

AT HOME ON THE RANGE

For the second consecutive year, undergraduate scholars at Utah State University proved that they're very much at home on the range at the 2008 Society for Range Management meeting in Louisville, Ky. USU Range Club team members Casey Addy, Ashley Hansen and Katie Santini captured the Rangeland Cup, the top student prize at the international gathering of range scientists. USU won the inaugural cup in 2007.

"We're proud of our Range Club for its outstanding performance at the SRM conference," says Johan

du Toit, head of USU's Department of Wildland Resources. "The members are shining ambassadors for our department, college and university."

Mentored by Wildland Resources faculty member Chris Call, the USU group bested teams from throughout North America. The team received a plaque and a traveling trophy that will, once again, make its home in the College of Natural Resources.

The USU team's use of comprehensive case studies set them apart from their competitors, Call says.



“Our team was the only team to use case studies and bring the topic to life.”

Preparation for the undergraduate team problem-solving competition started in September 2007 when the SRM presented this year’s challenge to competitors: “What role does livestock grazing play in the long-term conservation of rangelands? What are the benefits and consequences of livestock grazing in this contemporary conservation-livestock production interface? Explain your answer using scientific literature and design an educational program to inform the public.”

“That’s a very broad topic,” says Santini, 2007-08 Natural Resources senator and a member of last year’s successful team. “I knew that we shouldn’t focus too much in a specific area. We needed to keep a broad approach.”

Early on, she says, team members concluded that they needed to develop case studies of Utah-based land managers who run livestock and are committed to the conservation of rangelands. The students made field trips to a family-owned ranch that spans Cache and Box Elder counties; the Nature Conservancy’s Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, and the Deseret Land and Livestock Ranch, a 200,000-acre cattle ranch near Woodruff, Utah, owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

“In each case study, the students highlighted livestock and conservation aspects, then focused on commonalities among the different operations, including stewardship, innovation, flexibility and profitability,” Call says. “They described an outreach education program that included a formal component – a middle school curriculum – and an informal component that included a Web site and a traveling exhibit.”

Call says a number of conference participants urged the USU students to further investigate ways to implement their educational outreach ideas. “That is an honor in itself,” he says.

“Our team had a sense of camaraderie and direction from the start,” he says. “Katie is a wildlife major, and Ashley and Casey are both conservation and restoration ecology majors.

They complemented each other in terms of skills, experience and knowledge.”

During the conference, student competitors presented posters of their approaches and defended their projects to anonymous judges mingling with the crowd during public sessions.

Team members agreed that they felt confident in their responses to queries about their project. They noted that their own professors at USU had challenged them with tougher questions prior to the event.

“We had a lot of help from our faculty,” says Hansen. “No one ever said ‘no’ to our requests. Ben Baldwin, Roger Banner, Fee Busby, Mark Brunson, John Malechek and others helped us a lot with the project.”

The team also praises the case study participants – the Selman family; USU alum Chris Brown, manager of Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve; and Rick Danvir, wildlife manager of Deseret Land and Livestock, for generously sharing their time and expertise.

“We had a tremendous support group willing to jump on board and help us,” Santini says.

During the Louisville conference, team members and other USU students participated in a variety of competitions, lectures and activities, including SRM’s “On-the-Spot” job interview program. Federal agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, conduct a four-day application process with graduating college students and recent graduates in which the agencies provide entry-level job offers to successful applicants.

“Utah State had a strong contingent at Louisville and I was delighted to learn that USU received the highest number of job offers out of all other universities participating in the On-the-Spot interviews,” du Toit says.

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