ARGENTINA’S TRANSFORMING CATTLE RANCHER: A POLITICAL ECONOMIC LOOK AT INSTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

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ARGENTINA’S TRANSFORMING CATTLE RANCHER: A POLITICAL ECONOMIC LOOK AT INSTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Argentina’s Transforming Cattle Rancher: A Political Economic Look at Instability and Resilience

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Like cattle ranchers around the world, ranchers in Argentina must manage a variety of shifting and unpredictable pressures. Ranchers have little control over environmental, economic, or political forces, but must find ways to deal with them as such forces can greatly affect production. Despite a long history in Argentina and significant influence over much of the national culture, ranching has faced many stresses through the last decade that have led to changes in the activity and in land use in general. Considering the fact that ranching has persisted in Argentina despite strong challenges, this thesis asks two main questions – how and why? Semi-structured interviews with ranch owners across three regions of Argentina were conducted to better understand exactly what changes have been made to ranch operations, how such changes align with ranchers’ goals, and how ranchers identify with their livelihood. Because the main frustrations of ranchers are instability and unpredictability, mostly concerning national agropastoral policies, research participants focused on resilience and the ability to deal with unexpected shifts in policy or weather. Results show that “professionalization” and diversification play major roles in reducing vulnerability to stresses, but that a family’s land may be the most valuable factor in creating a sense of security. The qualitative nature of this research is intended to paint a more nuanced picture of cattle ranching as the complex and volatile livelihood that it is, and ultimately should help inform future ranching and agricultural policies.
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Finally, the only reason I am able to live this life I love in the first place is my family. From an early age I have been encouraged to follow my dreams, and my family has only made it easier for me to reach them. I am truly fortunate to have them in my life.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Ranching is like a myth in Argentina,” Aldo Roman (a pseudonym, as are all names throughout this thesis) told me as we sat down to eat at the deli of a Buenos Aires service station; the last place I would have ever expected to be interviewing ranchers. He explained that many people, both within the country and around the world, have an idea of what cattle ranching is in Argentina, but that most perceptions are antiquated or incomplete. As the manager of a relatively large family-owned agribusiness, Aldo has been very involved in both ranching and agriculture for the last several years and has witnessed immense change in both sectors. Born in a small rural town in Argentina, he earned an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and now lives and works in downtown Buenos Aires. “You would never be able to tell what my work is”, he told me with his fluent but unpracticed English during one of our talks, “because I am on the phone all day making plans, checking taxes, discussing…what to do, what to buy.” Despite the fact that he says he is criticized because he does not spend much time on the ranch, Aldo exemplifies the new and changing ranching culture of Argentina.

It is easy to understand how cattle ranching has acquired mythical attributes. The activity played a major role in opening up the frontier in the early centuries, well before Independence from Spain. Most of the first significant industries were all based on cattle products (the exception is silver which can be argued as the first major industry in South America, although Argentina served merely as a port to ship ore back to Europe), and helped make Argentina’s economy one of the strongest in the world during the 1800’s and early 1900’s. Additionally, for much of the twentieth century no country consumed more beef – many years reaching over 90 kilos (almost 200 lbs) per person. Today, however, other agricultural industries are becoming increasingly more prominent than ranching and the title of largest beef consumer was recently lost to neighboring Uruguay as consumption continues to trend downward. Despite this, the iconic image of yesterday’s cattle rancher still resonates strongly in the minds and hearts of Argentines.
My goal with this thesis is to offer a description of contemporary cattle ranchers that might contribute to de-mystifying their public image. Rather than continuing to view ranching as static and uncomplicated, creating a greater understanding about what present day ranching is and what it is not will allow the dialogue surrounding the activity to increase its focus on the challenges that ranching faces and potential solutions to them. To do this, much attention will be paid to the factors that influence ranching practices. A major question, therefore, is how ranchers are maintaining their ranching operations within the current political and economic environment. I will consider rancher perspectives from three regions of the country, each which offers distinct options to those who are using the land, so that a more complete picture of ranching in the country can be drawn. I hope to show the range of perspectives concerning methods of coping with challenges and the way that ranchers are changing their management strategies to be better suited to face the unknown future.

What follows in this introduction is a brief history of cattle ranching in Argentina and how political-economic factors have influenced its development. I outline some changes that have occurred in the past and introduce some ideas that continue to be relevant today. The second chapter will elaborate on the questions that this thesis seeks answers to and my rationale for asking them. I explain that, due to so many obstacles to production, I focus not only on how ranching is continuing in Argentina, but also why. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in this research, further elaborating on this chapter’s description of the three sites selected for fieldwork and providing details of interviews. The major findings of the work are laid out in Chapter Four, while Chapter Five provides some discussion as to their larger meanings for ranchers.

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF RANCHING AND LAND OWNERSHIP IN ARGENTINA**

Cattle ranching in South America had its start with the very first Europeans to arrive in the 1500’s. The Spanish colonizers that explored and settled the Rio de la Plata brought cattle with them, though containing them was difficult, and as more animals arrived in the following years most were left to populate the surrounding grasslands on their own. Until the early eighteenth century, however, the silver trade was the primary economic activity of the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata – the region that would become much of Argentina –
making Buenos Aires a major port for ships carrying Bolivian mined silver back to Europe. At this time, the most important cattle-based products were those that could be exported to Europe, which limited trade to hides and leather, tallow, and salted beef. All of these products came from “hunting” feral cows (ganados criollos) on periodic ventures into the interior. As numbers of cattle dwindled and expeditions deeper into the interior in search of additional herds were dangerous due to conflicts with indigenous communities, an effort was made to control and manage the animals remaining in the grasslands near Buenos Aires.

By the 1750’s, large estancias (ranches, or landed properties) with growing cattle herds were becoming common around Buenos Aires; increasing the supply of hides and helping the city’s economy develop. Still without the technology to fence in vast areas of land, estancias were typically areas of high quality pasture bordered by rivers or other barriers where exploitation of the herds could at least be more rationally managed. While the cattle on the estancias were now privately owned, the land itself was still primarily controlled by the Spanish monarch. Elite members of society were given usufruct rights of the pastures and water in the areas, which were often tens of thousands of acres in size. Enough land to accommodate and feed herds was, according to Martin de Moussy in the 1850’s, the most important condition for an estancia to profit; high quality pastures and access to water were also key factors (cited in Amaral 1998). By the time of independence from Spain in 1816, many had found these conditions as far away as 200 miles from the city of Buenos Aires; however, land tenure followed much the same system as during the colonial period. Argentina’s first president, Bernardo Rivadavia, instituted the Law of Emphyteusis, which granted long-term usufruct rights to state-owned land, so long as users paid the proper taxes. The inability to properly assess land values or even collect taxes, however, allowed producers to use the land virtually rent-free. This enticed many urban inhabitants to submit claims on land and begin their own ranching operations. The law also failed to limit the amount of land that could be claimed, creating a situation where millions of acres were consolidated among only a few users (Rock 1987).

Further benefiting ranching at this time was the lack of competition for land from agriculture. Most people were reluctant to use land for crops because of the fact that it required much more labor and produced few or no exports. Nearly all farming was intended to sustain consumers in Buenos Aires and because transporting goods was expensive, most
agricultural plots were limited to the outskirts of the city. Cattle ranchers, however, faced much competition for resources from sheep ranchers. High demand for wool made the activity very enticing and for several decades it became the country’s main export, surpassing hides and salted beef. By the end of the 1880’s, prices for wool had dropped due in part to the now stable United States and a reliable substitute in cotton. With land prices rising around Buenos Aires, it became difficult for sheep ranchers to make profits and they were pushed further to the interior. They relocated to the pampa semi-árida, the region covering southern Córdoba province and reaching into the provinces of Buenos Aires, La Pampa, and San Luis (Figure 1). Although considered a much more marginal area for livestock than the region they previously occupied, the pampa humeda, it was sufficient for sheep grazing and rents were much lower. The pampa humeda, the country’s most fertile lands in northern to central Buenos Aires province and southern Entre Rios and Santa Fe provinces, was now available for the increasingly profitable activities of cattle ranching and wheat production.

As the frontier was pushed forward by General Rosas’ Conquista del Desierto (Conquest of the Wilderness) in 1879, opening up 175,000 square miles of rangeland, ranchers, both ovine and bovine, moved in to settle the newly habitable areas of the center and south of the country. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the government sped up the process of making public lands available to individuals in order to persuade European immigrants to enter the country, rather than the United States or Canada, and to help pay off debts incurred through the military expeditions into the frontier and much earlier against Paraguay and Brazil. Although some immigrant colonies were established that provided parcels of land to new residents, most land had to be purchased. The availability of bank loans greatly assisted in this process, however, most loans were given to those who already owned land and could offer it as collateral. This further concentrated land in the hands of the wealthy and made it increasingly difficult for both immigrants and native citizens to move from an urban to a rural livelihood.

After a brief period of rapid expansion of wheat crops in 1893, cattle ranching once again regained its position as the most productive economic activity in the country by the second decade of the new century – this time in the frozen beef market. Before 1900, exports were limited to salted beef and live cattle despite the fact that refrigerated ships, however
Figure 1. Location of the fertile *Pampa Humeda* (Hu) and the drier *Pampa Semi-Árida* (SA).

primitive, had been in use as early as 1879. As domestic demand for beef grew – and the exportable surplus diminished – in the United States, Britain and much of Europe were forced to find trade partners elsewhere. Argentina filled that void, and by 1910 had surpassed the United States as a beef exporter. Ranchers were able to meet the increase in demand by experimenting with higher quality pastures and cattle breeds. By World War I, Shorthorn and Hereford cattle had all but completely replaced the *Criollo* stock, and most were at least fattened on introduced alfalfa. Additionally, ranching as a whole was reorganized to allow specialization in different aspects of ranching and for land to be used more efficiently. Ranchers realized that the breeding of calves did not require such high quality pastures and so began setting up *cria* (breeding) operations in the *pampa semi-árida*, again displacing sheep ranchers, this time south to Patagonia. When calves were ready, they were sent to the
pampa humeda to gain weight (engordar) on lush natural grasses and protein-rich alfalfa. Taking advantage of two distinct ecosystems to divide the practices associated with ranching, breeding and fattening, would lead to dramatic changes in rural Argentina. From this point forward, not only would ranching practices remain more or less divided and specialized but the land itself would experience simultaneous changes as owners tried to foster the necessary conditions on their ranches that would allow new methods to reach them.

Although the beef industry never really experienced long periods without conflict, either internal or with the government (see next section), the practice of ranching continued relatively unchanged throughout much of the early and mid 1900’s. By the second half of the century, fattening operations became more common in the pampa semi-árida because there was much less competition from agriculture than in the pampa humeda and fodder crops had already reached the region to allow efficient fattening of animals. By the 1960’s, the entire cycle (both breeding and fattening, or ciclo completo) would once again take place side by side in the Pampa region, though still in separate pastures. In other areas of the country where introduced grains had not yet arrived, however, they remained primarily focused on the breeding of calves to be transported elsewhere for more efficient fattening. There was also a very significant development during this time which would continue well into the new millennium. The electric wire fence greatly helped ranch operations because it can be rather easily put into place or moved and has proven very effective in controlling herds. By the 1980’s, the use of electric fencing was common to divide large fields into smaller lots. This practice allows landowners to make decisions based on 50-60 hectare plots, rather than 200, and to manage their herds more intensively by rotating groups of animals through carefully monitored pastures.

The 1990’s saw the beginning of much more dramatic changes to production systems and landscapes. Not only did the use of chemical fertilizers and heavy agricultural machinery greatly increase due to liberal trade policies which made importing easy (Chudnovsky and Lopez 2005), but the first genetically modified commercial crops reached Argentina in 1996 (Trigo 2011). By 2004, glyphosate-resistant soy and Bt corn accounted for nearly 100% of those crops. Interestingly, only the United States has consistently planted more area with genetically modified crops than Argentina (Lence 2010). Although these introductions greatly sped up the transition of ranchland to cropland, it was new political-economic
conditions after 2000 that really made commodity agriculture attractive to landowners. Up to this point, many ranches maintained strong breeding and fattening operations, though this would change as producers looked for ways to open up additional areas for agriculture. In the Pampa zone, the solution came by moving away from breeding and significantly intensifying fattening practices. Being able to purchase calves from outside the region allows many ranchers to maintain some beef production through fattening while at the same time using much of their land for crops such as soya (soy) or maíz (corn).

As expected, these changes led to a decrease in the nation’s herd size. In fact, in 2007 the nation’s herd was an estimated 10 million head less than it was in the mid-1970’s, though production was relatively equal because the fall in stock was offset by increased yield of meat per animal due to improved selective breeding techniques and better management practices (Canosa et al. 2009). Thus, the transition continued to favor agriculture and by 2005 it became the primary use of land in both the pampa semi-árida and the pampa humeda, as well as the focus of most businesses in the region. While herd sizes in certain provinces continued to decrease, however, ranchers in other provinces that did not see a rise in agriculture increased their breeding operations to supply feedlots and make up the difference. Between 1994 and 2007, for example, the herd size in Buenos Aires province decreased by 6.3% and by 31.0% in Córdoba province, while the provinces of Chaco and Corrientes saw herds grow by 25.6% and 13.1%, respectively (Iglesias and Ghezan 2010). Therefore, after an initial strong fall, the country’s herd has been relatively stable around 55 million head, save for a few years of intense drought and high government regulation (Table 1).

**Historical Role of the Government in Cattle Ranching**

Despite its reputation and relatively consistent production, ranching in Argentina has not been without its challenges. The sector has a long history of conflict with other sectors of the beef industry (i.e. slaughterers and packinghouses), with other rural and non-rural industries, urban consumers, and, most importantly, with the national government. In fact, even before independence and the development of a strong beef trade was there disagreement between ranchers and the government over taxes and regulation of the hide trade (Amaral 1998).
Table 1. National Herd Size for Selected Years between 1994 - 2009 and Distribution by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (%)</th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pampa</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patagonia</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (Heads)</td>
<td>54,794,960</td>
<td>52,960,512</td>
<td>54,164,896</td>
<td>54,349,907</td>
<td>55,545,942</td>
<td>55,738,658</td>
<td>54,429,911</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the conflicts among the various sectors of the growing beef industry of the early 20th century are very interesting (see Smith 1969, also Rifkin 1992 for a comparison with the U.S. beef industry), what is most relevant for this thesis is the role that the State has had in the evolution of ranching in Argentina. Because the national government was virtually invisible from ranching matters for much of the country’s history, the early beef industry – and politics concerning it – was dominated by the largest ranchers and foreign owned packinghouses (Smith 1969). Government involvement started to become an issue during World War I when demand for beef in Europe rapidly increased. The resulting relative prosperity for the beef industry (both producers and packers) in Argentina discouraged the government from any sort of intervention; however, the focus on exports greatly decreased the domestic supply of beef, thereby increasing its price and putting it out of reach for much of the population. Despite the fact that significant intervention never manifested during or following World War I, a debate concerning the proper amount of government involvement in ranching was started, and would continue into the next century.

In the years following the Great Depression, beef was still difficult for most to purchase as its price rose even more sharply than the relative cost of living in Buenos Aires. Although over seventy percent of the country’s total beef production at the time ended up in domestic markets, local consumers still had little power in voicing their concerns. It became evident to many that the welfare of the producers was more important to the State than that of the consumers, and that the interests of the two were inherently opposed. The rise of Juan Perón as Minister of Labor in 1943 and President in 1946, however, caused a near complete reversal of the role of the government. Although he did little to directly affect ranchers and other rural producers, he is significant for changing the discourse of the government to become much more concerned with the needs of the majority lower class than those of the middle and upper classes. Perón focused on urban development and promoted industries that would provide jobs, all the while describing agropastoral producers as inferior and backward. Political power, rather than simply economic strength, was now used to resolve conflicts and Perón’s support of the urban masses helped them become the dominant political force. As Smith (1969:241) states, “Like the politics of almost everything else, the politics of beef entered a new era when Perón came onto the scene”. Today, the political party that Perón created, the Partido Justicialista, remains the most significant in the country.
The first significant regulation of the beef trade occurred when the government of Nestor Kirchner halted exports for a period of 180 days in 2006. Kirchner, a member of the Justicialist Party, was responding to a drought-caused shortage in beef and was attempting to maintain enough of a supply to prevent domestic prices from skyrocketing. Similar policies have been put in place nearly every year since; and though they have been much less drastic, they have all limited the amount of beef that could leave the country to higher paying markets. The ranchers’ response, undoubtedly also influenced by potential profits with agricultural crops, was to simply produce fewer cattle, further decreasing a national herd that was already devastated by intense drought. The overall effect of such restrictionist policies was merely the intensification of the hurdles to ranching with little benefit to domestic beef prices. Indeed, a 2007 United States Department of Agriculture report stated that the success of Argentina’s ranching industry is dependent on “how rapidly institutional rigidities can be overcome” (Mathews and Vandeveer 2007:11).

Government intervention in agropastoral industries came to a forefront in 2008. President Christina Fernández de Kirchner attempted to raise export taxes on soy beans from 35 to 44 percent in order to generate revenue from rising world prices. In protest, farmers blockaded highways with their tractors causing food shortages in the city. The four-month long protest, referred to simply as La Crisis, was ended when the Argentine Senate finally rejected the proposal by a vote of 37-36, Vice-President Julio Cobos making the deciding vote. Although the proposed tax hike was only designed to affect certain producers, the events of La Crisis are significant because they brought together producers from several sectors to make a public statement against the government’s involvement in agropastoral production. Furthermore, the dialogue surrounding intervention was now reignited, albeit with landowners now on the defensive.

**SETTING OF THE FIELDWORK**

While a more detailed description of the fieldwork locations will be presented in Chapter 3, some information will be helpful before attempting to understand the questions of this research and its primary objectives. An initial picture of the regions where fieldwork was conducted is provided below, followed by a brief look at the range of characteristics of the ranches that are considered in the work.
Discussion of Sites

Interviews for this thesis were conducted in three major cattle producing zones of Argentina (see Figure 2). It should be remembered that even the smallest ranches can be nearly one hundred hectares in size, creating rather expansive research sites that can be up to 100,000 square kilometers. Despite the potential distances between them, I have grouped ranches into single zones as they exhibit similar characteristics; specifically the degree of participation in various activities and the environmental pressures they face. Of course, as will be evident, each zone has its exceptions and outliers, though their experience only helps to illustrate the distinct approaches to similar conditions.

![Figure 2. Map of Argentina showing the three research sites; the Pampa Zone (1), Río Salado Zone (2), and the Corrientes Zone (3).](image)

**Pampa Site**

In what one might call the very center of the country, the first zone spans much of the border between Córdoba and La Pampa provinces, and reaches into western Buenos Aires province. This region, what I will call the Pampa site, is typical of the *pampa semi-árida*. The
weather throughout this region is extremely dynamic; it is not uncommon to experience thunderstorms, intense heat, strong winds, and hail all within a couple of days. This zone receives the least amount of rainfall of the three sites considered in this thesis – an average of 700 mm of rainfall each year, with most of that coming between November and March (about 100 mm per month). Even in the rainy months, however, rain comes in sudden downpours and little remains in the sandy soils. In an area without irrigation or another reliable source of agricultural water, the main issue becomes conserving ground water by not disturbing the surface soils when planting crops. To get around this, most crops are planted using *siembra directa* (zero-tillage) techniques. The stalks and remains from previous harvests are left in the field to decompose and create a top layer of protection for the soil beneath. Planting machines then till into this layer to place seeds without putting any risk on the soil, or the precious water within it.

Until such techniques were well understood and became common in the early 1990’s, land use in the area was limited to extensive livestock grazing; first sheep, then cattle, as was the case with much of the *pampa semi-árida*. Today, ranches throughout this zone are characterized by a strong presence of commodity agriculture (primarily soy and corn, but also wheat, peanuts, and some sunflower) with cattle playing a much smaller position than has historically been the case. Although a few producers here have been able to maintain a strong ranching operation, just this limited area has seen its herd decrease by an estimated 200,000 head from a recent high in early 2003 (Jorge Lasta, personal communication, November 11, 2011). The most notable change in ranching practices has been a shift to specialize in fattening in confined feeding corrals from the semi-intensive breeding and fattening of just a decade earlier. Such intensive feeding methods have allowed ranching to remain an important activity in this zone while not consuming much land that, at least today, is more valuable for agriculture.

**RÍO SALADO SITE**

The second zone spreads from the outskirts of the nation’s capital to the center of the province of Buenos Aires. Although many would consider the area part of the *pampa humeda*, this part of the province has not been overtaken by commodity agriculture as has the northern part of the province. The main factor preventing agriculture here is, as in the Pampa
site, water; however, unlike the Pampa site, it is seasonal flooding that presents the major challenge. The zone receives an average of over 900 mm of rainfall per year, though since much of this region is at a low elevation and lies within the drainage basin of the Río Salado, much of it becomes marsh during the rainy season (October-March). The few ranches that are fortunate enough to have scattered hills on their property may be able to do a few hectares of agriculture, though because it is such a small amount it is often used only as a supplement to cattle feed.

Instead, the focus here remains primarily on the breeding and preparation of calves to be fattened elsewhere, as it has been for several generations. The Río Salado, running through the center of the province, was one of the first frontiers in the country. As the spread of estancias pushed the frontier further south in the 1820’s, towns were also created by the waves of people, mostly immigrants, looking to also take advantage of the available land. What originated as small rural settlements, the towns of Tandil and Azul today have populations of 110,000 and 65,000 people, respectively, and continue to grow as increasing numbers of families are choosing a more tranquil lifestyle over the hustle of Buenos Aires city. While nothing compared to the metropolis of the capital, both towns are significantly larger than any in the other two research zones. Of course, not every person in the region manages or works on a ranch and a number of other industries have been developed to support growing populations.

Simply because agriculture is not possible, though, does not mean that there has not been a change in practice. Many producers in this region have modernized and intensified to a similar degree as ranchers in the Pampa site. Although a few super-intensive feedlot operations do exist, intensification has mostly been achieved through the use of improved rotations with introduced crops.

**CORRIENTES SITE**

The third zone is situated in central Corrientes province, in the north east of the country. Despite its distance from the fertile lands of the pampas and the auction houses of Buenos Aires, this region boasts a pastoral history as long as any other in the country. The province was significant early in Argentina’s history as a location for Jesuit missions and for the native textiles and tobacco that were produced there, as well as hides from criollo cattle.
Following independence and for much of the nineteenth century, the province became the centerpiece of domestic and international disputes, which left the region relatively isolated from the growth occurring in other provinces at the time (Rock 1987).

Today, the economy of the province continues to be dominated by rural activities. Here, the primary agricultural crops are rice and yerba mate, with soy and corn playing a much less significant role. Cattle ranching, however, is by far the most common use of land in the entire province. The reason for this is not that Corrientes produces an extreme amount of cattle but that most are still grazed extensively. The fact that ranching still dominates and the way it is practiced cause many to describe the region as “traditional” or “different”.

As ambiguous as those words may be, there are some aspects of central Corrientes that set it apart from the other two zones. One is the vegetation. On first impressions, gazing out the window of a bus as it passed ranch after ranch, was that the land was not dominated by soy. In fact, it seems as though much of it has hardly ever been developed at all. Tall, tough-looking grasses scattered with chañar (Geoffroea decorticans) and guayaibi (Patagonula americana) trees was more reminiscent of the African Savanna than the rangeland I had anticipated. In this seemingly natural setting, cattle graze alongside sheep and horses in expansive pastures as competition for feed is not considered an issue. The cattle themselves are also visibly different, as even the untrained eye would notice the variety of colors, horn sizes, dewlaps and shoulder humps throughout the herds. Here, in the hot and humid subtropical northeast, the purebred Aberdeen Angus and Herefords do not do as well as those cross-bred with Indian Brahmans or Texas Longhorns, giving most herds a much more heterogeneous appearance.

Although this area gets more rain than most other parts of the country, an average of over 1,100 mm per year, commodity agriculture has still not been able to gain much importance with producers. Most ranchers are focused on breeding calves to send south for fattening, creating little demand for grains. The high costs of transporting grains by truck to ports in Rosario or Buenos Aires also make agriculture unappealing. The one crop that has created a niche in Corrientes is rice. Although no other province dedicates more land for rice, production remains limited to those who have or can create the required reservoir. Even those with the infrastructure in place seldom produce to their full potential.
Description of Ranches

There are two characteristics that all the ranches in this study, regardless of location, have in common. The first, as it was the main criterion for participation, is the maintenance of a cattle herd that contributes to national beef production. While ranchers may support a hundred animals or several thousand, engage in breeding or fattening (or both), or view ranching as the primary or secondary focus of their business, for one reason or another they have continued to raise cattle in Argentina during a time that has not been particularly favorable for the activity.

The second common characteristic is that all participating ranches are family owned and relatively small-scale operations. The once large estancias of hundreds of thousands of hectares have all but disappeared in Argentina as they have been divided through the generations into several smaller ranches among those descendents who rightfully have a claim to it. Today, by far the greatest part of agropastoral production in the country is done on farms of between 200 and 2,000 hectares. The last several decades in Argentina have, however, witnessed the rise of several large agricultural firms, some of them multinational. Though these firms may be family owned and managed, the main difference between them and the ranches that I worked with is that they have a much more corporate structure and often employ dozens of people who are not relatives, especially in positions of management. While these mega-firms may individually own only several thousand hectares, they often manage several hundred thousand that they acquire by renting from those families who want to get out of the agropastoral business for a while but do not want to sell their land. This is not to say that smaller scale family ranches do not view their operation as a business – an increasing majority of them certainly do – although the structure of the business is much simpler. In fact, the trend among most family operations is to incorporate their business, which will be described in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Other than these two characteristics, participants were quite varied. The amount of land that owners in this study managed ranged from 160 hectares to over 20,000 hectares, with the average being around 2,000. The total of any producer’s land may be concentrated on a single location or made up of several campos throughout the region (for the purposes of this thesis campo can serve as a synonym for ranch or farm, though there may be various meanings depending on the context), this being simply because that is where plots of land
could be acquired or because they offer conditions that are more suitable to certain activities. Additionally, some participants also rented anywhere from 200 to 4000 hectares in order to expand their operation or, though not as common, owners may rent or contract out a portion of their own land to others for various reasons.

Every campo is at least a 20-60 minute drive outside of the nearest towns, which has led a majority of producers to opt to live in town and travel to their ranch when needed; at least several times per week, if not every day. It is much simpler for them to live near their friends and family, schools for their children, supermarkets, and to hire an encargado (caretaker, ranch manager) to live at the ranch and watch over things than it is for the entire family to feel distant from everything they need in town. Of the 19 ranchers who participated in this research, only three can be considered to live at their campo while another two split time between their ranch and an apartment in town or in Buenos Aires; only one of these five families, however, has young children to consider, although they do live relatively near town. In fact, it is not uncommon for those producers with land in Buenos Aires province to live with their families up to 400 kilometers away in the capital city, but spend several days a week on the ranch.

The history of the land and families associated with each campo also varies. At least one participant in each zone purchased their land themselves, something that occurs less and less frequently in Argentina today; although they all had history in the campo or with ranching before they acquired the land. Most land, however, has been passed down through three or more generations to reach its current owners. In the past, the common practice was to divide the property among those with a share in it and each could do as they pleased with their part. Due to generations of divisions, ranchers realized that the plots their children would inherit were becoming too small for viable agropastoral activities. Today, owners of a ranch are frequently several siblings or cousins who have decided to not divide the land and maintain the larger scale of production. Several siblings may end up managing the ranch together, although, at least for this sample, it is more common for one sibling to be selected as manager and to be responsible for all day to day decisions concerning the business.
CHAPTER 2

ORIENTATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

In this chapter I would like to clearly outline the focus of this research project. The first section focuses on the research questions and why I have decided to pay particular attention to them. The following section is a discussion of the literature that was used to design and support the research questions. It is included as a separate section in order to refrain from over-complicating the description of the questions and to allow for a more in-depth discussion to take place. Lastly, several of the potential benefits of this work are presented.

QUESTIONS AND EXPECTED ANSWERS

Cattle ranchers in nearly every part of the world must deal with a variety of fluctuating and unpredictable pressures. For one, ranchers are intimately connected to their physical environments and as such are very susceptible to unpredictable shifts away from normal ecological patterns. Even if consistently presented with an adequate supply of important natural resources, such a strong reliance on them means that the potential for serious disaster is almost always looming. In addition to ecological pressures, many ranchers are presented with social and economic challenges, such as a decreased demand for bovine products or sudden price swings. Technological advances may make other industries more profitable and allow them to encroach on ranch land, thereby increasing competition for key resources. Lastly, there are many political forces that act on ranchers and strongly influence the practices or even the viability of a ranching operation.

Argentina is not immune to such challenges. In fact, between about 2006 and 2010, ranchers in Argentina were facing many of these pressures all at once. Dealing with so many complex and multifaceted issues has rapidly altered the activity of cattle ranching and of land use in general. The fact that ranching has persisted through these changes leads me to ask two questions – how and why? These two, seemingly very simple, questions will be the focus of this research. They seek to understand the changes that have occurred to allow cattle
ranching to remain a viable economic activity but also why ranchers have elected to make them in the first place and not just give up on ranching altogether. These questions are purposefully broad because the research is focused on exploring the lives of ranchers in Argentina, rather than attempting to prove or disprove certain hypotheses.

While this project was designed to be fluid and adaptable to participants’ responses, I did arrive in Argentina with a number of more specific questions to guide interviews and certain expectations as to what I would find. First, what changes have Argentine ranchers made to their ranching practices in response to the several major pressures of recent years? It seemed likely that ranch operations would be rapidly improving due to the use of more modern technology and management practices. Developments such as confined feeding lots and specialized veterinary services would allow ranchers to produce more beef in less time and compensate for disturbances through larger economies of scale. I further expected to encounter ranchers who were becoming increasingly involved in commodity agriculture, notably soy. I knew that, although much of the land that many ranchers in this study now employ was once considered too marginal, introduced technology and farming methods were rapidly promoting the spread of commodity crops outside of traditionally agricultural areas. Having other activities would help ranchers supplement their income from ranching, especially when beef export restrictions are high.

Second, how do any changes made by ranchers align with their goals and expectations for the future? Here, I was seeking to understand the explanations behind ranchers’ decisions through exploring the relationships between certain changes and what they offered the business and family. Simply put, to fully appreciate the decisions made by ranchers today, it is necessary to know what they desire for tomorrow. Recognizing the processes that influence landowners’ responses to pressures will help paint a more detailed picture of how ranchers perceive their livelihoods and serve as an important step to finding ways to balance production and regulation.

Lastly, how do cattle ranchers in Argentina identify with their livelihood and does any diversity among them or recent changes affect this identity? With the variety of ranching lifestyles that have developed due to the introduction of innovative strategies and access to other crops or technologies, it may not be a surprise to find out that the boundaries characterizing rancher identity have shifted. How do those who no longer fit the traditional
mold of an Argentine cattle rancher – the owner who spends more time in the city, the manager who devotes more land to soy production, or the land renters – identify as cattle ranchers, and what degree of consensus exists regarding that identity. While I was not prepared to assume how ranchers defined themselves, before fieldwork I did anticipate that certain factors would make identification as a rancher enticing and would also make changes to practices more difficult. I suspected, for example, that the strong cultural role that beef and ranching play in the country might make it difficult for one to decrease their ranching operation in favor of agriculture or even alter ranching practices in a way that produces a distinct beef product. Family histories and traditions also were expected to add to the reluctance to modify land use practices. Getting started in intensive agriculture, for example, can be complicated for a ranch manager when the land has always been used for extensive cattle grazing – even investing in a feedlot operation, while still beef production, may seem like a complete reversal of the family’s tradition and pride. I thought this sentiment to be strong enough that even a failing ranch might avoid such changes despite the clear benefits that they may bring.

**WHY CATTLE RANCHERS?**

It should not be assumed that cattle ranchers are the only individuals whose livelihoods are deeply connected to ecological, social, and political forces that present them with challenges. Agricultural producers too, for example, are equally susceptible to the negative effects of droughts, pests, decreased consumer demand, or discriminatory government policies just to name a few. So why, then, focus on cattle ranchers?

There are two reasons why ranching in Argentina presents an interesting situation for analysis. First, as has already been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, cattle and beef have a long history in the country and continue to have a particularly strong significance on its culture and society in general. This is an activity that is rather important to many Argentines, whether they are involved in it somehow or not. Due to this context of beef production, the questions and findings of this thesis should be important not only to ranchers or land owners, but also to policy makers and urban consumers. The second factor – which, I think, serves to underscore the first – is that cattle ranching as a whole is currently experiencing dramatic changes. Regardless of the pressures or reasons leading to such serious transformations, the
simple fact that changes are taking place provides an interesting avenue for anthropological research. Answers to my research questions will provide a better understanding of these changes and, hopefully, contribute to beneficial outcomes of them for those involved. In any event, lessons are learned from change and, with proper analysis, they can be applied to similar situations to make transitions easier.

**Supporting Literature**

A fundamental argument for the approach of this study is highlighted in Nathan Sayre’s (2004) article in which he points to the need for qualitative research when trying to understand ranching practices. This diverges from traditional ranching research which frequently focuses on the biophysical elements and often views ranchers solely as rational, profit-oriented actors. A more in-depth view of ranch practices and rancher livelihoods will show that many factors play a large role in the decision-making and management processes. As much work comes from disciplines that have not typically employed ethnographic methods, this can be a difficult task for many, though it is becoming widely recognized as an important part of research. The geographers Smith and Martin (1972:224), for example, comment that for their work with rancher communities in the southwest United States they “must take an almost anthropological view of the communities’ inhabitants in order to examine the detailed interactions involved.”

In order to understand the “detailed interactions” encompassing a ranching livelihood, this project employs a political economy framework to identify some of the major forces affecting ranch operations and describe how they are interpreted by ranchers. Broadly speaking, political economy can be described as the “study of the formation of anthropological subjects within complex fields of social, economic, political, cultural power” (Roseberry 2002:61). This framework is perfectly suited for this research because it maintains the focus on identifying how phenomena such as global economics and national politics influence the behavior of cattle ranchers. For this project, insights gained from this perspective support an analysis of the challenges that ranchers face, and in understanding how ranchers overcome them, offer explanations as to why ranchers do what they do.

In addition to identifying how political-economic forces shape ranch operations, further analysis considers the interactions that ranchers and their families have with the
natural environment. For this, political ecology is the most valuable framework. Like political economy, political ecology addresses the influences of larger processes of power, though its emphasis is on how those relationships leave their mark on the land. Reducing a situation to simply economic forces simplifies the reality of it and keeps researchers from being able to recognize other factors affecting the land and natural resources (Bryant 1992).

Political ecology also serves to examine the conflicts surrounding natural resource use. Brogden and Greenberg (2003), for example, highlight the difficulties that communities face in balancing economic interests and environmental values, and note the added pressures that globalization and emergent properties have on local environments.

It should be noted that while land use patterns are an integral focus of this research, ecological assessments have not been carried out. As a result, the project might be subject to Vayda and Walters’s (1999) criticism of political ecology work for over-emphasizing the political aspects of environmental change and downplaying the ecology. Although those authors do not discredit the role of political factors in leading to environmental change, they advocate research that begins with an analysis of the actual changes occurring to the ecology rather than a priori perceptions. Others have refuted this argument (Robbins 2004; Watts 2003). With them, this thesis maintains its claim to the use of political ecology, rather than simply political economy. Similar to McCabe’s (2004:241) rationale for considering his research as political ecology, this research “attempt[s] to understand the use of land and natural resources from more than just an ecological perspective”. Additionally, it will show that ecological elements can compound the effects of politics and history on contemporary people. In any case, ecological conditions and concerns will play a large role in understanding the perceptions that ranchers have of their land and the changes they make in their operations.

An excellent example of combining all of the above concepts is Perramond’s (2010) work with Mexican ranchers. His analysis is useful for this research as he often describes ranchers’ efforts to maintain their ranching identity in the face of pressures associated with beef markets, globalization, and national agropastoral policies. Specifically, he mentions the diversification of activities, especially into non-agricultural sectors, as a way for ranchers to decrease their vulnerability to local, regional, and global price shocks. By being able to rely on non-pastoral income, ranching families can feel more comfortable in their ranching
endeavors. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of ethnographic research by making a number of conclusions that would not be possible without such a framework. The conclusions – recommendations designed to improve development practices on ranches and in surrounding communities – are a perfect example of how an applied researcher may use the insights they have gained to assist a group of people.

While the amount of literature on cattle ranching that pertains specifically to Argentina is small, some highly relevant and supportive research does exist. One of the earliest analyses of beef production and the political relations that surround cattle ranching can be found in *Politics and Beef in Argentina: Patterns of conflict and change* (Smith 1969). Although somewhat dated, the work provides an illustration of the processes that have shaped beef producers, government economic policy, and consumer lifestyles in Argentina. Although the sentiment may be changing, Smith (1969:2) identifies how influential cattle ranching was when he states that “as the beef industry goes…so goes the Argentine nation”. As *Politics and Beef* gives insight into the challenges facing the beef industry from as early as the 18th century, the book clearly demonstrates that such issues have been prominent for much of Argentina’s history. One issue introduced in the book, and that is still figuring in political/economic debates in the country today, is how large (or small) of a role the state should have in attempting to regulate the beef trade. We learn that since intervention really began in earnest in the 1940s, most policies have been designed to protect the domestic consumer at the expense of the rancher.

Rossi and Kagatsume (2009) address the need to analyze the relationships that occur between restrictionist policies and beef production. They conclude that although export restrictions may reduce domestic prices in the short term, eventually they will lead to decreased beef production and subsequent inflationary consequences on the economy. While inflation continues to be a confusing and problematic issue in Argentina, the national herd has not yet faced much of a total decline, though only three years removed from their work’s publication date. A more important prediction of theirs, however, is that in the absence of export restrictions both foreign and domestic markets could be satisfied. Initially, domestic supply would decrease and domestic prices increases, though both would soon level off as increased profits from the export market encourages ranchers to increase the size of their herd.
One objective of this thesis is to reinforce the idea that ranchers are not simply passive participants of changing circumstances, but actively respond through appropriate management practices. Herd dynamics, for example, will shift greatly with the ups and downs of market prices for beef. Jarvis (1974) has shown that ranchers’ tendency to slow slaughter rates during times of high prices is not an irrational misunderstanding of economic principles, but rather anticipation for future demand. He demonstrated that in a situation where price increases were viewed as permanent, ranchers sacrificed short-term for long-term profits by retaining rather than slaughtering adult cows, which increased the size of future herds. Additionally, Jarvis (1974) also states that policy needs to account for this forward-looking behavior of ranch managers and cease seeing cattle ranching as an industry that slaughters a predetermined number of cattle each year.

An important look at the changing lives of Argentina’s agricultural producers is presented by Carla Gras (2009). Her article Changing Patterns in Family Farming: The Case of the Pampa Region, Argentina shows how the increases in agricultural crops, notably soy, have caused many family farms that cannot compete with larger operations to rent out their land rather than sell it off. By choosing to move off of their higher quality land and live in a less desirable (agriculturally speaking) area, agriculturalists are forced to expand the range of their economic activities to more non-agrarian tasks. This allows farmers to leave the hectic and unpredictable life of an agricultural producer, and do so without giving up ownership of their land. This situation illustrates that land is no longer a symbol of power as it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries but is now merely a productive resource.

Finally, studies examining the role of government policies in agropastoral and rural issues have also helped to orient this research. Cattle ranchers are not the only group in Argentina who must deal with taxes and regulation. In fact, Lence (2010) identifies Argentina as the country that discriminates more against all producers than any other country. Despite the fact that Argentina’s comparative advantage clearly lies in agriculture and not manufacturing, policies have consistently transferred resources from the former to the latter – mostly in the form of export taxes. As an example, taxes paid through agriculture and directly related activities were 40% of total taxes collected by the government between 1997 and 2001, and more than 45% between 2002-2005. Lence’s research also shows that since the 1940’s discrimination is strongest when world commodity prices rise. Fulginiti and
Perrin (1990) likewise demonstrate that Argentina’s agricultural sector has been more or less sluggish since the 1940s due to government policies that raised input prices and lowered output prices for most producers. They suggest that had policies such as export taxes, import restrictions, and currency overvaluation been eliminated, the decades between 1940 and 1980 would have seen agricultural growth rather than stagnation. Interestingly, they view beef producers as one of the groups which have been most successful in keeping export taxes low, though they fail to expand on this.

**Significance of the Research**

This work has the potential to be of benefit to several groups of people. The rancher, for example, will likely experience the greatest advantage as the research was designed with him/her in mind. Although it is my hope that this research will lead to economic and political advantages, the greatest benefit for the rancher will probably be social. As described in the thesis’s opening anecdote, many people in Argentina are unfamiliar with what a ranching livelihood entails and frequently hold strong opinions based on their incorrect perceptions. Both by presenting ranchers in what I hope is an easily understandable way and at the same time showing the complex contexts in which they work, a more accurate picture of ranching will be available to those who are disconnected from the activity and have few other ways of gaining the information. Challenging the dominant (at least in urban settings) rhetoric and altering general perceptions concerning ranching may be the most valuable thing for ranchers right now as a shift in social attitudes may lead to more positive and longer lasting political-economic change.

Second may be the politician who is involved with developing policies that affect not only ranchers but all rural families and agropastoral producers. Having a more in-depth understanding of ranchers’ lives and what they want for the future will, hopefully, lead to more informed policies that combine different interests in a more appropriate manner. It cannot be assumed that this will make a politician’s life any easier, but it may help them better predict the outcome of their work and achieve greater success. Additionally, more efficient work on the political side may translate into more satisfied producers and beef consumers.
Third is the academic researcher, who will be able to apply the results of this research, which is grounded in specific communities in specific geographic locations, to a wide range of studies. Aside from those working with ranchers this research will be relevant to discussions involving agricultural producers or other natural resource users. Behind every activity – from timber harvesting to coal mining to fishing – there are families and entire communities that rely on that activity to make a living. Understanding the human aspect of any activity will highlight the place that that livelihood has in the greater society. In this way, this thesis will also be of interest to those who study Argentine political-economic history. Even without focusing on cattle ranching, illustrating the position taken by the government on this issue and the perspectives of a portion of the population will supplement the literature on Argentine Studies. This situation also presents an interesting case of how people respond to and deal with their governments, which should be of interest to political science or economic research.

**WHY ANTHROPOLOGY IS RELEVANT**

The aspect of anthropology that sets it apart from so many other social science fields is the attention it gives to the range of human experiences. Anthropology understands that within each community are numerous human actors, each with their own way of interpreting the world around them. Any analysis that attempts to describe a group of people without acknowledging this fact will remain incomplete. Not only is anthropology concerned with all of these stories, but it endeavors to reach a depth of each that allows it to intimately understand an actor’s behaviors and motivations so that meaningful analysis can take place.

This is especially important for communities that tend to be underrepresented or misrepresented. Anthropologists have the opportunity to paint a community in a different light than how others may more commonly view them because of the intimate knowledge they acquire through ethnographic fieldwork. For anthropologists, this has typically been the powerless, poor, or other marginalized people within a society which are those most in need of special representation. Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry (2007) clearly describe the reasoning behind this phenomenon:

People who are thrust to the outskirts of institutional power…will have an entirely different set of concerns, cultural representations, and collective processes than will people who live at the center of political and economic power and who are
certain that their interests are being attended to by the state, their welfare is deemed valuable, and they have allies in the institutional structures that surround them. (54)

While not necessarily the group that is typically considered marginalized, ranchers are also frequently misrepresented and discriminated against. In many regions around the world, landowners are often viewed as the epitome of a privileged and wealthy class, and when attached to an unfavorable rhetoric they can quickly become the “bad guys” (Bobrow-Strain 2007). Thus, although ranchers in Argentina are relatively wealthy by local standards and play a major role in the country’s economy, they are marginalized due to a pervasive attitude of landowners as the elite. While Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007:55) may not have had landowners in mind, the circumstances here can help to illustrate “more clearly than usual how feeling and action are remade by social imagery and political strategies”.

Unfortunately, few around the world, including anthropologists, have come to recognize this point. The result is a large body of research that focuses on pastoralists, agriculturalists, or other natural resource users, though with little work focused on what are considered the elite or upper classes (Bobrow-Strain 2007). Much has been written, for example, about the challenges and risk management strategies of nomadic pastoralists, while modern professional ranchers get much less attention in academic literature despite the fact that they too face many of the same difficulties. Fortunately, this is slowly changing and the complexities of cosmopolitan ranching are starting to be acknowledged by researchers such as Sayre (2004) and Smith and Martin (1972), cited earlier in this chapter.

Using an anthropological approach and theory, this research will provide an alternate description of Argentine ranchers than that commonly available within the country. By talking with ranchers and seeing where they live and work, I was able to gain an intimate perspective of their livelihood; a perspective that revealed their frustrations, fears, and goals. It is this perspective that will allow this work to contribute to discussions involving ranchers and their livelihoods.
Though the majority of the fieldwork for this research – including all interviews – for was conducted in Argentina between October 2011 and January 2012, it benefited greatly from several earlier visits. It could be said that the initial idea for this thesis was realized in 2008 when a several month trip to Argentina revealed to me the significance that rural issues play in not only politics but the life of nearly every Argentine, whether urban or rural, as well. The 2008 conflict between the national government and the agricultural sector showed that there seemed to be a dire need for an applied sociocultural anthropologist who might help make sense of the situation and offer some recommendations that may lead to better relations between both sides. Some four years later, I relied on what I had observed during la Crisis to direct conversations with research participants. As I was never able to directly discuss the then-current events with producers during the Crisis itself, formal fieldwork provided the opportunity to gain insights and perceptions from the rural side of the conflict. Understanding producers’ experiences during the Crisis, their level of participation and how they may have been affected, and their interpretations of the results provided further insight into how government intervention and political-economic forces are viewed within the sector.

An additional trip was made in January 2011 to get reacquainted with the current events of the country. Nearly three years had passed since agricultural trucks and machinery blocked major highways and feverish demonstrations had erupted in Buenos Aires, and while I was able to follow much of the goings on through international news sources, I was still on another continent and felt quite removed from the details of the debate and the individual perspectives of the people. I began to formulate research questions based on my perceptions, but before I went any further I felt that it was important to return to Argentina and familiarize myself with more current sentiments on the still contentious relationship between the government and agropastoral producers. Though it was a short trip, I was able to visit one ranch and speak with several agropastoral professionals about my ideas. From what I learned
by taking this step closer to the actual producers with whom I wanted to work, I was able to modify my research questions in a way that allow me to better understand ranchers’ livelihoods and investigate an important theme that many ranchers feel lacks social research. Lastly, another objective of this trip was to make contacts who could serve as local correspondents after I left the country again and could connect me with potential research participants when the time came. These people proved invaluable as they helped me understand many of the general practices of ranchers and were the source of numerous subsequent informants.

Upon identifying my research goals, it seemed clear that interviews would form the bulk of fieldwork. I wanted to engage directly with participants in a way that would promote meaningful and personal responses. Without such, I did not think it would be possible to understand their perspectives and position as cattle ranchers. Semi-structured interviews would let me focus on certain aspects that interested me but also remain receptive to themes that participants themselves viewed as important.

SITE SELECTION

Due to the pervasiveness of cattle ranching in Argentina, it was deemed important to examine and compare ranching practices in several regions of the country in an effort to create a more comprehensive picture of ranchers’ lives. The original plan of this work was to focus on the Pampa and Río Salado regions to examine the relationship between shifts in ranching practices and rancher identity. These two locations were chosen as they represent different aspects of the ranching sector and different proximities to the capital city, both of which were expected to contribute to differences in how ranchers perceive their own lives. After a number of interviews from both of these locations, several participants recommended that I include the third zone of Central Corrientes. The incorporation of this area, along with a better understanding of the other two areas, offered the possibility to examine three areas exhibiting various degrees of agropastoral development and differing ecological conditions.

The Pampa zone, in the center of the country, is the area that has experienced the most dramatic change in land use practices among the three sites involved in this research – possibly even throughout all of Argentina. As recently as the mid-1990s, as much as 80% of productive land in the area was used for both the breeding and fattening of steers. Today,
most producers in the region use less than 15% of their land for ranching activities; the
turning point coming around 2005 as a result of the introduction of improved technologies
for crops such as corn and soy and also favorable market conditions for agriculture (or rather,
unfavorable conditions for beef). Says Pampa rancher Sergio D’Antoni: “This is why it is
such an important transition, because six years ago the amount of land used for agriculture
was less than half, maybe 30-40% of the total area. Not only in the land either, but also the
focus of the business. Today, the principal focus of the business is agriculture” (S. D’Antoni
unpublished interview, November 9, 2011).

The other two locations, in contrast, do not experience anything close to this degree
of commodity agriculture. Ranchers in the Río Salado zone do rely heavily on agriculture,
though the crops they plant are destined to support their own herd rather than be sold.
Rotational grazing in small plots of introduced pastures such as sorghum, alfalfa, ray grass,
and clover have allowed ranchers in this area to intensify in their own right and greatly speed
up the process of getting calves and steers to desired weights. Correntino (from Corrientes
province) ranchers use even less introduced pastures, preferring instead natural grasses for
extensively grazing their cattle.

Some comments about the physical characteristics of each zone and the impact they
have on potential activities must also be made. The most notable difference among the three
zones is that of rainfall. The subtropical provinces of the northeast receive more rain than
other parts of the country, an average of over 1,100 mm per year, while the more mild
climates around the Río Salado and Pampa sites average significantly less at 950 mm and
716 mm, respectively. Precipitation, however, is not the only factor that varies according to
location. In fact, most land owners might say that it is only one of two ecological factors that
are important when deciding how to use their land, the other being soil. A major worry of
producers in the pampa semi-árida, for example, is conservation of ground water because the
sandy and porous soils do not hold much. This is the reason why intensive agriculture was
nearly non-existent in the region before zero-tillage techniques became well understood in
the area and allowed plowing without breaking the surface soil. According to Ekboir and
Parellada (2002), zero-tillage, or siembra directa, techniques have presented the most
significant technological innovation in Argentina in the last 50 years. In an area without
irrigation or other reliable water sources, it becomes vital to not disturb soils so that the little
water that remains can be used and not lost to evapotranspiration. Many managers must diligently keep watch over their pastures because the smallest area uncovered by weather, trampling by cattle, or development can rapidly turn into a large worthless dune. The only remedy is to refrain from using those areas that show signs of damage for several years so as to let the natural vegetation resettle and protect the soil (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Left, a sand dune makes a field unusable because it must be left undisturbed to allow protective vegetation to grow back. Right, cattle reenter a pasture that had been closed off several years prior because it was nothing more than sand.](image)

Much of central Buenos Aires province, on the other hand, has a very different problem. During the summer rainy months, the low lying Río Salado basin is susceptible to frequent flooding. Farms such as Ana Belgrano’s, in nearly the exact center of the province, can only engage in agriculture if they are lucky enough to have small hills on their property that provide at least a few hectares of usable land when much of the surrounding fields turn to marsh. The fact that the soils become so saturated that much of the area cannot support more than natural vegetation or the hardiest of introduced grasses, limits Ana and many of the area’s ranchers to only breeding cattle. “It’s crazy. There are many limitations” explained Ana’s son, Leo, “but they are very good for cattle ranching. To breed! To breed, but not for fattening” (A. Belgrano unpublished interview, November 16, 2011). Without the help of other certain introduced feeds, such as alfalfa, fattening is simply not efficient enough to be profitable in the region.

Central Corrientes offers a slightly different situation. While many informants identified high temperatures and inconsistent rain as primary factors limiting agriculture, poor soils are also seen as problematic. The main complaint regarding soil, however, is that it
is generally very hard and deprived of the nutrients and minerals needed for intensive agriculture. Unlike other provinces that have longer histories of agriculture and developing the land, the soil of Corrientes is still “virgin land that needs to be worked first” (I. de la Garza unpublished interview, January 3, 2012). This process is occurring, though slowly because it is very difficult for producers to invest so much in their land when they are not sure of the outcomes. At the same time, producers are unsure as to what they would do with large amounts of grain. There is very little use for them in the region and transportation costs to other provinces are too high to consider at the moment. Until there is infrastructure in place that would make selling and exporting their products easier, agriculture will likely not play a large role in Corrientes’s economy. For this reason, extensive breeding operations dominate the area, with rice production being the only minor agricultural activity when landowners can build a reservoir to store large amounts of water.

It should be remembered that these regions span potentially hundreds of square kilometers, so it should be expected that the characteristics mentioned are not uniform throughout the area and do not affect every land owner equally. For example, not every Pampa ranch is incapacitated by médanos (sand dunes), nor does every Río Salado ranch enjoy high ground on which to grow soy or corn. The examples given here simply serve to illustrate the predominant environmental challenges of each area. Therefore, what may be a problem or limitation to one rancher may not be an issue for another. Either through years of working on the land or with ground surveys and home technologies most land owners are aware of the nuances of their land and take such information into account when planning their activities, keeping in mind that some land is most productive when left untouched.

The spectrum presented by these three regions allows for suitable comparison because each continues to be a major contributor to Argentine beef production, albeit at different degrees. Additionally, ranches in each region range in size from small to intermediate to large. Therefore, the use of these sites offers the opportunity not only to understand cattle ranching across Argentina, but also how the perceptions and practices of ranching relate to ranch size. While ranchers of specific characteristics were not exactly sought for participation, a sample created simply through the recommendations of previous participants proved sufficient at including both small and large land owners. At each location, an initial participant would also double as principal contact for the area; suggesting
potential interview partners and providing some general background information of their zone.

**DETAILS OF INTERVIEWS**

One of the most frustrating things about working with agropastoral producers is the fact that they are, for the most part, very busy people. Even with the help of other contacts who could establish meeting times well in advance, many interviews had to be rescheduled or cancelled due to last minute conflicts. Many participants also had cell phones that rang repeatedly during interviews with issues that demanded immediate answers or they were distracted because they were simultaneously playing the role of parent. That said, many interviews were done rather spur of the moment or impromptu at the risk of not finding another suitable time to talk; for example, in a truck while driving with a producer to and from their campo, at the nearest gas station service center during a quick lunch break, in a hotel lobby, or at a café or pub at the end of the day. For the most part, working under these types of circumstances did not negatively affect the conversation as the length and depth of information gleaned from each is equal to that of any other interview. In fact, in many of these more spontaneous situations, ranchers would invite me to accompany them in their daily on and off farm activities and provide a window into their lives that is difficult to obtain in an hour long interview. Additionally, I was able to take equally helpful field notes for these interviews and obtain a useful recording for all but one. For the most part, however, the interviews were organized in advance and conducted in the comfort and privacy of either a participant’s home/ranch house or office.

Original plans called for participants to be the current owners of the land or business – and indeed many were – although there are a number of situations where actual ownership does not fall with a single person or may be in transition between a man and his son-in-law, for example. Therefore, in the few occasions where a participant was not officially an owner, they were the sons/daughters, sons-in-law, or nephews of owners and have already taken over a majority of the management duties. Regardless, all participants were comfortable discussing land and family histories, ranch operations, and projections for the future of the business. Also, with one exception, if more than one person was present during an interview they were solely those involved in managing the ranch (e.g. husband and wife owners, two
brothers, uncle and 18-year old nephew), and never in the presence of other ranchers. Though I highly doubt that responses or results of a conversation would have been any different had other producers been around, this privacy helped assure that participants could be comfortable responding freely.

Interviews were frequently started by asking the rancher to discuss his/her own history in the activity and how they came to manage the land that they now use. Beginning with these topics made people comfortable with the format of the interview and helped with the flow of the conversation as other topics such as management strategies, changes, and the future naturally developed from them. In this way, interviews themselves typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, although there was always much conversation before and after.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

In addition to the semi-structured interviews that formed the basis of fieldwork, simple observation added to and reinforced what participants discussed with me. Even meeting ranchers in downtown Buenos Aires, and without ever setting foot on their campo, was a beneficial experience for me and informed my understanding of their lives as ranchers. Of course, most ranchers are not only ranchers. They are parents and grandparents. They are amateur photographers. They are runners. They are erudite, and accumulate huge libraries. A number of participants even have day jobs or other investments off the ranch which demand a large part of their time. There is more to their lives than simply ranching and agriculture, and while these aspects may or may not have been brought up in interviews, seeing evidence of them gave me a better understanding of the role that they play in an individual’s life.

A common theme of conversations, for example, was family. It was very evident that many producers want their land to support their children into adulthood regardless of whether they plan to be involved in the family business or not. Watching ranchers rush from the campo to their son’s school play or discussing the whereabouts of a daughter with their partner, however, was when I was really able to see them in another role rather than that of a rancher or business manager. Additionally, many ranchers were not shy in showing me the files, spreadsheets, and diagrams that they create and save in order to manage their business. These proved to me that although they may live a hundred kilometers from the ranch and
visit it only every other week, owners were still very involved with ranch activities and viewed them with a businesslike attitude.

On-ranch observations were also important in supplementing more formal interviews. When visiting a campo, I was interested in seeing firsthand the changes that have occurred in their operation. If interviews were taking place on the ranch, for example, many participants would pause in the middle of describing some aspect of their work and ask me if I would not rather just see “it”. By accompanying producers with their daily tasks, I witnessed the knowledge they hold as they looked over the animals, crops, or infrastructure; something that is more difficult to gain from a conversation. Lastly, where possible, I talked with some of the ranch workers to understand, briefly, what their role on the ranch is and how they feel about it. Many were also able to provide some additional insight about the changes that the land has gone through. Being able to visit ranches in all three field sites also allowed me to see for myself what the landscape was like and to get a feel for the environment many owners described to me.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The following sections present some of the most significant themes that emerged from interviews with ranchers. One details how ranching practices have changed and why. Another discusses the changing family life of many ranchers. The last addresses the importance of the land and how ranchers are finding ways to maintain ownership of it.

CHANGING RANCHING PRACTICES

What is revealed most clearly from this research is that a majority of cattle ranchers in Argentina feel as though they are living in a time of great insecurity. While the ecological, technological, and economic forces discussed in the introductory chapter play a large part in this and should not be ignored, it is the political factors that cause ranchers the most frustration. There is an understanding of pressures such as drought and even market shifts as “natural” and, therefore, something that is simply a part of their lives. Government intervention, on the other hand, is viewed more as an intentionally produced force that only serves to compound the instability and uncertainty that ranchers already face.

The principal issue with the government’s increased regulation is not so much that it may lead to lower prices or decreased consumption, but that it is erratic and makes it impossible for ranchers to plan for the long-term. For Argentine ranchers, the expected and normal uncertainty that they must deal with from the environment and markets is made all the more severe by government intervention that frequently shifts tax rates and access to markets. Beef export quotas often increase and decrease with little notice, dramatically changing the situation for ranchers who were expecting a different scenario for their animals at the time of slaughter or auction. Even opening access to markets is not always viewed as a positive for ranchers because even if they are prepared to take advantage of selling more animals, the larger supply stimulated by open markets often brings lower prices at the time of auction. Thus, most must simply sell the same quantity for a lower price. At Sergio D’Antoni’s ranch one day, I brought up the news that I had read the day before about beef
markets opening up for more exports which I naively expected him to be excited about. His indifference struck me, although it made sense after he explained that the increase would not last long and soon return to its normally low level. For him, it was not worth rushing his calves to put on weight and transforming the composition of his herd when he viewed the opening as a short-term occurrence. In this regard, being conservative may be a better option than over-producing and not being able to sell your product.

Another Pampa landowner, Javier Rios, echoed Sergio’s sentiments:

The government makes announcements that it is going to open exports, but they are only announcements. They never open them. So what happens? You always have this idea, but…tricks! How are you going to plan if you only have estimated prices? On top of these prices, that don’t yet exist, you have to subtract 25% because that goes to the government, or 35% for soy. (J. Rios unpublished interview, November 11, 2011)

Ranchers have clearly been misled before, and have been stuck with the consequences of not being able to properly organize their herds and crops for markets. It should be obvious that this presents a major problem for an activity that requires several years for a return on an investment. A newborn calf, for example, can take up to two years to reach the appropriate weight for slaughter or three years until further breeding will take place, all the while needing feed and taking up space on the ranch. It is difficult for ranchers to properly manage their herd if they are unsure as to how much they will be able to earn from the calves that they invested in. Will they be able to fetch a price that will cover their input costs and earn them at least a small profit? Will they be able to sell as many animals as they need or be limited to selling only part of their available herd? Of course, no producer, regardless of the industry, knows this information for certain when planning their activities and so is constantly faced with the uncertainty of the future and the eternal question of how to best move forward. For Argentine producers, the somewhat normal uncertainty is made more severe by the unpredictability of government intervention. As a result of this uncertainty and instability, changes are being seen in ranchers’ lives, both on and off the farm.

**Diversification**

The response of many ranchers to the increased unpredictability of recent years is to broaden their operation to include non-ranching activities that will, hopefully, provide them with a more reliable income throughout the year. For many, diversification comes in the form
of commodity agriculture, especially soy and corn in the Pampa zone and rice in Corrientes. High profits and less regulated markets have helped make the decision to use more land for agriculture an easy one for landowners, especially because the beef industry was simultaneously becoming much less appealing due to decreasing profits and increasingly unpredictable regulation.

The encroachment of agriculture is most easily seen in the Pampa zone where, in just a short time, soy and corn have come to dominate the landscape. When soy was first introduced to the area, as late as 2002, less than 20% of land was used for agriculture – most of it corn and sunflower. Today, one finds the complete opposite. Most producers report that 80-90% of their land is being used for soy and corn production (sunflower has nearly disappeared) and extensive grazing like that of the previous decade is much less common. Because ranchers can rather easily purchase calves for fattening from other areas, many have moved away from breeding their own and once again creating a strong geographical separation between the two aspects of cattle ranching – breeding and fattening – although a number of breeding operations still remain throughout the Pampa region.

Despite this new dynamic, many ranchers still maintain a small herd simply in order to remain diversified and adaptable. They understand that even though soy may be a more stable investment economically, it is also more vulnerable to drought, which can be severe in the Pampa zone. Cattle tend to handle dry spells much better than soy or corn and so provide some comfort for producers against the ever-looming possibility of inadequate rains. This way, should the region experience an extended period of time of below average rainfall, as occurred between 2008-2010, resulting in lower than expected harvests, even a small cattle herd can be sold to counteract some of the losses. In fact, a number of participants discussed their plans to actually increase the size of their herd to represent something closer to 50% of their business. Hernán Alameda, for example, is the manager of an agropastoral business in the Pampa region that is trying to do just this. In 2002, Hernán’s father had decided to sell the herd and focus the family business on intensive agriculture so that within five years nearly the family’s entire 650 hectare plot was being used for agriculture. By the time Hernán took over for his father in 2009, they had already begun the process of reestablishing ranching as a part of their business plan. His reasoning for returning to ranching is strictly to be more prepared to deal with stresses. “So, we scaled back our agricultural focus because of the
risks. It was a question of security, because of the climate. We are in a marginal zone. This isn’t an area that is clearly agricultural or safe in terms of the climate. This is a riskier area with climatic changes that are more drastic, so this is a better production system” (H. Alameda unpublished interview, November 11, 2011). Today, ranching is still only about 20-25% of the business; though he soon hopes to attain a better balance.

Although Hernán is not the exception in this regard, he may find it more difficult than others who have also sought to maintain a strong focus on ranching because he has less land to work with. Other producers have shown that sacrificing your entire ranching operation is not necessary in order to engage in agriculture, though many have had the luxury of several thousand hectares available to them. Therefore, even though they have only transformed less than 25% of their land to agriculture, they may still have upwards of 4,000 hectares planted with soy or corn, not insignificant when one considers that the average ranch size of participants is around 2,000 hectares. In fact, Naomi Alcorte, who runs a Pampean ranch along with her father and brother, rents 4,000 hectares in a nearby region simply to use as pasture for their cattle to graze. This way, they do not have to sacrifice any of their 2,000 hectares in the Pampa zone and can focus their ranching activities on land that is less suitable for agriculture, but just fine for cattle.

This phenomenon is also visible in Corrientes, where the participant with the most land in the area was the only owner that I spoke with who was able to engage in rice production. A small-scale land owner in Corrientes, Ignacio de la Garza owns two 90 hectare plots and explained the difficulty that producers like him have in starting agricultural endeavors. When asked if he could do agriculture on his plots, he answered “Yes, but you know what? At this time and with this economy, it doesn’t make sense for the small producer because of the costs” (I. de la Garza unpublished interview, January 3, 2012). Investment on a larger scale may initially cost more money, but returns are more likely to cover such expensive costs than they are with a smaller change. Despite the fact that rice can generate high profits, the modest yields that small landowners can expect is not high enough to cover what de la Garza and others will have to invest in building necessary reservoirs and canals on a small scale.

There is, also, at least one rancher who has decided not to diversify his own land use practices, though for not very different reasons than those who do diversify. Pampean
landowner Alex Luna focuses his own business solely on breeding cattle because he does not want to face the added uncertainty and risk that agriculture and fattening bring. After trying other activities for many years, he did not see enough profits to justify continuing in them. Now, with a high demand and relatively good prices for calves, he sees no need to return to the stress and risk that agriculture and fattening added to his business, although he tries to maintain the infrastructure on his ranch that will allow him to in the future should he desire.

Simply because some producers cannot efficiently do intensive agriculture, however, does not mean that they cannot diversify in other ways, both on and off their land. About 40% of Alex’s 1,200 hectares, for example, are rented out to another producer who used the land to plant soy. This way, Alex receives a guaranteed income that, while it may be less than what he could earn himself, saves him much stress and worry. Ignacio in Corrientes, above, also uses his land for more than just cattle ranching, though he does almost no agriculture Instead, he has set up a successful operation breeding Quarter Horses for polo. Not only is it a very good business due to Corrientes’ reputation for producing great horses, but he also gets much satisfaction from it and hopes to one day focus solely on this, after leaving the cattle to a child. Finally, still other landowners have turned to off-ranch or non-rural activities to decrease their vulnerability to sudden shocks and gain added security. Ana Belgrano, introduced earlier with a ranch in the Río Salado zone that suffers from frequent floods during periods of the year, provides a perfect example. Ana is a middle-aged, single mother who inherited 1,388 hectares in Central Buenos Aires from her father, but still works full time in the city because the ranch alone cannot support her and her 24-year old son. With few other options besides breeding cattle, there is added pressure on her family when prices for calves decline. Although she remains very involved with managing the ranch, which is relatively successful, having an additional and steady source of income eases much of the stress that managing a ranch brings.

While off-ranch income may not be as important for other managers as it is for Ana, it does play a significant role for many. This does not necessarily mean a full-time job, however, as activities such as real estate investing complement the farm activities of many producers. Again, it should be noted that diversifying in this way requires initial access to capital that many, especially smaller land owners, do not have. Additionally, many producers
can be considered “retired” from other non-rural careers and may also support themselves with retirement funds or large savings.

It is precisely because of the examples described above that the term “rancher” is problematic in Argentina. As we have seen in just these few pages, those producing and managing the nation’s cattle herd are also involved in a range of other activities. In fact, of the 19 participants involved in this study, not a single one derives their entire income from ranching. Of course, this may not be the case for each and every cattle rancher in the country, though it seems safe to say that most involved in the activity recognize the benefit of reducing their risk by diversifying. Frequently, as is the case with much of the Pampa zone, ranching is not even the principal activity or focus of many operations. It is for this reason that terms such as “producer”, “landowner”, or even “manager” may sometimes be more appropriate. Although these words do not explicitly relate the multifaceted life of cattle ranchers, they are broad enough to avoid any confusion in the first place. It should be added, though, that the participants refer to themselves in a number of ways, depending on the context of their discussion. They commonly call themselves productores (producers), ganaderos (ranchers), empresarios (businesspeople), or dueños (owners) whenever it makes the most sense to do so.

**Professionalizing**

In addition to diversifying their activities, land owners are finding that they can be better equipped to handle disturbances if they remain focused on innovation and developing methods that allow them to maintain a high level of efficiency. By focusing on increased productivity and strengthening their business, ranchers will gain confidence when having to respond to pressures because they will have given themselves a better position from which to confront them. While the term profesionalizando (professionalizing) is used by the producers themselves to refer to this concept, it can be equally thought of as developing or modernizing one’s ranch activities.

With regards to ranching, this can mean a number of things but generally signifies a more intensive use of one’s land, allowing them to produce more on the same amount of space. All fattening being done today among research participants, for example, takes place exclusively in feedlot operations because of the fact that it can be done much more quickly
and uses much less space than traditional fattening by grazing. Although all ranchers recognize the value that intensification can have for their operation, the decision to invest in a feedlot is not made without much consideration. As with nearly all changes on the ranch, starting a feedlot is done slowly and cautiously because it takes time, often several years, to become comfortable with a new technique and understand how to do it most effectively with the least amount of costly errors.

Breeding, though primarily still free-range, has likewise intensified with more strategic rotational grazing plans. Fields of several hundred hectares that were once used for grazing cows and their calves have been, over time, divided into many smaller plots of high-quality introduced pastures that must be actively managed. Today, while large areas of pasture still exist, much grazing is done in fields of 5-10 hectares. Although this method requires a bit more attention than extensive grazing, it makes managing different parts of the herd easier and gives managers the ability to make decisions that affect only a small portion of their land at a time. For instance, rather than planting an entire pasture with alfalfa, a rancher can divide it and have smaller fields of alfalfa, ray grass, clover, and natural pasture so as to graze their herd on a particular feed that is most appropriate for them at that time.

Perhaps more important than the development of ranch infrastructure and intensification of practices is the change that has occurred in how landowners view their ranch. A fundamental part of professionalizing requires producers to view their operation less in terms of a simple family ranch and more as a corporate entity focused on productivity and growth. This is not to say that ranchers in the past did not view their work in this way, but rather that the focus on innovation and the willingness to try new things was less prominent. Sergio D’Antoni told me of the advantages that his business received in the past from his father’s open-mindedness and attentiveness to conditions affecting the land, but that not all ranchers shared such a perspective. “My view is that if you can’t measure or gauge something, you can’t improve on it. I feel in the agricultural sector, in general, very few measure or evaluate themselves because processes are long and take time. It’s especially difficult to measure activities in an extensive system. Today, I think it is very important to constantly evaluate ourselves, and with an intensive system you get feedback very quickly”.

The fact that new technologies and practices make production cycles shorter also allows farmers to assess their operation more frequently and provides more opportunity to make
subtle changes. Several years ago, with extensive ranching practices, the effects of changes were spread out through the entire campo and would take a long time to manifest themselves. Today, more intensive methods make effects of a change more visible and show results in the span of several months rather than several years.

Although professionalizing will often also lead to an increase in profits and production, this is not necessarily the main objective of those attempting to improve their operations. In addition to helping ranchers diversify their on-ranch activities by making more land available for other activities, a focus on professionalizing can help a manager better understand their land and their business. The idea is based on the belief that in continually searching for ways to improve the practices and efficiency of the ranch, a manager will gain new experiences that will contribute to the body of knowledge they rely on when responding to pressures. Rancher Agustín Fariás best explained this concept to me during an interview in his Buenos Aires apartment. Agustín is unable to do much commodity agriculture at his Central Buenos Aires ranch, so I asked him how he makes himself less vulnerable during unstable periods; “During these times of good prices, instead of just relaxing and doing nothing because we have good prices, we have to take advantage to learn for when we have bad prices…Right now, instead of relaxing, we are trying to intensify more. We are trying to do things that we can’t really do at other times because if they don’t work out [it would be horrible]. If we make a mistake when cattle do not have good prices, we’d go bankrupt” (A. Fariás unpublished interview, December 16, 2011).

With this, we see that producers are not necessarily developing ranch infrastructure and intensifying their practices in order to build a savings account or a surplus of feed to get them through tough times. Managers have learned that these resources only last until they are depleted and so do not offer much insurance during extended periods of instability. Acquiring more detailed knowledge about the ranch, however, can provide comfort throughout hard times, no matter how long they last. What is most important for producers faced with disturbances is to find a way to survive without exacerbating the situation by responding in an inappropriate way. The trial and error experiments that Agustín mentions give ranchers confidence when they are forced to make changes because they have a better idea of what to expect and how the outcomes will affect their entire operation.
An argument could be made that professionalization would have occurred regardless of the environmental and economic conditions for agropastoral businesses in Argentina. It may very well be true that these developments were inevitable and I do not doubt that increased productivity and higher profits were a driving force behind them; however, it is interesting to see producers realizing the deeper benefits that professionalizing has for them. Conversely, it may not be a coincidence that as recently as 2000 ranching practices were relatively the same as they had been throughout much of Argentina’s history. Not until after major economic recession, drought, and shifts in agropastoral policies, did new developments begin to rapidly come onto the scene, despite the fact that they have been highly developed and used in other countries for decades (for a discussion on the development of ranching practices and infrastructure, at least from the United States, see Rifkin 1992 or Albin and Thompson 1996).

Neither of these changes, professionalization nor diversification, is an abnormal response to unpredictability and, in fact, both are often seen as good risk avoidance strategies when dealing with any sort of investments. Therefore, it is not surprising that ranchers are integrating them into their business plans. What was unexpected, however, was the relative ease with which ranchers moved away from ranching or radically altered the way in which they do it. Not only did so many quickly embrace soy agriculture or feedlots, but many, especially in the Río Salado and Corrientes zones where these changes have been less dramatic, commented that they would do much more if they felt that conditions allowed it. What does seem to play a role in causing ranchers to question making drastic changes to their operations, at least in the Pampa zone, was simply the enjoyment that they get from breeding cattle. Says Pampean rancher Diego Lavezzi:

For me personally, yes, changes were difficult. My brothers didn’t suffer it so much. We’d sit around, we’d talk about it – after all it is a common business – and they’d say ‘get rid of those cows and start planting maíz or soya’ because I held the herd for about three years. I said ‘let’s wait. Prices will get better’. They said ‘ok’ the first year. They said ‘ok’ the second year. The third year, they said ‘no’. They are probably more business minded. The emotional part, they don’t have it so much. Finally, I managed to keep a small herd so as to be able to start again in the future, but I am in no hurry. There are other priorities. (D. Lavezzi unpublished interview, November 23, 2011)
While there are some farmers who actually take pleasure in the work associated with agricultural production or fattening, for example, most expressed more satisfaction from the breeding aspect of ranching because it is viewed as requiring more attention and responsiveness which connects landowners to the work more than other activities. Although it made it difficult for many to decrease their *cria* operations, a rancher’s enjoyment was generally not enough to prevent a transition to other activities (which most also enjoy very much).

Equally surprising was the fact that ranchers did not face strong cultural or social pressures to continuing ranching or maintaining traditional practices. Despite the role that beef has in Argentina and the reputation that it has created for itself around the world, cattle ranchers express no responsibility to protect either when their current circumstances place more importance on other factors. Additionally, unlike that seen in other “cattle cultures” around the world (McCabe 2003; Perramond 2010), non-ranching activities are not done to protect and maintain the pastoral tradition in Argentina. In fact, it has become quite the opposite, as ranching now supplements agriculture. Nor does family tradition or previous methods of working the land influence landowners as much as was expected at the outset. Although several managers mentioned that it was difficult for their parents or those of previous generations to accept the changes they were making on the land, this, too, was not enough to keep changes from coming. It is clear that finding a stable way to provide for the family took precedence over all other factors. These findings run contrary to Mathews and Vandeveer’s (2007:4) assertion that “ingrained cultural practices” are responsible for inefficient beef production. While they fail to expand on this statement, this research found no evidence of what I could describe as “cultural practices” hindering production. They are more than likely guilty of assessing success and efficiency in terms not defined by producers themselves; something that will be shown to be much more complex than simply high production levels.

**The Changing Family Dynamic**

In the last several years, changes to Argentina’s ranching sector have taken place in much more than simply the activities on the ranch. Ranchers have been experiencing a range of additional and no less significant changes that are shaping their personal lives and those of
their family, which, of course, has ramifications for the business. The underlying root of these changes, however, is not disturbance as was the case above, but rather rural development. As in most of the world, ranchers and their families now live much more “connected” and global lives which provide them with opportunities that were not as available to earlier generations.

Increased opportunity and new perspectives about the future are altering the structure of family life (and, likely, of entire towns, although this research did not focus on such topics) in many rural areas. Among the participants of this research, many had spent some time living away from the ranch and nearer to urban areas before they took charge of the business. Often the first in their family to be able to do so, many current managers left the campo as young adults to attend university in Cordoba, Rosario, or Buenos Aires or pursue other work for a time. Ranch managers now take over the family ranch with formal training in veterinary or agricultural sciences, business management, economics, or even philosophy, which certainly plays a role in the how they manage the business.

While many returned shortly after earning a degree or gaining other work experience and slowly began to assume more responsibilities and learn how to run the business, others returned only much later in their lives when the previous managers had decided to decrease their role in the business. In fact, it is not uncommon for individuals to spend a majority of their lives working and starting a family elsewhere. Despite having established careers or families settled into city life, not to mention little practical management experience, many considered a return to the campo the best option for them, certainly better than seeing the land sold or rented off. Juan Mascheratti, for example, explains how he and his wife began managing their ranch in Corrientes:

I have a history of ranching but I never worked on my own family’s ranch because I went to study physics. I went to work and [started] my thesis, but I never finished. When I was about finishing my thesis, my wife’s family decided to separate their campos and so they gave us this piece. There wasn’t anybody else that could manage the land. If we didn’t come, they would have sold it. In one week, my wife and I decided to leave our lives in Buenos Aires. We had an apartment and two young kids, and we came to live here. I didn’t have any experience managing a ranch. (J. Mascheratti unpublished interview, January 2, 2012)
Despite not having previously managed a ranch, the life experiences that many participants brought with them when they returned to the campo greatly benefited their business by giving them an early appreciation for a cosmopolitan world view. Beginning with such awareness may not help new managers know exactly what to do on the ranch, but it does give them the direction to search for the answers in various locations and to carry out reasonable experiments to find out what works best. These owners are helping to change the culture of agropastoral production to one that, as discussed above, is focused on self-examination and experimentation for the purposes of innovation. Additionally, having learned the value of acquiring a worldly perspective, many producers are encouraging their own children in whatever endeavor they may choose, even if it leads them away from the ranch.

Equally common is that several siblings and/or cousins will have a connection to the land through a common grandparent and must collectively decide what type of managers they want to be. Because this decision typically comes up when children have already grown and may be beginning other career paths (as in Juan’s case above), it is often only one of the siblings/cousins who takes over management duties. Sometimes the new manager is chosen because they have the most experience for the position, though other times they are simply the individual who can make the life change easiest and is willing to do so. This is not to say that there is any less devotion to the ranch, as Pampean ranch manager Hernán Alameda states, it may actually be the contrary:

Outside of this business, I could be earning three times more. My brother also. We’d have the opportunity to live much better than how we are today, but when we started, we established low salaries for ourselves to cover the monthly costs and keep growing the business…and [have a] higher quality of life in the future, in ten years. Also, I’ll repeat that we do it because it’s satisfying. If it weren’t, I wouldn’t be so prepared to take a lower salary. We have the expectation that we will grow and in ten years we will be at a much higher economic level, while maintaining a satisfying job. This would be great. That is the objective that I have with my brother. I hope we can do it. (H. Alameda unpublished interview, November 11, 2011)

Even though the others may not be involved in the day to day management of the ranch, they remain “shareholders” and, therefore, are consulted with all major decisions and issues. Hernán, for example, arranges a yearly meeting with his brother and father to discuss the direction of the business and to offer the position up should they agree that the ranch needs someone new.
Interestingly, when returning to manage the business, many producers did not necessarily return to live on their land but rather have decided to live in the nearest towns or, if close enough, Buenos Aires or other large cities and simply travel to the ranch for work. This is seen not only in the families who have already spent a large part of their lives in a more urban setting, but nearly all families, especially those with young children, are finding it more difficult to live without the conveniences offered by living in town. As one rancher put it, “it’s amazing… these towns were always simple and kids couldn’t leave to go to study in the city because parents could not pay for it… Today, people live almost exactly as they do in the city but with a better quality of life. You have all your information and technology, absolutely everything” (J. Rios unpublished interview, November 11, 2011). This does not mean that managers, who are typically on the ranch every day, spend any less time there, but it does require at least one encargado (caretaker) to live on the ranch and watch over things when nobody else can be there. For producers, it is an easy decision that increases the quality of life for their family, even though it may require a several hundred kilometer trip between their family and the campo on a weekly basis.

**Ownership of the Land**

One thing that nearly every land owner who participated in this research will agree on is the importance of maintaining the land in the family. As alluded to above by Juan Mascheratti, this sentiment exists even before managers begin to administer the ranch themselves and may still be quite removed from the business. For land owners, the option to sell their land is an extreme last resort, worth consideration only if, for example, medical emergencies or some other sudden misfortune requires funds that the family does not have readily available.

Even if the productive value of the land drops significantly at times, owners recognize its economic value and the difficulty in re-acquiring land once it is sold. If they or other family members no longer wish to be so heavily involved in the business, a temporary solution is to contract the land out to others. Though not always the case, land is typically rented to those interested in starting or expanding their own agricultural operations because of the current profitability of certain crops. For providing the land, owners receive either monetary compensation or a percentage of any harvests, thus continuing to be supported by
the land despite not doing the work themselves. It should be noted that, although renting affords agriculturalists mobility between actively managing the farm or not as Gras (2009) suggests, this is not necessarily the case for ranching. Unless those taking over management of the land decide to retain some cattle, upon returning to ranching one must rebuild their herd. This process not only requires many years, but most participants agree that it is prohibitively expensive. Thus, despite remaining owner of the land, once management duties are given up, it is likely not possible to return to a ranching lifestyle.

One question that many participants do not yet have a complete answer for is what will happen to the land after them. Traditionally, and legally, land is divided among all individuals of the next generation. This means that the manager’s children, as well as their nieces and nephews, a potentially very large group, all hold legitimate rights to the land in the future. In order to prevent further dividing their land, many land owners are finding that they can keep all of their land together while still providing for future generations by creating a corporate entity from their agropastoral business. This way, all future stakeholders can make their own decisions as to the fate of the land when they need to, “just to give them the option, because we believe that the land is not ours [his and his siblings], it’s theirs [their children]”, as Pampean landowner Diego Lavezzi made clear one afternoon (D. Lavezzi unpublished interview, November 23, 2011). While it is a complex process and many producers remain unsure about the details because it is their first time creating such a contract, most feel that it is well worth the trouble to assure that their children, whatever career they choose, have at least the family business to support them in the future. At the time of research, a number of participants already had the structures in place to maintain the business after them, though there is still much uncertainty as to how it will work in practice when their children actually take over ownership. Like many other things on the ranch, it may take several attempts before the process becomes uncomplicated and conventional.

The findings of this research provide some insight into ranchers’ lives that are not easily known without the use of ethnographic interviews. It may be obvious to any observer that ranchers are diversifying and professionalizing, but it may not be clear that such changes provide a sense of security in an unstable environment. The fact ranchers are taking advantage of new opportunities available to them or changing the process of inheriting land are factors that may easily be overlooked by some, but are no less significant for either the
land owners or entire rural communities. While these findings are interesting in and of themselves, in the next chapter I will argue that they play more than simply an economic role for producers.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter I described some of the more common trends being experienced by cattle ranchers in Argentina today. Here, I would like to further discuss some of the less-explicit meanings of these findings and what sort of implications they may have for ranchers and for Argentina in general. Despite the fact that ranchers are rather articulate when recounting the changes made on their ranches or discussing the political forces facing rural Argentina, it is often difficult for individuals to distance themselves enough from current events to be able to identify the larger processes of which they are a part. At the same time, local effects may be very different when viewed on a national scale.

The following sections consider a number of ideas that were not explicitly mentioned by ranchers but that nonetheless play a role in shaping motivations and ranch strategies. Their biggest concern is with building livelihood security, but this can be accomplished in many different ways. The topics discussed below all play a role in helping producers achieve that.

REGAINING CONTROL

For the most part, ranchers view the decline of cattle ranching in purely economic terms. With less access to markets and lower returns on beef cattle, many ranchers have become more involved in other activities in order to maintain a relatively stable income despite any sudden shifts that might negatively affect herd structures or prices. While the economic motivations for this transition cannot be disputed, analysis of participant responses to interview questions reveals an additional advantage for ranchers.

Farmers feel secure not simply through having access to additional markets, but also the power to make choices and independently manage the inevitable shifts and disturbances that their ranch will encounter. Knowing that one has options in times of uncertainty can, of course, be very encouraging, though many participants do not explain diversification only as having contingency plans or a strategy that provides a stable income. What is more
comforting than simply having backup plans is having the control to make their own decisions when they feel a change is needed. Several participants alluded to the image of a series of pathways toward an ultimate goal:

I try to work with a plan for the short, mid, and long term...It is very difficult to predict. This prevents me from doing exactly what I had planned, but it is something that I can’t control. There are many things that affect my plan, but I always try to keep the grand objective in sight. The way in which I arrive at that goal might change, but maintaining the vision is important. (S. D’Antoni unpublished interview, November 9, 2011)

None expects to be able to arrive at the end by travelling a single path and diversification allows them to make their own decisions regarding how best to reach their long-term objective. Landowners have little control of such matters as markets, politics, or, especially, weather, so by arming themselves with multiple activities farmers are really increasing their ability to manage their own livelihoods in the face of these factors.

Not only have ranchers gained more control over their own operations, they have also sent a clear message to policy makers that they will not let themselves be vulnerable to what they view as an unfavorable government. They have shown that they are not powerless and will not idly accept regulations that are detrimental to their businesses and livelihoods. The outcome of beef export restrictions, for example, has not been what government officials expected. As mentioned earlier, the initial restrictions were put in place in an attempt to maintain the beef supply within the country and stabilize rising prices. Ranchers overcame this by deciding to focus less of their attention on beef production and more on agricultural crops, thereby decreasing the domestic supply anyhow. Ranchers did not decrease beef production purely out of spite for the new policies or to simply prove a point – this is not primarily an ideological issue for ranchers – but rather because the restrictions made beef production an unattractive activity. Although not their primary intention, the response of ranchers was successful in proving that they do have the ability to decide their own outcome to a situation. In refusing to limit themselves to the conditions dictated by the government, producers have shown not only their willingness but also their ability to initiate changes in order to actively confront challenges. A subtle point made by producers, but one that policy makers have undoubtedly noticed, hopefully learned from, and should consider in the future.
THE ROLE OF LAND

It should be clear that the number one frustration of ranchers is the unpredictability in their lives. No part of the natural, economic, or political environment is easily predictable or stable for extended periods of time, which, understandably, causes much anxiety for any producer, especially considering that most farm activities require a several year investment. While participants do what they can to manage shifts or disturbances, it is often impossible to completely avoid feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness. There is one aspect of their lives, however, that does provide some stability in these times and some optimism for the future – their land.

What ranchers do not see in the natural environment or in beef markets – predictability and continuity – they find some semblance of in their family’s land. They understand that they do not always know what the conditions of tomorrow will be but they do know that, unless there is some drastic turn of events, their land will be there supporting them, and in a relatively predictable way. Feelings of security for ranchers come from two features associated with land ownership. First, ranches are viewed as strong sources of capital in themselves that can be relied on in an emergency situation. Should several consecutive seasons of bad harvests or other extreme circumstances put a family in a difficult financial position, there is a general idea that support could be found by selling their land. Without exception, every rancher related their disinclination to sell their land unless faced with the most drastic and extreme circumstances because of the near impossibility of ever being able to reacquire land afterwards. Although it would be an ultimate last resort, even the smallest ranches or simply plots of the larger ones can provide a significant source of income to get owners through the most trying of times.

Before selling their land, owners will try to find security not by selling the land, but in simply allowing it to continue providing for the family when all have chosen to invest their time in other work. Despite the fact that production may be unstable and aggravating at times, the land is still capable of providing a supplemental income to those who have decided, for whatever reason, to work away from the farm. Whether the ranch alone cannot support the family or the work simply does not interest them, fewer family members are remaining to continue management of the business. Ranchers are now focusing on developing ways to ensure that the land will continue to provide extra income even with their
putting minimal work into production. In fact, the most common method of doing so, establishing a corporation to administer the agribusiness, only makes it easier for future generations to pursue other careers from a young age, rather than out of financial necessity later in life. So long as ranchers own their land, there is a belief that they will be able to find a way to continue generating income from it, whether from cattle or soy or some other activity, if even at a much diminished scale.

Thus, land provides security to owners in two ways – as a potential capital base and through the productive activities that it supports. Although one is viewed as an extreme last resort should it be needed and the other is designed to provide on-going support to owners, they both serve as a guarantee against the possibility of catastrophe, either on or off the ranch. Of course, both require owners to maintain their land in good productive condition because, unlike the mega-corporations now operating in Argentina that constantly vacate fields once they have declined in productivity, it is often the only land that a family farmer has. Landowners must be conscious of the condition of their land and take measures to maintain both its value and productivity for future generations. Although no participant would be labeled as “organic” or specifically “eco-conscious”, their long-term focus inherently gives their practices a degree of sustainability.

While the qualities of the land may make certain types of production difficult and less-profitable, being able to own the space, even in a “marginal” location, may be the only part of a farmer’s life that does not contribute to the anxiety that they receive from elsewhere. Of course there are circumstances that even land ownership cannot mitigate. For the most part, however, land can serve as both a safety net and a supplement – if not the basis of one’s livelihood – that will support producers and their families through the ups and downs of the distant future.

**A Custom Agriculture**

Towards the end of the 20th century, after the Green Revolution had reached nearly all corners of the world, much of the analysis concerning the spread of agricultural technology and methods was focused on the perceived differences between Western science-based agriculture and the smaller-scale systems of production that were to be “improved”. When new technologies and methods dramatically improved yields and profits of certain crops in
developed countries, many began to believe that other parts of the world were in need of such improved practices. Of course, the introduction of high-tech agriculture to communities around the world has not always had the positive results that were originally expected. Implementing new techniques is not often done in a way that acknowledges the complexities of existing production strategies and local cultural understandings. As González (2001:13) writes, agricultural studies “rarely focus on how [local] knowledges and practices have incorporated elements from the outside world and vice versa – in short, they often rely heavily on a separation between the local and the global without considering how ideas and artifacts are borrowed cross-culturally”. Thus, existing production systems are frequently viewed as much simpler than they may actually be because of assumptions based on superficial observations of certain features. For example, agropastoral producers in Argentina consider themselves highly modern and industrial, though a deep understanding of the experiences of ranchers participating in this research gives cause to question exactly what it means to be a modern and industrial producer.

Arguably the most defining feature of modern industrial agriculture is its focus on maximizing profits. For this reason industrial operations are generally large scale, monocropped farms that rely heavily on continued scientific innovation to achieve ever-increasing yields. Scott (1998) identifies the main logic behind industrial production as first visualizing an “ideal” farm that will offer the highest potential yields and then continuing to manage (or transform) the ecological conditions in order to achieve it. Using this sort of description, a great many producers in Argentina, including every participant in this study, would likely be considered as industrial in scale by most observers. Throughout the country hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers are widely used, as are impressive machines for any sort of agricultural task. Nor is this process unique to agriculture, as the ranching sector too has modernized (recall from chapter 4 their own term, “professionalized”) with its use of hybrid breeds, antibiotics and dietary supplements, and the increasing occurrence of confined feeding corrals.

Although the desire to “professionalize” is clearly strong for many ranchers in Argentina, this does not necessarily mean that managers blindly follow the path to greatest profits. After surviving the compounded pressures of economic recession, intense drought, and tight government regulation of the early 2000’s, cattle ranchers realized that they must
consider other factors besides only profit. The challenge has become balancing issues such as long-term stability and the needs of family members with a focus on making the business profitable. Thus, despite the fact that cattle are frequently intensively raised in feedlots and monocropping hybrid seeds is more the norm than the exception, both resulting in dramatically increased profits, modernizations and changes are done only to the extent that they do not jeopardize an owner’s ability to manage the range of disturbances that may be encountered or interfere with the family’s other values. Simply put, when asked why they have become more involved in commodity agriculture, ranchers say it is to take advantage of high prices; when asked why they do not dedicate more space to such profitable activities their answer is “for security”. Just as Hernán Alameda and Naomi Alcorte (from Chapter 4) were actually working to increase the role of ranching in their businesses, for many producers the immediate returns from soy and corn are not worth sacrificing any long-term stability that comes from a more diverse ranch.

Another feature that is frequently a point of distinction for modern producers involves not necessarily the amount of knowledge used by the producer, but rather the type of knowledge. Modern industrial producers are often thought to favor a more theoretical, abstract, and universal knowledge that has been verified by modern science over a self-developed and practical knowledge which can vary by individual and location. Rather than rely too heavily on information that is not specific to their ranch, Argentine landowners make sure to situate new strategies within the knowledge that they already have of their particular circumstances. Most research participants, for example, displayed quite an intimate knowledge of their land and its capabilities. This awareness of the range of conditions that are present and how to best take advantage of each area shows that Argentine landowners also have a long history of experimentation and some degree of success on their land. Many understand which areas are more sandy or which are vulnerable to flooding, for example, and strategically plant certain crops only where they will have the best chance to succeed without an overreliance of inputs. This allows them to be most efficient, even though it may result in slightly lower overall yields than if crops were planted indiscriminately and supported with chemical fertilizers and heavy watering plans.

Participants are primarily connected to modern scientific information through frequent visits by veterinarians or agronomists; that is, if they themselves have not been
formally trained in either field as many have. While many farmers find advice from such professionals indispensable, it is often supplemented with their own experiences or those from neighboring producers who may be in similar positions and have equally insightful information. The scientific professional, then, is very useful for identifying technical or biological problems for managers; however, “generating actions to counteract these problems...has proven to be a far more difficult task and one in which the role of science is not nearly as straightforward” (Van Kerkhoff and Lebel 2006:446, italics in original). Put otherwise, the difference between scientific knowledge and local, practical knowledge can be seen as “know why” and “know how”, respectively (Lundvall and Johnson 1994). One thing that is helping producers is an organization designed specifically to merge these two knowledges. The Asociación Argentina de Consorcios Regionales de Experimentación Agrícola (AACREA, or CREA) is a nation-wide organization that brings producers from a single area together with an agropastoral professional. The Association’s mission, “to work in groups and share our experiences and knowledge in order to increase profits and achieve sustainable economic growth for our businesses” (AACREA n.d.), calls for both scientific and practical answers to producers’ major questions. Members form groups with a professional based on the activities they are involved in (without limits to any agricultural or ranching practices) and rotate meetings through each member’s ranch to discuss their practices, any problems or benefits with them, and how they might differ from other group members’. While increased profits are an explicit goal of CREA, what is significant here is the concern for sustained over short-term growth and the recognition of the value that integrating shared practical knowledge with scientific knowledge has in achieving it.

Thus, what land managers possess is a hybrid knowledge that balances two complementary ways of understanding the world around them (see Raymond et al. 2010 for a discussion of the multitude of knowledge types). Despite the fact that many participants view professionals as “the enemy” of producers because of their focus only on profits and their disconnection from the other needs of managers, formal scientific knowledge remains highly sought after as a means of boosting production, though always within a local context. This is interesting because, whereas much of the literature is often focused on indigenous communities and issues such as development and natural resource management, it shows that even modern industrial actors must rely on other forms of knowledge. Modern producers
understand that scientific knowledge is not a panacea and must be incorporated slowly into local schemes to ensure that it does not create more problems than it solves. This supports the idea that all knowledge is hybrid because its use and interpretation are always socially constructed and influenced by individual experiences (Nygren 1999; Thomas and Twyman 2004). Therefore, it seems senseless to ask the question of whether there can be a “symmetrical coexistence between the diverse forms of knowledge” or if scientific knowledge will gradually push out alternative ways of thinking (Nygren 1999:282).

Although it may seem that one dominant form of knowledge is displacing another, it is really just hybridizing. What this shows is that knowledge is not neutral, and farmers recognize this fact. It is clear that most scientific agricultural knowledge has been developed in pursuit of certain goals; goals which are at odds with those of producers. The unwillingness of participants to adopt certain innovations without question highlights the disparity of values between the knowledges most available to them and leads to the creation of their hybrid knowledge.

Similar to highly industrial producers, Argentine farmers are always searching for innovations that may make them more efficient. Although not easily seen by the passing observer, they unfortunately do not often have the luxury of being able to make rapid changes to their operation without recognizing the potential for unexpected consequences, and so must incorporate changes very subtly and only after they have been proven through field trials. Several participants related how they view their own ranches as laboratories where one discovers what must be done in order to improve and address any dissatisfaction. This requires producers to be closely involved in operations in order to understand what is taking place on their ranch and to track the progress of changes, adding to their knowledge of the land and how it may react in certain situations. Hernán Alameda related that by working on other ranches before coming to manage his own he learned how “the family business could lose money because they didn’t pay attention to the campo, they just didn’t realize. Or they had delusions about their land and thought that it would simply always produce. That’s not how it is though. You have to know how to produce. You have to live it. It is possible to live from the campo, but you have to know how to do it” (H. Alameda unpublished interview, November 11, 2011). By properly assessing practices, ranch operations can get feedback to reach a positive balance between the local environmental conditions and the
needs of the family. A prime example of this is the recent transition from extensive grazing of cattle to feedlots. Many producers recalled how excited they were to begin intensifying because they understood the potential that it would bring to their business but were unsure as to how to begin a process that they were so unfamiliar with. Even after a gradual introduction and several years of practice most ranchers claim that they are still fine tuning the changes to their operations and trying to find out how it has affected their business.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, experimentation and innovation is more about gaining a better understanding of the relationships and processes taking place on the ranch than about efficiency and profits. The primary goal for managers here is building resilience. As the ability to “absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Walker et al. 2004), resilience is not concerned with avoiding or resisting disruptions, but rather acknowledging their inevitability and remaining flexible through them. Argentine landowners know that disturbances (drought, closure of markets, etc.) will come; they simply seek as much stability as possible when having to deal with them. Detailed knowledge of local conditions, such as that gained by managers’ attempts at diversification and professionalization, is vital to increasing resilience (Berkes and Turner 2006; Folke et al. 2004; Walker et al. 2004). In fact, Berkes and Turner (2006) state that:

The process[es] of learning and testing knowledge iteratively are seen as important for building resilience towards sustainability in an unpredictable and changing world...[and that] the capacity to elaborate knowledge about ecosystems and resources, and to learn from management mistakes, provides a buffer that guards against the failure of subsequent management actions based on incomplete knowledge and understanding. (488)

For these authors, even the slightest change or response to stress is an opportunity to generate understanding and increase resilience to handle future challenges. This is in contrast with the typical image of high-modern producers who do not put much emphasis on maintaining a high degree of resilience because of a reliance on technological solutions to problems. Berkes and Turner (2006:490) sum up the entire discussion nicely when they state that “[s]uch an approach shifts the emphasis from efficiency goals (such as maximum sustained yields) to resilience”.

It should be clear that underlying all of these factors is the relationship that landowners have with their land. Whereas many high modern producers do not need to consider the effects of their practices on the land because they can either temporarily revitalize deficiencies using technical inputs or simply move to a new location, the family-based farmers that are much more common in Argentina must think in terms that efficiently sustain production on that land for the long-term. As discussed above, the land is what will serve as the family’s safety net for generations to come and owners cannot risk losing that for short-term gain.

The important thing here is not whether Argentine agropastoralists are modern and industrial or not, but rather to show the nuances in their approaches to production. In this sense, the participants of this research at least can be seen as having developed a customized modern production system. It may very well have been the case that had events of the past not materialized as they did, ranchers would not be so concerned with issues of long-term planning or finding security in the ownership of their land, and may have developed more along the lines of what is generally expected from an industrial farmer. The point to stress here, I think, is that regardless of scale, motivation, or practices, no producer anywhere in the world will fit perfectly into outdated predetermined categories. What will be more beneficial is, as Scott (1998:303) suggests, viewing all producers as equally involved in “crafting unique amalgams of strategies that reflect their aims, their resources, and their local conditions”.

Together, all of the changes that managers make to their production methods and strategies add up to small victories in their battle to create stability and security. Although farmers may not be consciously making a statement to policy makers or purposefully altering their image as modern industrial producers, these inadvertent results are only bringing more attention to the situation and, hopefully, leading to more rapid improvements for them. Will this be enough to completely calm Argentine producers? Most will likely say no. Until there is a stable rural policy and better dialogue between producers and the government there will always be added uncertainty in ranch operations. The positive is that ranchers are becoming better equipped to manage that uncertainty; even if it may be as simple as, in the words of 22-year old ranch manager and future landowner Fabian Cortez, “just doing what makes sense.”
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

One sunny afternoon, while enjoying a cup of coffee on the patio of his ranch house in the Pampa zone, Javier Ríos made it perfectly clear as to what was most frustrating about intervention from the government. He said, “Today they say one thing; tomorrow they’ll say something else. There aren’t coherent agricultural policies, and this, in reality, is what people of the campo are asking for most” (J. Ríos unpublished interview, November 11, 2011). Although still not preferable, the restricted market access and high tax rates would at least be manageable if farmers knew what sort of income they could expect in the future and could plan accordingly. Until they do have a better long-term vision of their industry, landowners will have much added uncertainty to deal with.

In order to achieve a long-term picture, an understanding of rancher livelihoods and their objectives must be made known to those whose actions can influence ranch circumstances. The main questions of this thesis – how exactly are ranching operations continuing in Argentina, and why – help by providing a picture of what cattle ranching looks like today and show which forces have created it. More specific questions add details to the picture that can serve as a starting point from which agropastoral policies and livelihoods might be improved. Knowing exactly what changes are commonly made on ranches, what landowners desire of the future, and how decisions relate to ranchers’ sense of identity offers significant insights that can help calculate how certain situations will be viewed and handled by landowners.

Participants in all three study zones in this study have changed the way in which they view their businesses so as to ease some of the discomfort that they feel from being involved with such unstable activities. Through a focus on professionalizing and diversifying, producers have become much more active in assessing their practices and gaining a better understanding of the nuances of the environment that they live in. In making adjustments to the way that they use their land, managers have created a sort of customized production system that differentiates them from the extreme high modern and industrial system that most
outside observers initially see and expect. One fundamental aspect of this development is that most Argentine landowners increasingly recognize the importance of their land and its finiteness. The family-based producers of this study know that they face a much more difficult time acquiring more land than do the mega agribusinesses. This fact often ties independent producers to a single plot (or a few plots in certain cases, though still limited) that must be sustainably maintained to allow it to continue supporting the family in the future. Landowners are clear in their rejection of the notion that science and technology is developed with their specific goals in mind and that it alone can somehow protect them from volatile changes or address the deeper needs of their families. They understand that the best way to feel more comfortable in achieving their goals is to be very active in managing the business and to think long-term, rather than continually chasing short-term profits.

Interestingly, although this work included participants from a range of backgrounds, overall sentiments were rather uniform throughout. The main themes of frustration with the unpredictability of the industry, professionalizing/diversifying to increase security, and land ownership were expressed by landowners in all three geographic regions and by small, medium, and large land owners equally. Additionally, most adapted to changes to previous production strategies quite easily, with little reservation. Of course, small differences do emerge in the details of how each goes about expressing these themes, such as diversification in the Pampa region versus in Corrientes or the views of the consequences of instability for small and large land holders. Thus, although the overarching issues confronting agropastoral production are quite similar throughout the country, they are experienced in distinct ways by each family depending on their individual background.

While this research does contribute to a more general discussion of resilience, especially among modern agropastoralists, it was designed more with the ultimate objective of understanding a specific group of people and finding ways to interpret their concerns and needs. Many participants believe that one of the largest hurdles to gaining balanced and consistent agricultural policy is the misinformed popular rhetoric which labels producers as antagonists of the country. Clarifying some of the predominant misconceptions that many Argentine citizens have about farmers will be one of the greatest benefits that this thesis can offer. Although much of the discourse surrounding agropastoral producers in the country tells a different story, readers should now understand that cosmopolitan producers do not
mindlessly follow the recommendations of extension workers or scientists who are less familiar with the land and who often have no other interest in it other than yield. Nor are many ranchers in Argentina today content with managing simply as their parents did. Ranchers work hard and sacrifice much for their families and their businesses. They are very active in their work and often do not get the credit they deserve for successfully balancing so many factors. Most importantly, the lives of producers are not always carefree and without worry simply because they own land. My hope is that recognizing the expertise and dedication that go into all agropastoral activities may help improve the way farmers are represented within the greater society and start to bridge the disconnect between producers and so much of the rest of society.

This work has also demonstrated that it is not simply policy makers or the general public who may be disconnected from producers and carry misconceptions about their livelihoods. Researchers and extension workers also frequently come from a background that assumes that farmers are rational maximizers interested in profit above all else. Bringing these preconceived notions to their work with landowners will only prevent them from understanding the lives of the farmers that they work with and possibly lead to the spread of false reports of agropastoralists as irrational and stuck in traditional or non-modern methods of production (recall from Chapter 4 Mathews and Vandeveer’s [2007:4] USDA report that criticized Argentine ranchers for allowing “ingrained cultural practices” to inhibit beef production). The fact that participants place more importance on other factors, such as sustainability of their land, than immediate profits does not make them irrational managers or unintelligent businesspeople. Producers do have very good reasons for not simply focusing on the short-term and are constantly making logical decisions based on the needs and goals of their families.

Finally, the description of cattle ranchers that this thesis provides further illustrates the significance of qualitative, ethnographic based research when it comes to ranchers and other agricultural producers. Similar to other authors cited earlier (Perramond 2010; Sayre 2004; Smith and Martin 1972), the findings presented here would not have been possible without the use of semi-structured interviews and a focus on why changes have been made, rather than simply how. Relying only on quantitative or physical aspects of rancher livelihoods would not have revealed the complex nature of landowners – a major statement
of this research – and may have only furthered the erroneous model of producers as exclusively profit driven actors. Likewise, employing both political economy and political ecology has been valuable. No individual lives in isolation from political, economic, or sociocultural forces and using this approach focused the project on landowners’ struggles with various pressures and has helped provide an explanation as to why ranchers do what they do. Specifically, a political ecology framework maintained an outlook on the land and how it is affected by the same forces that act on people. This added focus allowed participants to show the importance that land ownership has in creating security for ranchers – another major finding.

There were a number of limitations to this research that required consideration and should be addressed. While the participants in this study were able to provide insights from a range of perspectives, a larger sample would only strengthen the research. Including additional landowners from the Río Salado and Corrientes sites, as well as more representation from ranches of less than 1,000 hectares in all three zones would create a better balance among the size and geographic characteristics of participants. Of course, incorporating ranchers from regions outside of the three used in this thesis would only make for a more complete analysis and stronger discussion of rancher livelihoods throughout the country.

One of the most difficult aspects of beginning fieldwork at a new location is finding potential participants. The fact that I relied heavily on contacting individuals who were recommended by previous participants may have kept me working within the same circle of producers who all had similar views about the topics that were discussed. As this is a common issue when using snowball techniques I do not believe that takes away from the results because each perspective remains the individual’s own, although it may prevent any different experiences of those not in the same social network from being heard. Also limiting this research is the difficulty in obtaining certain statistics regarding the productivity and methods of agropastoralists. Without data that is focused on specific locales (rather than an entire province or the entire country) it is not possible to situate participants’ experiences of change within a previously established context. Talks with participants and other principal informants suggest that this is due in part to the fact that national census methods are
relatively incomprehensive and that the recent changes to farm operations have been too rapid for the decennial survey.

The focus on cattle ranchers as the subjects of this thesis was, I believe, an appropriate starting point for an examination of the lives of Argentina’s producers. After conducting fieldwork, however, it became very clear that much of what is described in these pages may not be unique to cattle ranching. Participants talked of the difficulties facing nearly all agricultural practices, whether soy or rice or dairy farming, and the frustration that they give to managers who must deal with them. Thus, future research should attempt to incorporate a diverse sample of agropastoral producers to understand just how pervasive the sentiments expressed by ranchers in this research are among producers in general. What will also be of value to future research projects is actual biophysical analysis of the land used by producers. Such examination will provide researchers and producers with hard data to better understand and evaluate the methodological and technological changes taking place.

Along slightly different lines, it would also be interesting for future research to examine the general attitudes and perceptions that non-producers have of producers. As noted just above, there exists a slightly negative public image of landowners in Argentina which this thesis aims to rectify. Further research into the trends and patterns of popular sentiments will highlight more exactly the misunderstandings that lead to discrepancies regarding the image of producers and serve as the best way of testing just how effective this thesis was in promoting a new vision of rural landowners.

In the end, my hope for this research is that it serves as a starting point for agropastoral producers to gain stability, at least in the economic and political environments in which they live. When read by participants and other producers, this work should be comforting because it shows that their actions and the changes they are making are not going unnoticed. When read by policy makers, this work should allow them to see the direction that agropastoral production is going in Argentina and enable them to calculate potential responses to future policy changes. This is not meant to be a debate between the right and left; it is neither a call for less government intervention nor a lesson on how to reluctantly deal with it. While it can offer some lessons for discussing the issue, its greater value lies in offering an understanding that can lead to more informed discussions between all involved and a more balanced situation can be achieved.
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