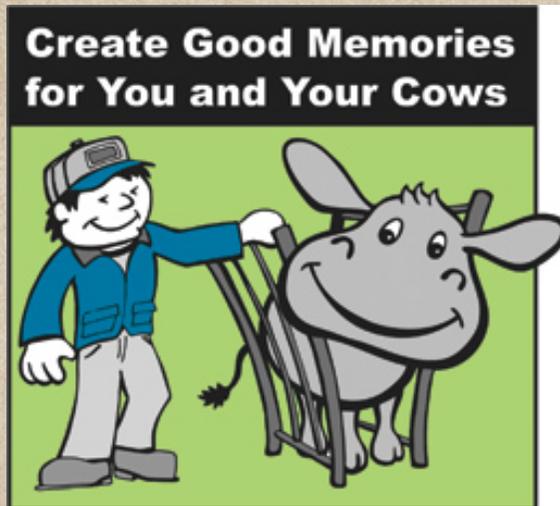




BeefTalk 687: Cows Have Memories, Too

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



If exposed to something they feel uncertain about or something that actually causes stress, cows remember.

The other day, although a minor event, I had a memory-producing moment. I poured a glass of water and took a drink, then set the glass down momentarily. Soon, I took a second drink, only to have this less-than-desirable sensation. During the brief time that the glass was unattended, a boxelder bug landed in the glass and became part of my drink.

Apparently boxelder bugs do not go down or give up willingly because this particular boxelder bug decided to grab onto my tongue in an attempt to escape. Those who are aware of boxelder bugs realize that they seem to have no need for anything. It would appear they exist with a reasonable desire to survive.

Anyway, this misplaced boxelder bug succeeded in crawling up my tongue but still met a quick demise. Although one acts

instinctively in unknown situations, I have no regrets on crushing this little boxelder bug. In fact, as a common late-fall guest in the house, all the remaining boxelder bugs were put on the “unwelcome” list.

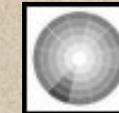
Life experiences produce memories. It is hoped that these are pleasant memories, but not always. Memories are good for us and the cattle we work with. Pleasant environments produce pleasant memories. Regretfully, stressful environments produce bad memories. Not unlike my quick overreaction to the boxelder bug and all the innocent boxelder bugs close by, cows also will overreact.

If exposed to something they feel uncertain about or something that actually causes stress, cows remember. I always will remember that boxelder bug crawling up my tongue, and cows always will remember that touch of pain produced by an electric prod. It only was one boxelder bug or only one touch of the electric prod, but that makes no difference because the memory has been programmed and bad memories do not go away.

In fact, as the cow bellows in response to what seems like an incidental touch, her response upon leaving may be much



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like my treatment of the boxelder bug's friends. I turned on them, and so may the cow turn on her handlers.

Fall is a busy work time for cattle producers as cattle are gathered, worked and readied for winter. Accessibility, protection and simple ease of handling all come into play when the cattle are sorted. This experience or reintroduction to people is important. Cows are expected to have a long life on the ranch. The oldest cow in the herd certainly should be in double digits in age. Granted, the average age of the herd is significantly lower than the oldest cow, but the goal is to keep cows for a long, productive life.

For those cows that are enrolled in the North Dakota State University Extension Service's CHAPS program, the average age is 5.7 years. The older cows certainly can influence new cows. As the cows are gathered, new cows will sense nervousness if the older cows are uneasy. Again, the predator-versus-prey fear never is very far away. Cows survive by being cognizant of all that is around them. As producers, our goal is not to be viewed as a predator but rather as an acceptable partner in the range environment.

As the cows come home, recall is critical. I remember our cattle were summered away from the home place. The pasture had a west gate that faced home. For some reason, as fall set in, the cattle would start to camp at that gate and eventually we would arrive to open it. Those old cows knew exactly what was going on and the younger cows followed.

The cows walked home instead of dispersing into the wilderness. Cows have memories, and the more good memories they have, the better life is for them on the ranch. Difficult or painful memories do not go away.

If you kick the dog, the dog remembers. If you poke the cow, the cow remembers, and when you swallow a boxelder bug, you remember. I do not intend to swallow another boxelder bug, and boxelder bugs need to be more careful when in my presence. If you kick the dog, the dog might bite, and the cow that gets poked with an electric prod will not want to come home.

Common sense or, as one might say, cow sense, is learned through time. The ability to have a smooth cattle working process is the accumulation of cow sense that is put to work chute side. To rush, get frustrated or push too hard is not good for the cattle and not good for the producer.

Best management practices for cattle producers beg the question: What is one's attitude while working cattle?

Let's keep it calm and always look before you drink.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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