

## **The Waste of the West**

### **The Ecological Consequences of Public Lands Livestock Grazing**

*This article was published in the August 2003 issue of the Earthsave newsletter of Portland and Vancouver*

While many vegetarians and vegans choose their lifestyle out of concern for the welfare of our planet, most do not realize the full ecological impact of beef production in the United States. Across 300 million acres of public lands in West—that's roughly 95% of the federal and state lands that belong to us all—cows are laying waste to fragile grasslands, polluting precious rivers and streams, and causing fundamental alterations of native landscapes on a massive scale. They do so with the blessing of \$500 million annually in federal subsidies, and at an ecological cost that can be measured in terms of the two thirds of species on the endangered list who got there due to the impacts of livestock grazing on their habitat.

While feedlots and slaughterhouses come with their own ecological costs, public lands livestock grazing constitutes by far the greatest threat to native ecosystems and wildlife across the western United States. Though more subtle than a clearcut and less engaging to the popular imagination than suburban sprawl and subdivisions, public lands livestock grazing represents a greater environmental threat than all other human activities in the West combined.

The extensive ecological damages wrought by grazing stem from the fundamental reality that 2,000 pound, non-native ungulates have no place in the arid environments found throughout the west. Cows evolved in the mesic environments of Asia, and now they graze throughout areas, such as the Intermountain West, whose fragile soils and native plant communities evolved in the absence of numerous large herbivores. And in those areas where bison were once plentiful, cows have now replaced not only bison but the entire plant and animal community that once surrounded them.

Since cows evolved in far moister climates than those found throughout most of the American West, they tend to congregate in those few riparian areas—the incredibly diverse and rich biological zone surrounding streams and rivers—that they can find. These zones comprise less than 1% of the land area of the arid West, and yet they account for over 80% of the biological diversity. Fish, amphibians, and plants rely on these arteries of life for habitat, birds and small mammals build nests in the trees that grow around rivers and streams, and large fauna such as lynx, cougars, and coyote use riparian corridors for the coolness, food and water sources, and shelter they provide. It is no wonder that the southwestern willow flycatcher, the Chiricahua leopard frog, and the Mexican gray wolf are all critically endangered, given that nearly 90% of all riparian areas in the West have been severely degraded by cattle. Cattle defecate in the water, cause sedimentation by trampling streambanks, and consume riparian vegetation, thereby removing food and shelter for many wild species and causing a wider, warmer stream channel that is inimical to many native forms of life.

Livestock industry spokespeople will often say that these problems are all of the past, that streams can be fenced, cattle herded away from natural water supplies, water developments constructed to pump water out of streams and into cattle troughs in the uplands. Yet the fact remains that water consumed by cattle is no longer there for fish to live in or antelope to drink, that upland water developments become ecological sacrifice zones, that fences often kill wildlife who get caught in them. This is aside from the fact that these so-called range “improvements” are constructed by public agencies at millions of dollars in taxpayer expense, all for the benefit of ranchers.

Fences are not the only side effect of the livestock industry that has devastating consequences for wildlife. Many cattle ranchers profess to be stewards of nature, but will think nothing of eliminating any wild creature perceived to be a threat to their stock. Mexican gray wolves once roamed freely throughout the Southwestern United States; the last one was shot in the 1920’s after a 6-year campaign, carried out by ranchers and a government agency euphemistically known as Wildlife Services, of systematic poisoning, trapping, and shooting aimed at eliminating this predator from the wild. Although Mexican gray wolves are now being reintroduced in Arizona from a remnant population in Mexico, these wolves continue to be targeted by the livestock industry and it is questionable whether any wolves remain in the wild. Prairie dogs are now endangered in many parts of the West, after being systematically poisoned by ranchers and Wildlife Services in the 1930’s. Along with the decline in prairie dogs has come a decline in numerous other species, as roughly 200 other species are associated with the colonies of this charismatic, incredibly social animal and rely upon it for food, shelter, or some combination thereof.

The impacts of 150 years of grazing by domestic animals on western native ecosystems are clearly too extensive to elucidate here to any degree of completion. Even from this brief overview, however, the bottom line should be clear: the consumption of “free range” beef should not be a palliative to the meat-eater’s conscience. This is true even for the cows themselves, as range-fed cows are left with little supervision on near-desert lands, often to starve in an extremely hostile environment.

The ecological ravages of the cowboy and his stock will come as a surprise to many, largely because the myth of the cowboy holds such sway in the American consciousness. From the Marlboro Man to the Virginian, cowboys are portrayed in the American media as virile, strong, independent, and romantic, and Americans buy into this image wholeheartedly. Most think of ranchers as benign, hardworking stewards of the land, honest, masculine, and trustworthy. Indeed, it is largely because the cowboy myth is so embedded in the American consciousness—and has such uniformly positive associations for most of us—that activists have had such difficulty making progress toward grazing reform.

Fortunately, though the cowboy myth may be a long-lived fixture in mainstream consciousness, activists have devised some creative ways to ensure that the reign of their industry on our public lands is not so enduring. The past two years have seen the birth of the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign (NPLGC), a network of environmental

organizations that has come together with the single goal of ending livestock grazing on public lands. Their strategy is simple: take the millions of taxpayer dollars that now go into building stock tanks, providing emergency drought assistance to ranchers, and crisscrossing our western wild lands with barbed wire, and use them to make one-time payments to ranchers who are willing to retire their public lands grazing permits forever. The plan is generating enthusiasm among ranchers and conservationists alike, and is fast gaining momentum on Capitol Hill, where U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Connecticut) will lead legislation to make the buyout proposal a reality. To help bring about a realistic, achievable, win-win solution to the public lands grazing disaster, you can contact your congresspeople and tell them to cosponsor grazing permit buyout legislation.

For more information on the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign and the impacts of grazing on the ecosystems of the West, please visit the NPLGC website at [www.publiclandsranching.org](http://www.publiclandsranching.org). The fate of the American West hangs in the balance, and the choice between a landscape devoted to cattle production, and one devoted to native wildlife and vibrant ecosystems, is one we can all make.