



LAND HELD HOSTAGE

A History of Livestock and Politics

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Since the early sixteenth century, the West has been used for livestock grazing. Yet winter die-offs, drought, and overgrazing have long plagued western ranching. On public lands, federal regulation of livestock grazing was slow to develop. The political influence of stock growers has enabled them to largely resist policy shifts that would allow ecological recovery. Today, increasing scientific knowledge and general appreciation of arid lands may finally effect real grazing reform.

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European livestock came to North America only a year after the first European settlers. On Columbus's second voyage, in 1493, he brought horses, sheep, and cattle from Spain and the Canary Islands to the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo. From there, Spaniards shuttled them to Cuba, and in 1521, Cortés and Gregorio Villalobos brought them to the mainland of Mexico. Cattle raising caught on instantly in the new colony. Within a decade, scores of ranches occupied the plains and valleys near Mexico City, and a registry for brands was established. By the end of the sixteenth century, these big immigrant herbivores were munching placidly throughout Mexico.¹

Cattle first arrived in what is now the United States in 1540.² Coronado, in his quest for the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, traveled northward through present-day Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, and as far northward and eastward as Kansas.³ Although a few strays probably escaped from Coronado's immense herds, the period of continuous livestock grazing in the future United States didn't begin until about 1700. As Padre Eusebio Kino, a zealous Jesuit missionary, traveled widely throughout what is now northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States, he established twenty-four missions and preached two gospels: Jesus Christ and livestock husbandry. Kino gave livestock to the Indians, hoping to draw them into the convenience of European pastoral ways. It is hard to say which conversion—to Christianity or to herding large Eurasian mammals—ultimately had a more dramatic impact on the face of North America.⁴

Missions that had been established in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona between 1670 and 1690 became livestock centers soon after 1700. During the mission period, 40,000 to 50,000 sheep and 10,000 to 20,000 cattle were brought to Texas. By 1834, twenty-one missions in California thronged with 423,000 cattle; 61,600 horses; and 321,500 sheep, goats, and swine. Mission San Luis Rey alone was home to 80,000 cattle; 10,000 horses; and 100,000 sheep, goats, and swine.⁵ Meanwhile, all the trappings we associate with the quintessential American icon—the cowboy—had been invented back in Mexico.⁶

In the early nineteenth century, livestock populations began to swell in the American West. By the start of the Civil War, Texas swarmed with more than

A stock pond is just one of many alterations ranchers make to the landscape to better accommodate their cattle, to the detriment of native wildlife.

3.5 million head of cattle.⁷ Conditions were right for a market frenzy: cattle were abundant, consumers in the north and east were eager, and the new railroads crossing the continent made previously inconceivable linkages between the Texas range and the dinner plates of eastern townspeople. To take advantage of this opportunity, the long cattle drive—another tradition from Mexico—was adopted.⁸ Several general routes developed, often converging at river crossings and railroad depots. In the next twenty years, more than 5 million cattle were driven northward from the ranges of Texas.⁹

What made this possible? The advent of the railroads, surely. But the glory and riches of the great cattle drives were equally dependent on the health of the immense grasslands that stretched between Texas and the waiting rails. Those grasslands, though, were vulnerable: the 20 million hooves that trod toward the railroads quickly degraded vegetation and soils.

Such explosive economic activity did not occur in a vacuum. Self-promotion ran rampant. The Cheyenne, Wyoming, newspaper, for example, ran sixty-three articles in two years touting the state as a cattleman's paradise.¹⁰ Exploitation of rangelands accelerated wildly as dreamers speculated fortunes on the new gold: livestock. As in all get-rich-quick booms, rationality and long-term concern were flung aside. Stockmen judged their success by the number of head of livestock, rather than any standard of sustainability. By 1880, Utah was home to almost 100,000 cattle; New Mexico, 1/3 million; Texas, more than 4 million. Between 1870 and 1886, the number of cattle in what are now the seventeen western states¹¹ leaped from 7.9 to 21.6 million head.¹²

Inevitably, the bottom fell out. Even in the best of times, the semiarid West couldn't withstand grazing pressures like these. A recent study at Capitol Reef National Park, Utah, analyzed past vegetation change and concluded that "the most severe vegetation changes of the last 5,400 years occurred during the past 200 years. The nature and timing of these changes suggest that they were primarily caused by 19th-century open-land sheep and cattle ranching."¹³

Two key features of the West's geography had begun to affect the burgeoning cattle industry: it was dry, and its climate was unpredictable. Euro-Americans chose to ignore the first fact and hadn't been here long enough to perceive the second. The next couple of years provided a harsh lesson. The severe winter of 1885–1886 caused massive die-offs of cattle throughout the West. As much as 85 percent of herds perished in some regions. The spring thaw simply teased, as it led into a serious summer drought. Hot and dry weather, especially in the northern plains, caused cattle and their forage plants to suffer further losses. Then, to add insult to injury, the ensuing winter arrived direct from the Arctic. Blizzard followed blizzard, and the losses mounted higher still. Paper fortunes collapsed from Cheyenne to London. Bones littered the ground from the prairies of the north to the deserts of the south.¹⁴

A Reluctant Path Toward Policy

By the 1890s, cattle had grazed in the West for three and a half centuries, but regulation of grazing practices was nonexistent. Yet even during the most reckless times, a few ranchers recognized the need for maintaining a dependable forage supply. The ruinous years after 1885 compelled a few more to face reality. Some even began to clamor for government interven-

tion to help control abuse of the common resource. The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a massive decimation of forests as huge corporations sped to convert forests to dollars. People both inside and outside government grew alarmed. Public discourse on the treatment of American forests served as a harbinger of debates soon to come to rangelands. Rangelands—more hidden from the public eye—were continuing to deteriorate, and stockmen grew more worried. But resistance to federal involvement in range issues also persisted. As early as 1878, John Wesley Powell, the original explorer of the Colorado River, had urged in his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* that federal land policy must be fundamentally different in the West than in the moist East.¹⁵ But his ideas ran against the grain. During the grass boom of the 1870s and 1880s, his proposals were rejected.

Even so, stockmen's enlightened self-interest began to awaken to the need for regulation. As larger and larger chunks of capital were invested in ranch operations, ranchers grew uneasy about the vagueness of their legal basis to graze on federal land. In 1884, the National Cattle Growers Convention passed a resolution favoring a federal leasing program. In 1898, the American National Livestock Association passed resolutions asking that public lands be given protection from overgrazing. Still, these pleas went unheeded. Three years later, the American Cattle Growers endorsed a congressional bill that would impose lease fees; the bill withered.

In 1901, Teddy Roosevelt, an avid big game hunter and conservationist, swept into the White House with a promise of progressive reform. Roosevelt had spent considerable time hunting in the West and recognized that the range was in trouble. In 1903, he assembled a group of experts to advise him on issues of rangeland deterioration and the possible need for government intervention. The report of the Public Land Commission was presented to Congress in 1906. It stated:

The general lack of control in the use of public grazing lands has resulted, naturally and inevitably, in overgrazing and the ruin of millions of acres of otherwise valuable grazing territory. Lands useful for grazing are losing their only capacity for productiveness, as, of course, they must when no legal control is exercised.¹⁶

Included in the report were the results of a survey that gathered the opinions of 1,400 stockmen from throughout the West. An impressive 78 percent favored some sort of government control of grazing.¹⁷ Yet the commission's report was ignored by Congress.

Why was there such stout resistance to implementing range regulation? Some congressmen invoked lofty ideals of freedom and democracy in their opposition to regulation. Some were convinced that range ills would be cured more effectively by providing individual citizens with private homesteads. Until the mid-1920s, turf wars between the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior also worked against action, as both bureaucracies claimed to be the logical overseer of the range. Some westerners objected to "government meddling" just on principle. "States' righters" insisted that public lands should be given to the states. That many states didn't want federal lands was, apparently, an irrelevant detail. Also inhibiting any move toward a rangeland policy was the plain fact that the general public was less interested in grasslands and deserts than in forests.

By 1920, Congress had snubbed several major initiatives for reforming grazing policy.¹⁸ After America entered World War I in 1917, the needs of hungry soldiers increased the demand for beef—and decreased public concern with the health of rangelands. Livestock numbers swelled to their highest peaks since the crash of the 1880s, even though none of the ecological problems of that era had been rectified.

During the gleeful profligacy of the Roaring Twenties, conservation issues receded even further from the public eye. Behind closed doors, debate on grazing policy focused on the pros and cons of a leasing system for the public domain, and which department might administer it—Interior or Agriculture.¹⁹ In spite of Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot's utilitarian jump start, the Forest Service was unpopular with many ranchers because it had had the gall to charge fees for what had always come free with the scenery—the right to graze. The Forest Service found itself caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. The nation had wracked up a huge debt during the war, and Congress was sniffing everywhere for cash. The House committees on agriculture and forestry, especially, pushed the Forest Service to raise grazing fees.

Stockmen across the West set their political friends into motion. The result was that while some congressmen were wagging their fingers at the Forest Service for charging stockmen too little, others, from the West, were denouncing the agency for having the audacity to charge anything at all.²⁰ Despite the stalemate, the hard times of the Great Depression—economic, ecological, and governmental—argued against continued complacency. The time was overdue for the federal government to acknowledge that livestock grazing on its lands demanded action.

In 1932, a bill that would have established federal oversight of livestock grazing was endorsed by both the Interior and Agriculture Departments and approved by the House of Representatives, but it shriveled in the Senate. Nonetheless, it was the first time a grazing bill had ever passed either house of Congress. Edward Taylor, a conservative congressman from the western slope of Colorado and a prominent voice for states' rights for a quarter of a century, had come to realize that transferring federal lands to states was politically unpalatable nationally, and might not help the range anyway. He reintroduced the failed bill and promoted it forcefully.

Many western congressmen attacked the bill as an assault on the American dream. Debate followed familiar grooves—grazing regulation was antidemocratic and anti-individual. Taylor responded:

The West was built . . . largely upon the courage, privations, and frightfully hard work of the pioneer homesteaders. . . . But my dear sirs, if those hardy pioneers had had to go onto the kind of barren land that is contemplated within this bill, the West would still be a barren wilderness.²¹

Congress shuffled along, avoiding decision. But in the strain of the Depression and the fresh hope of the New Deal, public sentiment veered toward action. The Dust Bowl became harder and harder to ignore, as it literally dominated the atmosphere of the country.

Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes upped the ante. He discovered that he had legal authority to create a federal reservation out of all otherwise undesignated federal lands—which included the vast majority of the public range.

The bill's progress toward passage suddenly sped up, and it was passed by the House of Representatives in April 1934. The next month, a ghostly presence descended on Washington and made senators take heed of the issue they had been endlessly debating. Some of the worst dust clouds in history blocked the prairie sun, then, buoyed by prevailing winds, blew a thousand miles and filtered down around the Capitol. The Senate approved the bill the following month, and President Roosevelt signed the Taylor Grazing Act into law on June 28, 1934.²² The United States of America was now in the business of managing its rangelands.

The Taylor Grazing Act officially ended the giveaway policy for federal lands, which had been the cornerstone of national land policy since the Revolution. All federal lands that had not already been appropriated or given away were set aside as “the public domain.” But the heart of the act was its resolve to manage livestock grazing on this newly designated land: “To stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing overgrazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development, to stabilize the livestock industry dependent upon the public range, and for other purposes.” The act authorized the secretary of the interior to establish grazing districts on lands that were, in his opinion, valuable chiefly for grazing. Furthermore, the secretary was instructed to provide “for cooperation with local associations of stockmen, State land officials and official State agencies engaged in conservation . . . of wild life.”

Ickes created a Division of Grazing within the Department of the Interior; five years later its name would change to the U.S. Grazing Service. Farrington Carpenter, a Colorado rancher who had studied law at Harvard and Princeton, was named as its first head. Carpenter immediately set up a series of meetings with ranchers throughout the West to discuss the new law. Committed to local control of grazing policy, he coined a phrase still heard today—“home rule on the range.” He created grazing district advisory boards, composed exclusively of ranchers.

From the very first, local ranchers were given control over such issues as who should receive permits and how many animals the range could handle. In 1940, representatives from district advisory boards were organized into a National Advisory Board Council, which wielded tremendous influence nationwide. A member of that council later recollected that ranchers wrote the entire Federal Range Code at the council's first meeting, with government officials polite enough to offer to leave so as not to interfere.²³

Meeting the two primary goals of the Taylor Grazing Act—stopping injury to rangelands and stabilizing the livestock industry—required two basic decisions: How many livestock could the range reasonably support? And whose stock should they be? To answer the first question, the government relied on the opinions of local advisory boards, since neither funding, personnel, nor inclination existed to conduct scientific studies of carrying capacity.

The second question—which stockmen would get to use the public domain—was especially touchy. The majority of previous users had to go; there simply wasn't enough land for all. Carpenter's interpretation of the Taylor Grazing Act clarified criteria for determining who should receive one of the initial grazing permits. First, priority was given to landowners and those with water rights. Second, priority was given to ranchers who owned enough land to partially sustain their livestock, but not so much land that they didn't need public

forage. Still, there remained three times too many applicants. So Carpenter established another crucial criterion: preference would be given to those who had customarily used the land in the past—in a sense, codifying squatter’s rights. Since it was often impossible to determine who, in fact, had been first in an area, the Department of the Interior set up a “priority period” of the five years immediately prior to the passage of the act.

Using these guideposts—land ownership, water rights, intermediate scale of ranch operation, and activity during the five-year priority period—the Division of Grazing largely succeeded at stabilizing the livestock industry in the West. Obtaining one of those precious few original permits was a wind-fall.²⁴ Those families that prevailed in the mid-1930s sweepstakes endure today as those with public land grazing “rights” (more accurately, privileges). The Taylor Grazing Act, and its subsequent clarifying interpretations, remains the most pivotal legislation concerning livestock grazing—“the watershed event” in grazing law, according to legal scholars.²⁵

During the World War II years, the Grazing Service lost popularity among range users for the same reason the Forest Service had a couple of decades earlier—grazing fees. When the Grazing Service tried to raise grazing fees, ranchers and their political allies erupted. The Grazing Service found itself trapped in a crossfire of congressional factions, with the result that its funding was cut by almost 90 percent. Meanwhile, another Department of the Interior agency, the General Land Office, had been running out of work. For a century, it had been responsible for the “disposal” of federal land—recording homestead claims and land grants to railroads and states. But the Taylor Grazing Act had effectively closed the frontier, and so no more land was to be given away.

In 1946, the two sister agencies in the Department of the Interior were melded into a new one—the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Congress created the BLM without providing any clear mandate on its mission. Two things were clear, though: the BLM’s primary business was livestock grazing, and the new agency had inherited a shaky relationship with Congress.

The BLM faced a daunting set of challenges: ranchers wanted fees kept low, Congress wanted revenues, and it was expected to heal rangelands and stabilize the livestock industry. To make things worse, Congress trimmed the agency’s budget: only eighty-six people remained to oversee 150 million acres of grazing land. The grazing district advisory boards, fearing a return to unregulated chaos, deflected funds they had been given for range improvements to pay salaries of BLM range employees. Thus, within the first couple of years of the BLM’s history, its primary task—regulation of the range—was only being accomplished by the good graces of the very people it was supposed to be regulating.²⁶

In 1948, Marion Clawson, who came from a Nevada ranch family and had a doctorate in economics from Harvard, was appointed director of the BLM. Clawson immediately set out to professionalize the agency. He shifted emphasis from Washington to field offices in the West and pushed the BLM toward the emerging concept of “multiple use”—the idea that public lands should be managed for more values than just livestock grazing. But Clawson’s tenure as a strong leader for the BLM ran up against familiar obstacles. In 1953, newly elected President Eisenhower chose Douglas McKay, governor of Oregon and former Chevrolet salesman, as secretary of the interior. McKay boasted, “We’re here in the saddle as an administration representing business and industry.”

Giveaway McKay, as he soon became known, couldn’t tolerate a BLM director like Clawson, who believed that government had an essential role in conserving rangelands. Within months of Eisenhower’s inauguration, Marion Clawson was unemployed.²⁷

Gradually, though, the BLM widened its view to encompass broader concerns. In the 1960s, the agency began to create “allotment management plans” for each grazing allotment, paying heed to values besides the production of beef. The Forest Service had officially become a “multiple-use” agency in 1960. Upon passage of the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act, national forests were to be managed for five uses—timber, range, watershed, recreation, and fish and wildlife.²⁸ In 1964, Congress directed the BLM to follow the Forest Service down the multiple-use path. The Classification and Multiple Use Act (CMU), however, was only a temporary measure. In 1970, the CMU expired, and once again the BLM had no multiple-use mandate on the books.

Public lands management began to come of age, and natural resources laws tumbled out of Congress like pebbles down a chute. But most of this new environmental legislation passed rangelands by, like a cloud drifting over a mountain crest, dissipating in the dry air of the rain shadow. BLM lands went conspicuously unmentioned in the Wilderness Act. No new additions were made to BLM holdings to complement spectacular new national parks. Public concern over falling trees, chemicals in the air, and poisons in the water mounted visibly. But the simple munching of cattle on the range? The expanding environmental movement didn’t think to comment on it. Four decades after its genesis, and a decade and a half after the Forest Service became a multiple-use agency, the Bureau of Land Management still hobbled along as well as it could without any clear mission statement. The agency continued to operate according to the nebulous guidelines of the Taylor Grazing Act and the unofficial traditions that sprang up in its wake. That was about to change.

In 1976, Congress passed the most significant law relating to BLM lands since the Taylor Grazing Act. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) provided comprehensive direction to the BLM. The new law confirmed that the BLM was a multiple-use agency. Six uses were classified as appropriate: grazing, fish and wildlife, minerals, rights-of-way, recreation, and timber. Prior to FLPMA’s passage, over three thousand federal laws pertained to BLM lands; the new law superseded more than three hundred of them. For all its sweeping revisions and synthesis, though, FLPMA lacked clarity. Bedeviled by political compromise, Congress, in effect, told the BLM to consider conflicting values, but didn’t specify any standards or desired results.²⁹

In Nevada, in 1978, three men who held BLM grazing permits, disgruntled with the environmental bent of Jimmy Carter’s White House, put their heads together and developed a line of reasoning that seemed rock solid: federal lands in western states like Nevada and Utah, where Uncle Sam controlled so much of the land, should be handed over to the states. These three ranchers also happened to be legislators in the Nevada State Assembly, and within a year the assembly had passed a bill that called for state control of all BLM lands in Nevada. Quickly, they were imitated: Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming all passed similar bills. These self-styled revolutionaries called themselves “Sagebrush Rebels.” In the presidential campaign that year, the Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan, grinned broadly as he said, “Count me in!” When he won in a landslide, Reagan installed well-known antiregula-

tion champions into key roles: James Watt as secretary of the interior and Robert Burford, a rancher, as director of the BLM. Soon, what had been demands from the western fringe became official government policy.³⁰

Resisting Change

A glance at the history of grazing politics reveals a remarkable consistency of controversies. Consider, for example, these two congressional opinions, uttered sixty years apart—Representative Ayres of Montana in 1933: “The trials and tribulations of the western people are only a magazine story to these bureaucrats” and Senator Simpson of Wyoming in 1993: “We are defending a Western life style in this Administration’s war on the West.”³¹

For several decades, it has been commonplace to hear some ranchers heartily complaining that the federal bureaucracy is impinging on their rights. Others have objected to academic scientists who don’t live on their land telling them anything about it. West has often been pitted against East, but this mistrust and acrimony, like the prevailing winds, has generally flowed eastward, not westward. Congresspeople from range states have struggled to get government “off the backs” of their constituents, and have—if they get riled up enough—introduced legislation that would give federal land to western states. The same political scenario repeated itself in 1929, 1945, 1979, and 1994: Republicans took back control of Congress, and conservative congressmen began to flex their muscles by introducing bills to transfer millions of acres of federal land to their states.³²

Were the Forest Service to announce that every single acre of forest was suitable for logging, the public would probably shriek. But the BLM has made an analogous decision for rangelands—grazing is still authorized on the vast majority of the BLM’s 177 million acres in the lower forty-eight states³³—and the public has responded with indifference. How has the ranching industry kept such a muscular grip on public policy and resisted new views of land use so successfully? The answers to this question include social, historical, literary, and—above all—political perspectives. Formidable cultural forces have worked to maintain the status quo of livestock grazing on public lands.

In his classic work *Politics and Grass*, Philip Foss analyzed problems with federal grazing policy. To begin with, he said, early federal homestead policies forced overgrazing by encouraging stockmen to stuff too many cattle on nibbins of land that were too small and too dry. Ecological abuse of the range became entrenched in tradition. Our political process itself worked to resist change, as everyday aspects of the American governmental system coincidentally served ranching interests. In the U.S. Senate, sparsely populated western states are represented disproportionately—every state, whether New York or Nevada, has but two voices. Thus, over a quarter of senators represent western grazing states. Western politicians tend to be unified in their defense of ranching interests, whereas eastern politicians know or care little about grazing issues. Besides, a senator from Ohio doesn’t gain much political capital in Cleveland or Cincinnati by challenging ranchers, but a senator from Utah surely loses points if he or she doesn’t defend grazing privileges.

Ranchers were among the first settlers in much of the West, and their control of land quickly translated into political influence among state politicians. In fact, in many cases, western politicians have been ranchers. In both houses of Congress, representatives from western states scramble to chair subcommit-

tees that oversee range policy. Thus, over the years, a small number of western politicians have exerted enormous control over federal grazing policy. Foss referred to this as a “special private government,” rather than a “general public government.” This special government dutifully serves the interests of one private group—ranchers—while holding true to rhetoric about the public good.³⁴

Grazing district advisory boards are an example of what political scientists call a “captured” policy pattern: control of a policy by the very group such policy is supposed to regulate. In the 1930s, when the Taylor Grazing Act first codified grazing regulation, a view known to political scientists as “interest-group liberalism”—in which interest groups make policy for their own economic realms—held sway.³⁵ No other interest group has ever played this game of institutionalized self-interest as effectively as ranchers. During the legislative battles concerning the Taylor Grazing Act in the 1930s and FLPMA in the 1970s, ranchers succeeded at diffusing the laws’ regulatory authority.

Legal scholars have described FLPMA as a “not very good law . . . [that] represent[s] congressional buck-passing,” “internally inconsistent,” and “schizophrenic.”³⁶ Furthermore, judicial interpretation of this muddled law has discouraged federal land managers from applying it too enthusiastically. Legal analysts have noted that, because of lack of public interest, rangelands have avoided “many environmental laws and safeguards that have become common in other areas of modern public land law.”³⁷

The structure of the BLM itself contributes to a lackadaisical approach to grazing regulation. As part of Marion Clawson’s initial reforms, the bureau is alone among federal land management agencies in being administered by a separate office in each state. Compared with other agencies, each state is largely a world unto itself. Like the local grazing advisory boards, this state-by-state structure of the BLM simplifies the expression of local political will.

More fundamentally, though, Americans have a love affair with the imagery and symbolism of cowboys. Within any culture, stories undergird attitudes and biases. In the American mind, the West is equated with cowboys.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a few observers in the media began to scrutinize range management more carefully. In 1972, *Readers Digest* published an article entitled “Nibbling Away at the West.” A few years later, *Audubon* carried a piece called “The Eating of the West.” By 1985, the sportsmen’s magazine *Outdoor Life* had weighed in with an editorial that proclaimed “fish and wildlife’s biggest enemy is the excessive livestock grazing being done on more than 200 million acres of rangelands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.”³⁸

In the 1980s, an upsurge in public recognition of the recreational potential of BLM lands, especially in the Southwest, collided with a growing awareness that livestock were just about everywhere. Range management, which had been consistently ignored by the general public, began to be an issue of broader concern. Using rangelands for fun was a novel concept. The BLM was not funded for recreation until 1965. But as hikers, bikers, and environmentalists penetrated the once-exclusive domain of ranchers, they didn’t always like what they saw. Bare ground and cow pies inspired disgruntled comments on trailhead registers: “Get the cows out!” “Welcome to Cowpie National Monument!” and “I found some grass—put more cows in, quick!” Bumperstickers with slogans like “Stop Welfare Ranching” began to appear

on out-of-state cars at BLM trailheads. By the 1990s, contention was more abundant than forage on the western range. Drove of recreationists grew incensed that public lands were littered with feces and hoofprints. Environmentalists were fanning the flames of outrage at ecological abuse and economic subsidy. And ranchers circled their wagons in an understandably defensive stance.

Throughout the history of range management, the basic assumption that livestock grazing was the most sensible use of the arid West had gone unchallenged. The first sentence of the first textbook on range management was “The West is a land of livestock grazing.”³⁹ But, beginning in the late 1970s, academic scientists and professional land managers began to probe deeper into grazing issues. A government symposium in 1977 concluded that grazing was “the single most important factor limiting wildlife production in the West.”⁴⁰ An interagency committee in Oregon and Washington, composed of state and federal biologists, quietly released a report in 1979 concluding that livestock grazing was the most important factor degrading fish and other wildlife habitat in the eleven western states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming).⁴¹ Ecologists began to squawk more frequently about the awful consequences of cattle grazing in riparian areas.

Whereas range scientists had focused on forage, productivity, and effects on a few game species, more broad-based studies found that livestock grazing might be less benign in arid western ecosystems than previously thought. Biologists were especially concerned about livestock effects on western riparian areas, which are among the most productive habitats in North America, essential to many wildlife species for breeding, wintering, and migration. Cattle, too, prefer riparian areas for their shade, cooler temperatures, and

water. In addition, riparian zones have more abundant food. Not surprisingly, cattle spend a disproportionate amount of their time in riparian zones, where they inflict considerable damage. The Environmental Protection Agency concluded that riparian conditions throughout the West are now the worst in American history—livestock grazing is a primary reason.⁴²

Scientists began to realize that these sorts of effects are remarkably widespread. In the eleven western states, 70 percent of the land area is grazed by livestock. In terms of the extent of area affected, other types of land use—logging, mining, crop agriculture—pale in comparison.⁴³ Significantly, in the 1990s, the normally staid scientific community began to clear its throat and speak with a firmer voice. The American Fisheries Society, the Society for Conservation Biology, and the Wildlife Society all endorsed formal position statements on the nefarious biological consequences of grazing. “Livestock grazing . . . has a host of negative ecological repercussions. . . . Much of the ecological integrity of a variety of North American habitats is at risk,” intoned the conservation biologists. “The inherent productivity and ability to sustain fish, wildlife, and livestock is in jeopardy,” echoed the wildlife biologists.⁴⁴

Five hundred years after the first domestic cattle and sheep arrived in the Americas, and 450 years after they were brought to the western United States, domestic livestock are still nearly ubiquitous. Meanwhile, scores of native animal and plant species have been pushed to the margins. Some species are now extinct, owing in large part to the prerogatives of ranchers and the imperatives of an industry ill suited to the rugged, arid landscape. It remains to be seen whether future reforms, unlike those of the past, will make significant progress toward salvaging the native species, clean, free-flowing water, and diverse biological communities of the West.

Sunset and moonrise over sagebrush-covered Bureau of Land Management lands, Jarbidge area of southwest Idaho. The best use of the West’s arid lands had long been thought to be livestock grazing. Today, many Americans—informed by ecological science and inspired by spacious western landscapes—wish to see native species instead of cows and sheep and believe the public lands are best utilized as sanctuaries of biological diversity and natural beauty.

