

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.” – Aristotle

From raising kids to raising grain, through holistic resource management practices, Don and Marie Ruzicka are now raising the bar in environmental stewardship and community excellence. Recipients of the 2008 Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration and Environment’s (PFRA&E) L.B. Thomson Conservation Award, the Ruzickas embrace the philosophy and deliver the results to show their long-standing commitment to the advocacy of improved soil and water conservation.

For the past 21 years, the L.B. Thomson Conservation Award’s Alumni Committee has come together to salute modern day soil and water preservation pioneers and practitioners. The accolade is named in honour of Leonard Baden (L.B.) Thomson, Director General of PFRA (1948-56), who was one in a group of soil and crops specialists who played an integral role in developing and promoting soil conservation practices that managed wind erosion during the 1930s.

To be considered for the respected award, candidates must fulfill the nomination criterion, which may include a major on-farm breakthrough or innovation contributing to soil or water conservation; or a long-standing commitment to the advocacy of improved soil or water conservation practices; or a long-standing personal commitment to soil and water conservation practices; or lastly, a scientific breakthrough generally recognized as a major step forward in the advancement of soil or water conservation practices.

The Ruzickas own and operate an 800-acre ranch in the County of Flagstaff. They purchased the farm in 1983, which has been in Don’s family since 1909, and ran it as a conventional grain and cattle farm for 13 years. In 1995, they enrolled in a Holistic Resource Management course, which prompted them to rethink the way they managed their operation. Holistic refers to the approach of looking at the whole system rather than just concentrating on individual components. As a result, they began to focus on rebuilding the landscape from an environmental perspective – a change which included managed grazing.

“If we don’t manage our pastures properly, then pretty soon we’re going to graze ourselves out of a living,” says Don.

Today, the Ruzickas custom - graze yearlings on their farm. They take in about 250 head for spring and summer grazing, with cattle numbers and length of grazing managed to match the plant production of each grazing season. Cattle are rotated once daily to ensure even grazing and rest

for their pastures. Off-site watering is used on all pastures to preserve water quality and the natural vegetation buffering the water sources. Even ephemeral sloughs are fenced to protect the important role they play in groundwater recharge.

With an established free range hog and poultry operation, the Ruzicka's use moveable pens designed to reduce soil disturbance and increase nutrient return to help build the soil. Without being strictly organic Don and Marie strive to raise healthy animals for healthy food. They market their locally-prepared meat and poultry through a network of like-minded consumers. This helps reinforce the link from the consumer to the producer and to the environment – a link the Ruzickas feel is essential for the long-term support of stewardship.

The benefits of the holistic management approach include the obvious environmental benefits, but also increase the economic advantages, including reduced costs, enhanced profits, improved economic viability for organics production, and better food security.

"I guess what I really enjoy about the way we farm is that it's not totally dependant on agriculture. It's really fun and a real challenge when nature can throw different things at you," says Don.

The Ruzicka's stewardship began with a comprehensive tree planting program back in the early 80s when they started a tree planting program with the trees coming from the PFRA&E shelterbelt program. The trees offer shelter for the cattle and buildings and provide homes for many of the local wildlife year round. Today, this program has resulted in nearly 35,000 shelterbelt trees being planted since 2003. If a person were to line up these trees in a single row, it would extend more than 35 kilometres!

The theme for the Ruzicka's farm is "stewardship of the land," which means "take from the land, but put something back into the land or even more than you take out." In 1996, Don and Marie started to make changes. As far back as 1989, they noticed the western Meadowlark was no longer on the farm; over grazing of pastures had destroyed their habitat. Following a change in pasture management in 2000, they noticed a return of the Meadowlark, as well as the arrival of the Sprague's Pipit. A biologist from Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta told the Ruzickas that new habitants act like barometers – nature's way of telling them that what they were doing was right.

The Ruzickas have installed some 150 Blue Bird boxes throughout their farm, which have provided homes for generations of various bird species. Over the past five years, there has been an increase

of 16 species of birds on the farm. The birds are an indicator of a much greater treasure trove of plants, small animals, insects and unknown critters that make a healthy landscape.

Having a healthy and resilient environment with its own checks and balances is a real advantage for the Ruzickas. Case and point: their bird population will help ensure grasshoppers will not devastate the farm, and they are confident that their healthy insect population includes pollinators that will maintain the plant life.

Don and Marie have had two riparian health assessments completed by the Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society (also known as Cows and Fish). Don attributes the improvements of the land by their current grazing methods and use of a portable solar powered watering system to pump water to the cattle. Before the Ruzicka's first assessment was complete, Don felt the land was in a state of "illness," with the "I" in illness being what "I" (Don) had done to the land.

Today, with the assessment being very good, Don says his land is in a state of "wellness," with the "we" in wellness being all the partners he has had to help turn the farm around. Over the past 10 years or so, Don has fenced off many riparian areas which benefit both wildlife and his farming operation by providing a bank for forage in times of drought and habitat for wildlife.

While many farmers may view the holistic approach as a labour intensive and physically strenuous method of operation, the Ruzicka's embraced the opportunity to be accountable to the environment, the earth's systems and all creation. In fact, their entire property reflects holistic thinking and innovation.

In 2001, the Ruzickas built a New England-style dovetail timber cabin which has encouraged the development of eco-tourism, allowing artists, bird watchers, naturalists, writers and many others to enjoy the sights and smells of nature at their residence. They also welcome grazing schools, other producers, agriculture post-secondary students and countless others – sharing their knowledge and vision as a way of giving back to the community and sector.

In addition to their community-oriented marketing, Don chairs the Iron Creek watershed Improvement Society and in 2008 he was elected as a board member of the Parkland Conservation Farm. Don and Marie are also members of the GO Organic Association of Alberta. Their accolades extend a country mile wide. In 2001, they received the Farm Family Award for Flagstaff County, the Excellence in Grazing Management Award (2003) from the Society for Range Management,

were honoured with the Countryside Canada Award (2004) from Habitat Stewardship Canada, and in 2007 received the Environmental Stewardship Award from Growing Alberta.

With their farmstead clearly an indicator of their beliefs and values, the Ruzickas encourage farmers to think beyond their own operations and recognize that we work in an eco-system and watershed, and if we work together, the impact will be greater. The Ruzicka's have stepped out to create benchmarks in their community. They went against the conventional grain, took risks, embraced opportunities and continue to think outside of the box.

For more information on the L.B. Thomson Award, e-mail lbthomson@agr.gc.ca.