers to deduct up to 100% of their income; and
- Increases the number of years over which a donor can take deductions from 6 to 16 years.

This incentive has allowed the Wyoming Land Trust (WLT) to work with over 46 families on 28,564 acres in Sublette County. This year, the WLT is working on 29 conservation easement projects in 7 counties across the state, totaling nearly 92,000 acres of critical wildlife habitat, open space, watersheds, scenic views, and working agricultural lands. Of the 29 projects, 13 lie in Sublette County and cover nearly 19,555 acres.

The mission of WLT is simple – to work with private landowners to conserve Wyoming’s natural and agricultural resources. Ranchers in Wyoming can take comfort in knowing that organizations like WLT are there to help conserve what is most important to them.

In addition to the WLT, land trusts across the state are working to keep ranching in the blood of Wyoming. Ranching will forever be a definitive aspect of life in Wyoming and Sublette County. It is the blood that brought us to where we are today, and it will continue to be an important part of our culture, economy, history, and future. Ranching depends on open space. Folks like the Murdocks feel that it is important and necessary to work with organizations like the Wyoming Land Trust to ensure generational land ownership and keep ranching in our blood for many more years to come.