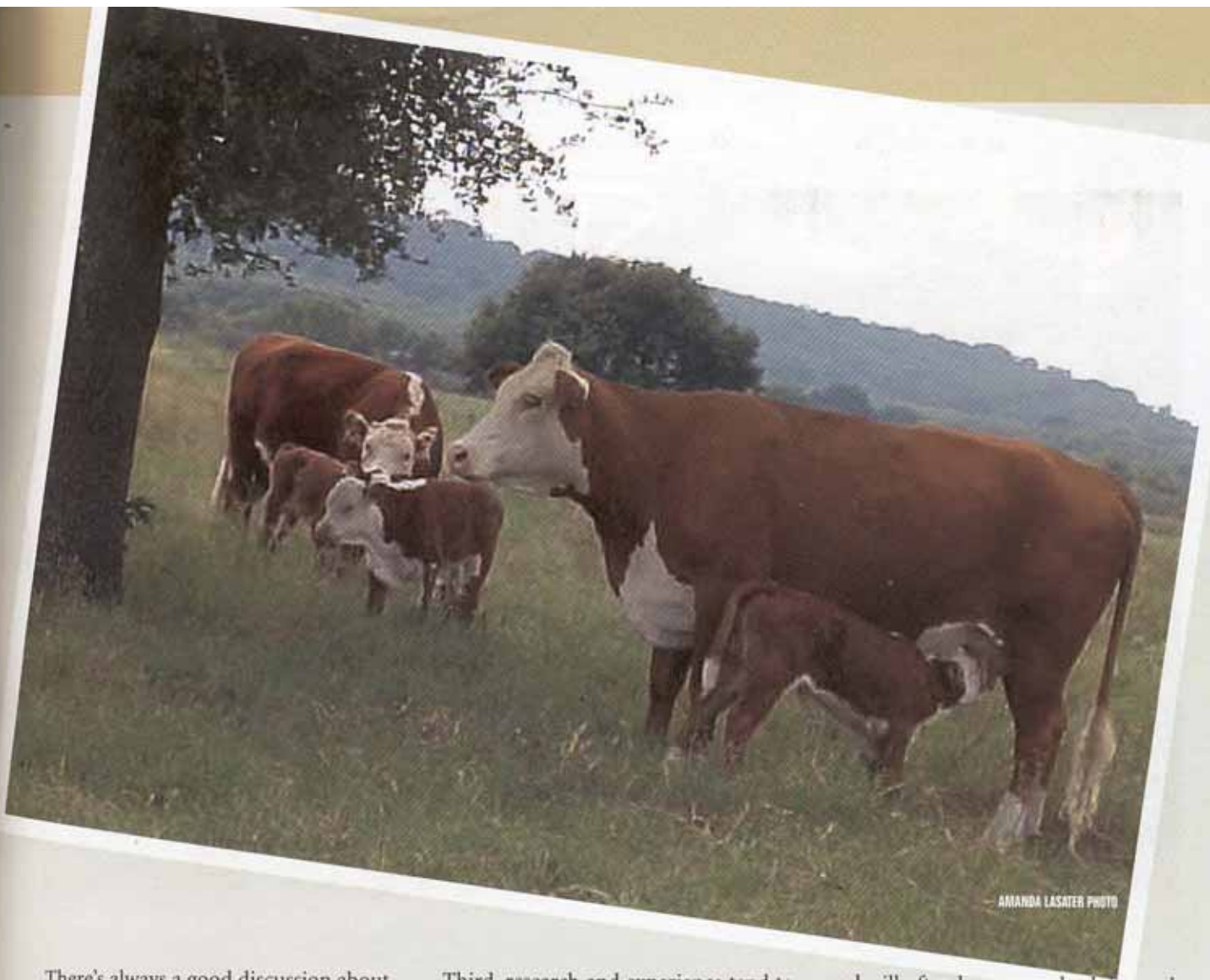




DEER

CATTLE DO THEY MIX?

By Paul Ohlenbusch



AMANDA LASATER PHOTO

There's always a good discussion about having deer and cattle together. Some say they mix, others say no, and a lot don't know what to think! Here are a few factors to consider to help sort out the issues.

First, the diets of the animals need to be considered. Deer are browsers with some forbs and maybe a little grass preferred. Cattle are grass eaters with some forbs and occasionally some browse. Sheep and goats prefer forbs and browse and compete with deer. With that in mind, the deer and cattle won't compete unless the vegetation doesn't have what they need, which is an important point!

Second, research and experience is showing that species diversity increases when grazed by herbivores such as cattle. If there is no grazing of the grass component, grasses tend to dominate. That means the deer may have less preferred vegetation to choose from. Properly grazed, cattle may improve vegetation for deer.

Third, research and experience tend to indicate deer prefer to graze where cattle aren't. This means a rotation grazing or seasonal grazing program could be beneficial.

Fourth, leaving an ungrazed area for fawn rearing is desirable. It may help provide predator protection for the fawns. It also provides a rest period for improving the grasses.

Fifth, keeping cattle out of wooded bottomland areas during the fall and winter will help reduce competition for browse for the deer.

Last, and most important, matching the number of deer and cattle to the USEABLE forage available is critical. Both classes of animals can adapt to using what ever forage is available. When there is direct competition, the animals suffer.

OPTIONS

In determining if and how to mix deer and cattle, the following steps need to be considered. Each is a major consideration

and will often have several sub items that need considering. After the first item, the order is not necessarily the order in which they will be done.

First, and most important, determine the vegetation composition (grass, forbs, browse) in each management unit (pasture, paddock, etc.). This may require a trained individual to develop the information. The evaluation should determine guidelines for carrying capacity and stocking rate decisions.

Second, review the current management goals and objectives plus financial information. Consider an evaluation comparing current costs and returns with the potential costs and returns of including cattle with deer (or deer with cattle).

Third, develop optional strategies for the management of the cattle. You could consider options such as cow/calf or yearlings, seasonal or rotational grazing, self or leased operation.

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PLANNING

■ Review rainfall history and current soil moisture status. Soil moisture is needed for early season good growth. Limited or no soil moisture can mean little plant growth.

■ Checking and repairing fences, gates, and water sources now can save many headaches later.

■ Planning to seed native grasses this year? Have the seed in the ground, no more than 3/4 inches, by early March in central Texas. This means earlier to the south and as late as early May in the Panhandle.

■ Planning on a prescribed burn this spring? To be successful, enough soil moisture should be available to insure good plant growth to protect the soil and provide forage.

■ Review and adjust management plans for 2007 based on current and past weather conditions.

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■ A cow/calf enterprise is year-round with high labor demands at calving and weaning.

■ With the yearling enterprise, labor can vary.

■ Traditional season-long can be varied with part season (from green-up to mid-July or other variations).

■ Rotation grazing requires timely moving of animals from paddock to paddock, an increased labor requirement.

■ Leased operations might be a written contract allowing access for a specified number and size of animals for a specific time period.


Each option has advantages and disadvantages. You must determine what fits you based on your situation.

Fourth, estimate the increased costs of labor plus fencing, water development, and other capital improvements to make the management of a deer/cattle operation possible. Remember, fencing

needs to allow for control of the cattle while allowing free movement of the deer.

Fifth, will the land, labor, capital, and management resources available support the change? This is the final step. If the resources can't support a change, so be it. However, going through this process may also help improve your current management. Evaluating your management goals and objectives with results every few years is a good way to insure the operation is performing in an efficient, ecological, environmentally, and economically friendly manner.

Want to look at the references? Go to www.grassbydesign.com/tda.htm

Next time, Carrying Capacity and Stocking Rate - What Are They? 

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