



RANCHING MYTHS

MYTH

Ranchers Are Good Stewards of the Land

TRUTH



Cattle at water trough, Bureau of Land Management lands, eastern Oregon.

More than 410 million acres of U.S. rangelands—public and private—are in unsatisfactory ecological condition, according to an estimate by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. This is an area four times the size of California, or 21 percent of the continental United States, and nearly all of it is in the West. These lands are severely damaged, with at least 50 percent of the desirable plant species eliminated, high erosion and weed invasion rates, and riparian areas unable to function normally.

Although public lands usually get more attention from the media, statistics compiled by the Natural Resources Conservation Service indicate that more total acres and a higher percentage of private lands in the West are in unsatisfactory condition as compared with public rangelands. This is particularly egregious in that private lands tend to be more productive and better watered than public lands—hence more resilient to livestock abuses.

In truth, ranchers are fighting an impossible battle against the natural limitations of the landscape. The West is not only an arid region but one in which annual precipitation varies widely. The amount of precipitation that falls in a year is directly reflected in the amount of grass production, meaning that forage quantity varies widely from year to year as well. This makes it very difficult for ranchers to maintain a stable business operation while also managing herds so as not to damage the land.

To be a good steward, ideally one not only must have a sense of responsibility and concern for the land—as many ranchers do—but also must treat the land in a way that conserves its fertility, productivity, diversity, and beauty for the future. Yet by raising domestic animals that demand large quantities of water and forage in a place that is dry, and by favoring slow-moving, heavy, and relatively defenseless livestock in terrain that is rugged, vast, and inhabited by native predators, ranchers have put themselves in a position of constant warfare with the land. They funnel most of the grass into their own animals, at the expense of the wild herbivores. They divert water from rivers to grow hay and other crops to feed cows, leaving fish and other aquatic life with hot, shallow trickles. They allow their cattle to graze and trample riparian areas—habitat on which 75 to 80 percent of all wild animal species in the West depend—polluting waterways with manure and adding excessive sediments to the water as they denude the land. And although “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” it’s arguable whether most people would prefer a place where the grass is chewed down to stubs and the ground is littered with cow pies, over a grassland of tall and waving stems, dotted with wildflowers.

Windmill and water storage tank, Arizona.

MYTH

Rangeland Conditions Are Improving

TRUTH



Spring trampled by cattle, Humboldt National Forest, Nevada.

Rangelands were so severely overgrazed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that most places just couldn't get any worse. Since then, there has been limited improvement, mostly because of a steep reduction in domestic sheep numbers. Yet it would be wrong to imply that our rangelands are seeing significant advances toward biological sustainability. Hundreds of millions of acres are still in an ecologically degraded condition. For example, according to statistics compiled by the Society for Range Management, 15 percent of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands are improving in ecological condition and function. However, 14 percent of BLM lands are continuing to decline. And although the vast majority of BLM holdings are rated "stable," a

high proportion of the acreage in this category is in such poor shape that it cannot get much worse. Livestock proponents like to say that the majority of western rangelands are "stable and improving." Yet by combining the large percentage of "stable" lands with the smaller percentage of "improving" lands, what livestock advocates have done is to disguise the reality that most of these public lands are ecological disaster zones.

Most improvement on public lands has been on the uplands (areas upslope of valley bottoms and streams), because of the decreasing numbers of livestock there, while the devastation of biologically critical riparian areas continues. In fact, according to a 1990 Environmental Protection Agency report, riparian areas are in the "worst condition in history." And, as a 1989 General Accounting Office report found, livestock are the major source of riparian degradation on public lands in the West. It is possible for livestock proponents to claim that the range condition of a particular allotment is improving even while the riparian zones within it are worsening, because of the way official range assessments average all parts of an allotment together.

In most cases, improvement on an allotment is a consequence of lowered stock density or a shortened grazing season. In effect, fewer livestock means better range condition, and in nearly all instances, termination of all livestock grazing would result in much more rapid rangeland recovery.

MYTH

Livestock Benefit Wildlife

TRUTH



Bighorn sheep ram.

Hundreds of species across the West are in danger of extinction, primarily because of livestock production. Species as varied as the Bruneau Hot Spring-snail, the southwestern willow flycatcher, and the Bonneville cutthroat trout are in jeopardy as a consequence of habitat loss or degradation due to livestock grazing and its associated activities. No other human activity in the West is as responsible for the decline or loss of species as is livestock production.

Predator and pest control has extirpated many species, from wolves to prairie dogs. Dewatering of rivers for irrigation has contributed to the decline of many aquatic species, including many native trout. Livestock trampling of riparian areas, wet meadows, seeps, and springs has harmed habitat for a great variety of creatures, from songbirds to frogs. Livestock consumption of grass and other vegetation decreases hiding cover for many animals, making them more vulnerable to predators. Disease transmission from livestock to wildlife, as has frequently occurred with domestic and bighorn sheep, can diminish or eliminate certain wild animal populations. Most forage on public rangelands is allotted to livestock, leaving little food for native species to consume.

A few species have increased with the spread of livestock production. Yet, just as one could demonstrate that rats and pigeons flourish in the city and thereby incorrectly assert that wildlife benefit from urbanization, so too is it false to point to the proliferation of deer, Canada geese, cowbirds, and a few other opportunists and suggest that livestock production enhances conditions for wildlife in general.

Several big-game species, such as elk, pronghorn antelope, and bighorn sheep, have increased from early twentieth-century lows, when market and subsistence hunting nearly drove them to extinction. However, the rise in the numbers of these species is a consequence of intensive game management—such as adoption of strict hunting seasons, reintroductions, and habitat acquisition—rather than any inherent compatibility with livestock. Indeed, many of these big-game animals are still limited by having to compete for forage, water, and space with domestic livestock.

Livestock advocates suggest that water developments, such as troughs and stock ponds, benefit wildlife. While some wild animals undoubtedly use them, these facilities tend to lack adequate surrounding vegetation for hiding cover, nesting habitat, foraging, and other wildlife needs. Thus, these structures are almost useless to most wild species, and they exist at the expense of natural seeps, springs, and streams that would support far more native creatures if left intact.

MYTH

Public Lands Grazing Supports the Family Rancher

TRUTH



Cowboys herding cattle.

Public lands grazing subsidies, like most agricultural subsidies, disproportionately benefit large landholders. In a 1992 Government Accounting Office profile of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permittees, the largest 500 permittees, out of nearly 20,000 total, controlled 36 percent of the public lands forage. Just 16 percent of all permittees controlled 76.2 percent of the AUMs (animal unit months—one AUM being the amount of forage required by a cow-calf pair for a month) available on BLM lands. Most of these permittees were big corporations or very wealthy individuals. The smallest 2,000 permittees controlled less than 0.13 percent of BLM forage.

This inequality is a result of the process for assigning public lands allotments. Access to permits requires ownership of private base operations. Since wealthy ranchers own more land, and thus more base property, they wind up with more federal lands allotments.

In addition, few ranchers depend entirely on their public lands allotments to meet all their forage needs. Although the percentage varies from operation to operation and state to state, most ranchers fulfill the majority of their annual forage needs from private lands. Only the largest operations actually use public lands for a significant amount of their livestock's forage. If the public lands were to become unavailable to these large ranches, most of their operators could reasonably afford alternatives for grazing their stock.

Alternatively, most smaller ranches today represent status or lifestyle choices for their owners—the vast majority of ranchers who use public lands. Most western ranches do not depend exclusively on livestock for their income, or for even an important fraction of their income. Growing and selling livestock is usually a break-even enterprise at best. Jobs in town or other business ventures are what allow families to maintain their status and appearance as “ranchers”—not running cattle or sheep on the range. If these ranchers chose to give up, or were forced to relinquish, their public lands allotments, most would adjust through reducing their herd size to match their private holdings, or through leasing the private grazing lands of other landowners. Family ranchers might also continue to diversify their income—as many are already doing—either with new enterprises on the ranch (for example, guest ranches, and guided fishing and hunting), or with other work off the ranch.

MYTH

Cattle Have Replaced the Bison

TRUTH



Bull bison.

Although cattle and bison have a common evolutionary ancestor, so do the polar bear and black bear. Yet we would not suggest that these two bears can inhabit the same type of landscape or that they are ecological analogues of one another. Cattle evolved in moist Eurasian woodlands and are poorly adapted to arid regions. In comparison with bison, cattle use more water, spend more time in riparian areas, and are less mobile. They are poorly adapted to dry western rangelands—one reason why livestock grazing has been so detrimental to these ecosystems.

Bison feed in one place for a few days, then move on, whereas cattle tend to “camp out” in the same location for weeks, overgrazing the landscape in the process. Bison survive on available, native forage. Cattle require extra feed to survive northern winters, which typically means hay production and accompanying dewatering of streams. Cattle are poorly adapted to dealing with predators, being rather slow and unintelligent. Bison retain their wild instincts for avoiding and fending off wolves, grizzlies, and other carnivores.

Wild bison functioned within ecosystems in ways that livestock do not. Their bodies served as food for predators and were scavenged by ravens, coyotes, and magpies. What was left of their carcasses decomposed and was returned to the soil. Bison were a part of, and contributed to, a great diversity of life. Livestock, on the other hand, represent a large net loss of energy and biomass to an ecosystem, as their bodies are removed for human consumption elsewhere.

Despite the simplistic claim that cows merely replace bison, it's not just bison that have been replaced by this exotic, domesticated species. On most rangelands today, cattle are the *only* major herbivore. Yet in the days before livestock, an entire suite of species fed on the grassland plants, from grasshoppers and sage grouse to prairie dogs and pronghorn. Substituting a single species—with different dietary preferences—for this diverse group of herbivores results in overuse of some plant species and grants competitive advantage to others. These other plants are often invasive and less palatable to many native herbivores.

MYTH

Rangelands Must Be Grazed to Stay Healthy

TRUTH



Enclosure, for studying range where livestock are excluded, Boise National Forest, Idaho.

Over much of the area that is now public land in the West, native plant communities evolved largely in the absence of grazing herd animals. Between the Sierra Nevada–Cascade crest and the Rocky Mountains lies the arid Intermountain West, composed of areas such as the Great Basin, the Palouse prairie, and the deserts of the Southwest, where bison were mostly absent and even herds of pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, elk, and other herbivores tended to be small and widely distributed. Consequently, the plant species of this region are not adapted to continual heavy grazing and trampling, as occurs with domestic livestock.

Yet some livestock proponents argue that although no large herds of grazing or browsing animals occurred in the Intermountain West in historic times, during the last Ice Age great numbers of wild horses, mastodons, giant sloths, and other herbivores roamed these lands. Thus, livestock advocates claim, cattle are merely filling a niche left empty since the extinction of these Pleistocene mammals. The problem, however, is that climatic conditions were very different during the Ice Age—precipitation was higher, for example—and plant communities were much different in composition, as well as generally more productive than today. Cattle are not filling some long-vacant ecological niche but are, in fact, exotic animals that have dramatically altered the native plant communities of the arid West.

Even where large herds of bison, elk, and pronghorn were common, such as on the Great Plains, plants do not need to be grazed. Rather, many Great Plains grasses *tolerate* grazing by compensating for losses in leaf and stem materials through additional growth. However, when plants move carbohydrates up from their roots to produce new leaves, root growth may slow, and seed production may be inhibited. Only plants with unlimited access to water and nutrients and with no competition (conditions found only in a growth chamber) can withstand repeated cropping without harm. In nature, plants repeatedly munched by livestock suffer from diminished root mass—a potentially lethal situation for the plant during a drought. Of course, drought occurs commonly in the West, including the Great Plains.

MYTH

Ranching Is the Foundation of Rural Economies

TRUTH



Cows in stream, southern Arizona.

Many livestock supporters attempt to portray public lands livestock production as an essential element of rural economies. It's easy to see the fallacy in this argument if you think about the numbers involved. For example, in Nevada there are fewer than 800 public lands grazing permittees. And in the entire state less than 2,000 people are engaged full-time as farmers or ranchers. One casino in Las Vegas employs more people than work in agriculture in all of Nevada. Although other states may have higher numbers of people involved in ranching, livestock production is proportionally a small part of the economic picture in all western states.

Ranching and associated activities provide very few jobs. Furthermore, most ranch operations, except the very biggest, are not highly profitable. Both of these truths help explain the rather interesting finding of one University of Arizona study: that instead of rural towns being dependent on the livestock industry for their economic survival, the reverse was true. Ranch families depend on nearby towns and cities to provide full- or part-time jobs that help keep the ranch financially afloat. Without family income from such positions as schoolteachers, local civil servants, store clerks, salespeople, and so forth, ranch ownership would be impossible. The vast majority of people who call themselves ranchers enjoy the lifestyle and the prestige, but they are not choosing a lucrative pursuit (as indeed many will complain!). Therefore, it can be argued that, financially, rural towns would likely survive without ranchers, but most ranchers would be hard-pressed to survive without the towns.

As ranching is relatively unimportant in local economies, it is even less important on state and regional scales. According to the Department of the Interior's 1994 *Rangeland Reform Environmental Impact Statement*, the elimination of all public lands livestock grazing would result in a loss of 18,300 jobs in agriculture and related industries across the entire West, or approximately 0.1 percent of the West's total employment. Natural resource economist Thomas Power has calculated that all ranching in the West, on both public and private lands, accounts for less than 0.5 percent of all income received by western residents.

MYTH

It's Either Ranching or Subdivisions

TRUTH



Ranch for sale.

Livestock advocates try to silence critics by saying that reducing or eliminating livestock from public lands will lead to subdivisions. Yet, supporting the livestock industry—even increasing its subsidies—will not stop the parceling out of ranchland into housing tracts.

Ranching in the West has always depended on the ready availability of large acreages of land. Western ranchers have competed with stock growers in more productive regions of the country by using more space, and by getting the forage on that land cheaply. However, when land prices rise, western ranchers lose their one advantage. Wetter, milder areas produce more cattle per acre than western rangelands, without as many of the costs and challenges, such as predators, scarcity of water sources, and the need for miles of fencing.

Subdivision is also market driven. But a supply of millions of acres of land for sale (as is the case in the Great Plains) does not alone draw developers. To be attractive to developers, and to eventual buyers of residential lots and homes, land must offer a favorable mix of amenities: proximity to jobs, outdoor recreation, arts and culture, good schools, a pleasant climate, and beautiful scenery. These are the qualities that stimulate subdivision.

Sprawl has gobbled up farmland in California's Central Valley and the Los Angeles Basin, despite the fact that these are some of the most valuable agricultural lands in the world. There is no way marginal ranches and rangelands in the West can compete when a high demand for housing occurs in an area.

The threat of subdivisions needs to be put in perspective. Ultimately, population growth is the problem. In the meantime, livestock production has a physical footprint far greater than urban and suburban areas. In California—the most populous western state—less than 5 percent of the land area is devoted to cities, towns, and subdivisions. Agriculture—farming and ranching—dominates more than 70 percent of the state's acreage. In other western states, the fraction of land occupied by housing and urban/suburban development is even smaller.

Fortunately, there are at least three proven ways to protect open space, wildlife habitat, and other environmental values on private lands: zoning, conservation easements, and outright fee purchase. If the same amount of money we currently throw away on subsidies to the livestock industry were devoted to protecting and buying up wildlife habitat instead, the land would be far better off.

MYTH

Good Livestock Production and Ecosystem Preservation Can Coexist

TRUTH



Cow-blasted riparian area, Elk Creek, Beaverhead National Forest, Montana.

Perhaps the biggest fallacy perpetrated by the livestock industry is the idea that if we would only reform or modify management practices, there would be room both for livestock and for fully functional ecosystems, native wildlife, clean water, and so on. Unfortunately, even to approach meaningful reform, more intensive management is needed, and such management adds considerably to the costs of operation. More fencing, more water development, more employees to ride the range: whatever the suggested solution, it always requires more money. Given the low productivity of the western landscape, the marginal nature of most western livestock operations, and the growing global competition in meat production, any increase in operational costs cannot be justified or absorbed. If the production of meat as a commodity is the goal, then an equal investment of money in a moister, more productive stock-growing region—such as the Midwest or the eastern United States—would produce far greater returns.

Even if mitigation were economically feasible, we would still be allotting a large percentage of our landscape and resources—including space, water, and forage—to livestock. If grass is going into the belly of a cow, there's that much less grass available to feed wild creatures, from grasshoppers to elk. If water is being drained from a river to grow hay, there's that much less water to support fish, snails, and a host of other life forms. The mere presence of livestock diminishes the native biodiversity of our public lands.

The choice is really between using the public lands to subsidize a private industry or devoting them to ecological protection and preserving the natural heritage of all Americans. On private lands, native species face an uncertain future. It would be a prudent and reasonable goal to make preservation of biological diversity and ecosystem function the primary goal on public lands. To suggest that we know how to conduct logging, livestock grazing, or other large-scale, resource-consumptive uses while sustaining native biodiversity is to perpetuate the greatest myth of all.