Readers of CowCountry are undoubtedly familiar with all of the outstanding work the University of Wyoming (UW) College of Agriculture and Natural Resources does related to natural resource management. So, you may ask why UW has a separate School of Environment and Natural Resources.

The Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources (Haub School) at UW is the umbrella organization that serves the university by bringing together faculty and students to study, teach and do outreach on issues related to environment and natural resources. Our formal mission is “to advance the understanding and resolution of complex environmental and natural resources challenges.”

Many of the most important issues facing society today require the integration of knowledge from multiple disciplines. Interdisciplinary Schools, such as the UW Haub School and the School of Energy Resources, are uniquely situated to reach across traditional departments and tackle these problems from multiple angles. For instance, understanding and managing forests in the Rocky Mountain west requires consideration of silviculture (understanding and managing forests for tree establishment and growth toward harvest goals), botany and entomology (for instance, bark beetles), recreation (access, signs, transportation, campgrounds), watershed status, fire ecology and management, wildlife habitat, economics, community perceptions and values, and public lands law and policy. The Haub School forges and facilitates relationships across campus to take on interdisciplinary challenges. Universities across the world contain such interdisciplinary schools that offer degrees and conduct research in environment and natural resources, alongside colleges that are a bit more traditionally focused within disciplines. We work to move faculty, students, funding, and most importantly, knowledge across the traditional internal barriers of a university. We partner to provide new value.

In the Haub School, we train students to have disciplinary strength, which they obtain from departments throughout the university, and interdisciplinary skills and perspectives that we provide. About 15 percent of our approximately 200 majors have a primary major in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Our students learn to communicate using the language of many different disciplines, and for any natural resources challenge, they can critically evaluate the natural and social sciences associated with the challenge—facts and theories—as separate from the values and opinions that individuals and communities hold. They listen with a balanced ear, not to judge human perspectives but to understand and analyze them.

We use innovative teaching methods and field and international travel experience, to immerse students in complex real-world situations. Our students seek out solid data and information, think critically from multiple perspectives, consider the needs of a range of stakeholders, and push boundaries as they craft innovative answers to big questions. After graduation, industry, government, education, and non-governmental agencies seek out our students for their knowledge and abilities. The students who return to working landscapes as ranchers go well-armed with information and tools.
to manage animals, land and water, and to communicate and negotiate with partners such as state and federal land management agencies.

The Ruckelshaus Institute is a research and outreach arm of the Haub School. The Ruckelshaus Institute supports stakeholder-driven solutions to environmental challenges by conducting and communicating relevant research, and promoting collaborative decision-making. Our research focuses on some of the most critical natural resources policy and management issues in Wyoming and the Rocky Mountain west. We engage faculty across the university to contribute to our current initiatives in Open Spaces, Water and Energy Mitigation, all three of which have a major focus on rangelands in Wyoming. For instance, in recent years, we have been producing a landowner’s guide for commercial wind development, and we have been collaborating with the Wyoming Stock Growers Association and The Nature Conservancy to evaluate and demonstrate public support for maintaining open spaces (rangelands).

We publish our work both in the peer-reviewed literature and through Ruckelshaus institute publications, which are geared toward citizens and not specialists. Most recently, we have developed a new magazine, Western Confluence, which brings current scholarship about natural resources science and management to the general public. Our most recent issue evaluates water in Wyoming and the West.

The Ruckelshaus Institute is unique in our work on collaborative decision-making. We provide neutral, third-party facilitation and mediation services to help communities resolve natural resources challenges. Our Spicer Chair of Collaborative Processes, Dr. Steve Smutko (also a professor in Agricultural and Applied Economics), with his team, has facilitated collaborative teams on a variety of issues, including air quality in the Upper Green River Basin, the Governor’s Task Force on Forests, and currently, the Laramie County Control Steering Committee, focused on water use in the High Plains aquifer system. In each of these examples, the Ruckelshaus Institute helped groups of individuals with very diverse perspectives create shared recommendations on complex natural resource challenges, and each of these groups included ranchers as key contributors.

We have also developed a program in Collaborative Solutions to work with natural resources professionals to enhance their skills in leading and participating in effective collaborative decision-making processes. The ultimate goal is to create a network of leaders from across all sectors – industry, government, and non-profit—who have trust in one another and skills to engage in finding collaborative solutions.

There can be some confusion around the “Environment” word in our title. The term refers to things that are outdoors, that surround us, and not to a political point of view. “Natural resources” are the part of the environment that humans use, such as agricultural production, forest production, water use, fossil or renewable energy, wildlife for either aesthetic appreciation or for hunting and consumption. The work of the Haub School is to study the environment and natural resources; we advocate only for good information and fair, inclusive approaches to problem solving.

Indy Burke, the Director of the Haub School, is an ecosystem scientist with expertise in semi-arid rangelands. •