

Ten Tips Taylored for Successful Talks with Landowners in Ranching and Range Management Landscapes



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Abstract

Privately owned lands offer substantial land area that have the potential to contribute greatly to wildlife conservation. However, it is dubious for private landowners to engage in such programs that have not readily accepted their input. Given the future directions of wildlife conservation and needing to heavily integrate private lands into habitat objectives to meet wildlife population standards, it will be of growing importance to consider the needs and wants of private landowners to meet production goals and simultaneously wildlife habitat goals (and not the other way around). We recognize the important methodological research that has built foundations for current and future research practices; however, few practical offerings exist on how to effectively elicit qualitative data from private landowners. In this article, we propose ten tips as a starting point for those seeking to engage in qualitative interviews in rural communities as a way to increase efficiency in others' future studies. Our hope is that these ten tips help others in their own quest for qualitative data to help bridge the gap between livestock and range production, and wildlife management and conservation. In doing so, together we can continue to build effective knowledge to address future conservation programming that synergizes livestock production in conjunction with wildlife habitat.

Keywords: Range Management; Interviews; Ranching; Qualitative Research; Ranchers; Livestock; Conservation; Working Lands

Introduction

The human dimensions of wildlife management are becoming increasingly important as biologists aim to incorporate private lands habitats into conservation planning. In addition, as biologists pursue partnerships with private landowners in the greater realm of natural resource and wildlife management, it is imperative to integrate the wants and needs of private landowners. The importance of incorporating private landowners is likely to increase in the future as habitat continues to be lost to anthropomorphic development and climate change. Given the future direction of natural resource and wildlife management, including private landowner voices when developing future policies that emphasize wildlife and natural resource management through private land initiatives is likely to be critical moving forward. The success of a number of future funding opportunities (e.g., Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful [1] and Restoring America's Wildlife Act (RAWA; 2021, 2023), is likely to hinge on private landownership commitment, creating the need for qualitative research that will be extremely influential as we strive to find innovative solutions that focus on production

needs in conjunction with best management practices (BMPs) for wildlife conservation [2]. However, in the past, many of the recommended BMPs have focused simply on what is best for wildlife and natural resources, and have arguably often neglected the wants and needs of private landowners, and have overlooked the values of incorporating different stakeholder groups in order to achieve long-term and landscape-scale sustainability of such conservation initiatives. Because over 90% of the great plains and grassland dominated regions are primarily privately owned, it presents challenges for integrating wildlife or natural resource management objectives on contiguous, interconnected landscapes [3]. While the experience and ecological knowledge of natural resource and wildlife managers is valuable to contributing to preservation and conservation purposes, the role of working landscape knowledge from private landowners (i.e., farmers and ranchers) should of equal value and attention when considering the practical application of conservation programs [4]. Moreover, while quantitative methods certainly provide insight to advancing things like conservation program participation based primarily

on demographic factors, qualitative methods are ultimately needed to further understand the why and the how of rangeland livestock production managers', and give important insight about the status related to their current and future decision making about how they manage their operations and why [5]; [6]. Through taking this flipped, bottom-up approach to conservation by starting with private landowners instead of policy-makers, and building effective policy from the ground up using informed science, instead of letting policy trickle down from legislatures, the end result could ultimately lead to increased efficacy of programs with shared goals and visions between landowners and natural resource managers by creating partnerships that work toward shared common goals, and by increasing the diversity and inclusion of non-traditional decision makers [7]. In order to achieve the biological goals of wildlife and natural resource managers, we must understand more about the social wants and needs of private landowners in order to achieve maximum interest and optimum enrollment in working land and other conservation programs.

One example of such qualitative research is our current on-going study on grassland birds, and the impacts that different rotational grazing styles have on things like nest densities, nest success, and avian diversity within rotational grazing systems. Without the understanding of decision-making from privately operated ranchers in the region, our results from our biological study can only go so far in creating practical applications and miss the important other half of this partnership – the private working lands that can, and does, provide the majority of critical habitat to wildlife (especially grassland nesting birds) that are held in public trust [8]; [9]. Because every state in the great plains regions, from North Dakota to Texas, is over 90% privately owned [10], finding solutions that harmonize the wants and needs of private landowners with the wants and needs of wildlife and wildlife habitat is critical to the future of wildlife conservation and management. As such, we sought to bridge the gap in understanding what drives decisions as it relates to cattle rotations and other aspects of range livestock management. By integrating private landowners into the discussion, we can expand our reach about a conservation perspective from simply lands that we (as a public) can control and reach into private properties to encourage practices that benefit dual outcomes in livestock production and in wildlife and natural resource management [11]. While the results of our empirical research are forthcoming, we felt as if there was a need for us to share some of our areas of success in scheduling, coordinating, and implementing qualitative interviews. There is substantial research available that supports and discusses best practices for qualitative interviewing, however, few articles that offer up practical considerations for planning, traveling to, and conducting interviews with rural landowners and ranchers. In fact, there were painfully few guides in the scientific literature that we found valuable, and we believe that our experiences

provide the opportunity for others working in similar areas to learn from our trials and tribulations. As such, the purpose of this article is to provide tips, tricks, and advice to other researchers pursuing qualitative data collection within the ranching and/or range livestock ownership community. In the past year, we have had idealistic and romanticized plans on what this endeavor was going to look like, but we have also learned a great deal about what it means to try and recruit private landowners (and in our context, ranchers) for a one-hour interview. Below are ten insights that we have learned on our journey in hopes that others will be able to learn from our experiences and have a more successful research project based on the partnerships that they can develop as the result of our own mishaps along the way.

Study Context

Our research takes place in central North Dakota, and specifically within Burleigh, McLean, and Sheridan Counties. The population of these counties, excluding the capitol city of Bismarck (since our interviews focus on rural areas, we excluded the capitol city), is 35,859, which is less than 5% of the entire population of North Dakota. These counties lay within the Missouri Coteau and the Prairie Pothole region, two ecologically important regions for cattle ranching and for grassland bird (especially waterfowl) production. Our initial expectations were that many ranchers were full-time, and that summertime was when ranchers would have a heavy focus on their cattle operations, however, we quickly discovered the opposite. Many ranchers are working two or more jobs in the summer, and often take advantage of the long days to work off the ranch and focus their evenings on different aspects of the ranch (i.e., checking fences, moving cattle, etc.). Much of the travel in this region is dominated by gravel roads that experience only minimum routine maintenance (i.e. grading the gravel), especially during the winter months when the focus is primarily on state highways. Working in this relatively low population density area with minimally developed infrastructure across the landscape, we found that the sense of community is quite strong. People were generally pleasant and kind but could be a bit guarded with those whom they perceived as outsiders. But with time, patience, and effort we learned some things that helped us develop a sense of connection with members of the community who ultimately agreed to participate in our study. Once we earned their trust, we found them willing to provide deep, rich, meaningful, and insightful thoughts about the management of their operations [12]. The quality of the data from these interviews would be critical in assuring that landowner and manager voices are heard and incorporated into decisions that affect habitat and conservation management (e.g. natural resource and wildlife conservation programs and policies). These are voices and perspectives that may traditionally have been excluded from this decision-making process. This exclusion has historically led to feelings of animosity and tension between many landowners and natural resource or wildlife managers when it comes to dealing

with wildlife and conservation management. Below we share ten things we learned to help others overcome these challenges, and to ensure that the diverse and previously unheard perspectives of these folks are included in future decision making and policy implementations.

Tips for Effective Interviews

Tip 1: Seasonality & Weather

Be mindful of the time of the year, associated seasons, and what that entails from a ranching/rancher perspective. For example, here in North Dakota, ranchers are often calving primarily in March – April (though this ranges from January – May, depending on the rancher), so use caution when cold-calling and try to not call in the early mornings. Next, “springtime” means many different things: folks have cattle and calves they are tending to, many are riding through pastures and pasture cells to check gates and fences, while others are in transport mode to get cattle on pasture. Similarly, in July and August, folks are often out mowing and baling hay, which means they are often out in the tractor most of the day. Each of the aforementioned seasons will have weather that will likely impact travel in rural areas. In North Dakota, we have two things that we are great at: snow and wind, and the combination of the two can not only be frustrating, but also deadly. For example, we would recommend against suggesting to complete interviews later in the winter months, as wind can cause blowing snow and thus, can block access roads to ranches, and further, landowners become busy with snowplowing cattle wintering areas and their own yards. To combat this, we suggest scheduling interviews earlier in the winter when the snow hasn’t completely ruined roads, or early summer to avoid travel complications.

Tip 2: Know which questions will yield what information.

In open-ended questions, you would be surprised on how much overlap there is in drawing out answers from interviewees. It is better to have several overarching questions with room for probes [13] rather than multiple questions that overlap and fewer probes. When you ask open-ended questions, be aware that lead ins such as “Tell me more about...” will likely result in interviewees covering a lot of the demographic questions, so it’s unlikely that you will need multiple questions about “How long have you been ranching?”, and “How long have you been on this property?”, so consider condensing these (and listening) to responses. And on that note, asking about how many head of cattle a big “no-no” is. Many ranchers perceive that question to be the equivalent of asking to see their bank statement and this could be the difference between establishing your ticket into or being locked out of their circle of trust. Avoid pushback for this question by asking it more open-endedly, and if they don’t bring it up, then it might not be worth probing into unless it is absolutely necessary to your study objective. If you must ask this, consider asking at the end of your interview to avoid participants becoming hostile.

Tip 3: Know your terms and do your homework.

All cows are cattle, but not all cattle are cows. There is a difference in how you label cattle on the landscape. For example, all cows are female, but females that have not yet been bred are heifers. Similarly, young, immature bulls, that are reproductively in-tact are known as yearlings, whereas those that have been neutered are steers. This may seem relatively simple and unnecessary, but this will tell you more about the type of operation that the rancher may be running, and especially as it relates to annual events (yearlings don’t calve, so a rancher is unlikely to be tied up with calving responsibilities) if they are dealing with yearlings or heifers. Further, an increasingly important topic in the ranching community is the types of grass within pastures and cells. Being familiar with these grasses, both from a biological/ecological standpoint, as well as from a range health/cattle foraging aspect will help you understand more about a ranchers’ thought process and foraging goals/approaches. Knowing the terminology and using them appropriately gives you credibility and allows you to probe for insight and nuances that qualitative work is best at getting at. It also can help them know you care enough to learn and increase their openness with you.

Tip 4: Ranching is a lifestyle.

Previous research has identified that ranchers often ranch because the lifestyle [14]; [15]. There is a lot of passion in this community and they hold tightly to their beliefs. You may have some folks become teary eyed, and some may even shed a few tears when asked about their operation and how they got to where they did. It’s not because they are upset, it’s because they reflect on all the hardships they’ve encountered to get through the tough times. Getting to this point is an achievement, as it often means that the rancher is trusting of you, and to get to this point, it takes establishing rapport and building that relationship. Make sure you are genuine in your conversation and mirror the emotions that are being put out there; folks know when someone is being disingenuous and will keep you from extracting full, honest responses if they find you are not genuine, honest, or compassionate. Approaching interviews with the understanding that this is a very passionate line of work, and genuinely showing that you respect the way of life throughout the interview will help you demonstrate your understanding of and appreciation for the lifestyle, and show that you are not there to infringe on said lifestyle, nor judge the values of those who live it.

Tip 5: Texting as a method for initial and follow up contact.

If you are looking to get ahold of ranchers or landowners, keep in mind that many of these individuals often live in remote areas, and sometimes out of good cellphone reception. Be mindful of this, too, when selecting for in-person or telephone interviews, as dropped calls could frequently occur. In addition, many ranchers are working another job off of the ranch. That said, if you have tried

to reach out, and have tried leaving voicemails, you may consider sending them a text message. We would advise to identify yourself, what organization you are with, and the reason you are contacting them. Finally, welcome the opportunity to chat over the phone if/when they are available to clarify anything. If you must cold-call, consider calling in the evenings either before suppertime (around 5:30pm), or after 7pm when ranchers may have had a chance to get in the door and settle down from their day.

Tip 6: Image is everything.

Your reputation in the ranching community means a lot to individuals among the community, and your reputation will spread quickly and follow you around. Keep levelheaded and do not try and one-up people with stories unless they ask and prompt you about your experiences. Further, keep in mind how you dress to impress but know your audience. Showing up in a suit and tie is not going to be your way in, nor is a hoodie and sweatpants; whereas a nicer pair of jeans and a collared shirt and a firm handshake upon your arrival will speak volumes about your character. Look your participants in the eye too – that means a lot in this community.

Tip 7: Give compliments

Ranchers are extremely proud people and they are proud of what they have, what they do, who they are, etc. Providing them with a compliment will immediately establish a level of respect and trust. It also demonstrates to them that you are observant about their land, their operations, and them as a person – so make sure to keep this positive. If you are able to be around their farm or their ranch, or have seen their properties, find a way to compliment them (and be genuine about it!). Talk about how good (healthy) their cattle look, or how great their grass/pastures look. A little compliment can go a long way in establishing your rapport early in the interview process.

Tip 8: Don't get caught up in the Gossip.

Many ranchers will meet up with friends, colleagues, other ranchers, etc. at the local coffee spot, bar, whatever is nearby to sit and chat, and this is where rumors, or badmouthing, begins. Do not partake in spreading rumors, or names and criticisms of individuals. These are small communities and if someone's name slips out of your mouth, it will very likely come back and negatively affect you and your image. Even in non-interviews or more, more informal settings with ranchers where you may not be protected by IRB protocols, we would advise against such activities. Professionalism and high personal standards that demonstrate respect and courtesy are critical to your success in these communities.

Tip 9: Ask for a Recommendation or an Introduction (if possible).

While cold calls may eventually pay off, your name and contact information will circulate quicker if you have a foundational

contact within the ranching community. This is similar to snowball sampling [16]. Further, because these communities are rather tight knit, asking for a recommendation (with permission to name drop), or even asking for an introduction will make your time much more effective in contacting potential folks for interviews. To help get you off the ground, start with reaching out to foundational individuals in the community such as NRCS staff, Grazing Lands Coalitions, etc. They can be invaluable with providing names of potential folks to get you started and these folks are usually willing to help you out. At the end of interviews, you may also consider asking interviewees if they know of anyone else that may be interested in interviewing with you, and if possible, ask if they would be willing to share their contact information. We also suggest following up conversations with a "thank you" - a text, phone call, or card all work to show your appreciation for someone's valuable time.

Tip 10: Scheduling & Locating

Ranchers are busy individuals, and often must evaluate within a few days if a) they will be around and if they have free time, and b) if they have time to sit down and chat [17]. Things often come up relating to ranching activities, even if it's something like fixing the tractor, and this happens on short notice a lot (and automatically takes precedent over things like interviews), so planning an interview or meet-up over 3-4 days in advance does not usually work out in anyone's favor. Because of this, avoid long-term planning for specific interview days/times. Further, it may be most beneficial to spend time in the study area and make arrangements while in the area, versus trying to schedule too far in advance due to the uncertainty around daily on-farm chores, tasks, objectives, etc. The rural nature of working with private landowners in many of these places will likely end up in you being lost by asking for their physical address. Become familiar with your area, knowing major landmarks and features. Knowing the general lay of the land, and being familiar with state and county road systems will often be much more helpful than following a GPS.

Discussion

While in the past year we have had many successes in scheduling and conducting interviews, it has come at the cost of tripping over our own faults along the way. Our hope is that this article helps others pursuing qualitative research questions and objectives within the context of range livestock production across the United States. In broadening our understandings of the current practices and the opinions of private landowners, we could not only create more effective policy, but there is also the potential to create more appealing programs at the crux of production and conservation. Our tips above propose ideas that may seem simple but feel often overlooked during the whole research process. Things like weather, difficulties traveling in rural communities, do's and don'ts during the interview process, and contacting participants are all things that may be crucial to

the whole interview and qualitative research journey that often take trial and error to learn along the way. Our hope is that others will read this article and have time to adjust and account for these variables when considering things like how to contact landowners, how to conduct interviews, when to conduct interviews, and what to expect. In doing so, we hope that future research is able to be much more successful in achieving qualitative research objectives. In conclusion, the insights provided here offer practical considerations for conducting interviews, and we hope that this will help advance qualitative research and the outcomes it could provide for the future of range (grasslands) protection and conservation, livestock production, and wildlife conservation practices. Lastly, we hope that policymakers and managers recognize the amount of work that is put into collecting critical qualitative information from rural landowners and ranchers with the ultimate goal of helping advance the efficacy of conservation programs.

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