

# Romance of Rangeland Resource Management

C. Arden Pope III

I grew up as the son of a rancher and farmer in the public lands states of Wyoming and Idaho. As a youth, I was exposed to the "Better-the-Devil-own-it-than-Uncle-Sam," and "Damn-the-BLM-and-the-Forest-Service" philosophy. As a boy, I cared little about anything but horses, guns, knives, and growing up to be a man. To me as to many boys in the rural West, manhood was exemplified by an image of the cowboy or rancher. Many of us have never completely overcome romantic notions of horses, cows, cowboys, and ranchers. As I have been actively involved in research dealing primarily with agricultural production and natural resource economics, I have found it impossible to ignore the importance of romance and other emotions akin to it in economic decision-making. This is particularly true when dealing with cow-calf operations and public rangeland uses.

An example that illustrates this occurred in Iowa following a two-year research project dealing with the economics of soil and water conservation practices. Beef cow-calf operations were common in several study areas but no reasonable set of prices or economic conditions of the time could make a cow-calf enterprise an economically feasible alternative in our economic models. When forced in by constraint they would result in a reduction in profits for the whole farm operation (See Krog et al. 1983). Almost any type of hog operation was much more profitable even under restrictive soil erosion constraints. Our economic models were unable to incorporate the fact that when evaluating a hog enterprise, some individuals respond, "It smells like money to me"; others simply turn up their noses and mutter, "It stinks."

**When evaluating the opportunity** to purchase a ranch supporting a cow-calf operation, the calculating profit maximizer sees the low rate of return and looks for alternative investments. The romanticist sees himself as a cowboy. Profitability, as important as it is, is often a lesser factor in investment and management decisions that personal desires for management style.

Another example involved several related studies dealing with rural land markets in Texas. Although agriculture is an important use of rural land in Texas, land buyers and brokers are also acutely aware of motivations centered on purchasing rural land for recreational and reasons involving romantic notions of cowboys, cattle, ranches, and rangeland. A survey of Texas land brokers revealed that land buyers often seek an investment that they can "touch, feel, experience, and enjoy." Others want a rural homesite or retreat; a place to hunt, fish, or engage in other outdoor recreation; or a place where they can be associated, at least peripherally, with farming, ranching, and the great outdoors (Pope and Good-

win 1984).

Statistical analysis of available land value data suggested that rangeland in Texas was nearly always valued more for its recreational and aesthetic qualities than agricultural productivity (Pope 1985). Approximately 80% of the ranches in Texas are small part-time or hobby ranches with less than 50 head of cattle.

In the Intermountain West, the different motivations associated with using public rangelands are even more complex. Growing demands for wilderness area, roadless and scenic

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areas, public recreation and national parks allow for increased conflict and a magnification of emotion.

Following the tradition of agricultural economists, I have attempted to explain conflict between public and private managers of rangeland as if both sides are perfectly calculating and rational. For example, optimal livestock stocking rates on rangeland depend on the planning horizon and rate used to discount the value of future benefits from the range. If it can be concluded that public rangeland should be managed for the good of society as a whole, including future generations, and that society's planning horizon is longer than that of many individual cattlemen, and/or society's discount rate is lower than many individual cattlemen's, then conflicts and differences between public and private management of rangeland will exist. Society may view individual cattlemen as being greedy exploiters of the range, while individual cattlemen may view public range managers as being over-zealous conservationists.

Continued research dealing with public rangeland, has convinced me, however, that calculating, rational, economic agents do not always best describe the players in the game. I grew increasingly aware of this while conducting research for the National Forest Service in Utah. Under a cooperative agreement with the Forest Service, an economic evaluation of a relatively major range improvement project called the Oak Creek Range Management Project was conducted (Pope and Wagstaff 1987). Millions of dollars had been spent on various range improvement practices designed almost exclusively to improve forage for livestock production. In 1985, coordinators of the project were awarded the Secretary of Agriculture's Distinguished Service Award for the most notable conservation action in the nation. The problem was that for every dollar spent, only about 25¢ worth of benefits could be accounted for, and for every dollar spent, less than 7¢ would be returned through grazing fees. Many

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people continue to advocate this and similar range improvement projects based on benefits to local ranchers and ranching communities.

Although the Oak Creek project and most others like it are extremely inefficient and costly means of enhancing rancher's incomes, direct cash subsidies have not been politically palatable. Another implicit goal of the project may have been to maintain "Ranching families" or "Ranching lifestyles." Just as it may be a public goal to save the grizzly bear in Yellowstone National Park, it may be a goal to save the Oak City Area rancher. But to save the Oak City rancher through direct cash subsidies would be like saving the Yellowstone grizzly by caging and hand feeding him. The politically palatable means of supporting both the grizzly and the rancher is to preserve their habitat. Ranchers, however, unlike grizzly bears, cannot be shot or removed when they do not behave as required.

Ranching families cannot be expected to maintain or even obtain the mythical lifestyle of popular romanticism. For example, many of the ranchers in the Oak Creek project area

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farm, teach school, or have some other primary occupation. Most have only a relatively small number of cattle that they "run on the mountain." Often romance, recreation, the achievement of a desired social status, or simply the maintenance of a family tradition are primary motives. Also the public perception of the rancher on the public lands seems to be shifting from viewing him as a rugged independent, natural nobleman, to a greedy caretaker of "Sacred Cows at the Public Trough" that exploits the public range to the exclusion of other uses. Although public perceptions may be inaccurate, subsidizing the public land beef industry may do more harm to ranchers' image and the viability of their lifestyle than allowing them to deal directly with prevailing economic conditions.

It is noted that only about 27,000 livestock producers, or 7 percent of cattle producers in the 16 Western States, and 2 percent of cattle producers in the U.S., use any public rangeland. About 2 percent of feed consumed by cattle in the U.S. comes from public forage. The total annual value of this forage based on \$1.35 per AUM, the amount currently charged by the Forest Service and BLM, is less than 25 million dollars. This over-estimates the value of public forage for livestock production because it does not include the cost of administering livestock grazing on these lands. Federal costs alone equal approximately \$50 million, leaving the net value of livestock grazing to the public negative. Even this ignores other opportunity costs of livestock grazing on public lands. Livestock grazing on public lands as currently administered is not a source of public revenue but is a drain on public funds, although relatively a small one. It is becoming increasingly clear that domestic livestock is beginning to compete more heavily with other growing uses of rangeland, such as recreation, watershed, wilderness preservation, and wildlife habitats. If livestock producers were required to pay all the cost of public forage, the amount and relative signifi-

cance of forage on BLM and Forest Service land would decrease.

If this is true, why don't we just drastically reduce the support for livestock grazing on public rangelands? Why do we continue to spend many millions of dollars to study how to best manage the lands and on livestock-oriented range improvement projects? Why, in the time of great government borrowing, and trillion dollar Federal budgets, are so much time and effort going into reports entitled "Federal Grazing Programs: All Is Not Well On the Range"?

At least part of the answer lies in the fact that associated with public rangelands is a romance—a sentimental, emotional attraction, attachment, or aura associated with vast tracts of relatively undisturbed range and forest land. Laren Robison (1983) stated that "the romance associated with range is far better known than the truth." I would suggest that this romance is a part of the truth. To ignore it is to ignore one of the most important elements in the debate dealing with proper management of public lands in the West. Economists deal with management issues based largely on efficiency and economic rationality; yet, as Nelson (1982) pointed out, "It is the romance of the public lands which gives them their compelling interest, and leads even many economists to study them." The fact that this land exists, relatively undisturbed and publicly owned, may give a certain degree of pride and national unity and identity. Like the Statue of Liberty, public range and forest land in the West is a symbol of part of our national heritage. A public rangeland committee assembled by the National Academy of Sciences stated:

Public rangeland supplies only a small amount of the national demand for meat, but an extremely large amount of the national demand for myths of free-ranging rugged individualists. . . It is evident that public rangeland may be far better at producing the stuff of myth and national identity than economically prudent beef and mutton products. Yet, in the long run, the production and perpetuation of national myth may be one of the most valuable resources harvested from public rangeland. (As quoted by Nelson, 1982)

The problem with simply recognizing that romance influences the way we view and manage public rangelands is that

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romantic perceptions are not the same. In fact, there seems to be increasing polarization of the way different groups of people romanticize about public rangelands. These different perspectives, more so than just economics, seem to increasingly be the source of conflict on the public rangelands.

**Adherence to these romantic notions often distort reality.** For example, I recently conducted a funeral for a neighbor who was 82 years old when he died in an accident while riding a horse. He loved horses and was good with them. He was a fine man. The interesting thing was that over a period of days visiting with the family and listening to the talks at his funeral, you would have thought he had been a cowboy or rancher his entire life. Romantic stories about him working on roundups and riding horses were told with reverence. The

truth was that he never was a rancher. He worked for two summers back in the 30's as a rider for a livestock association. The rest of his working life was spent primarily as a construction worker and machinist at a local steel mill. He was an excellent, skilled crane operator and machinist, but that was never mentioned and seems to be nearly forgotten and replaced with the last few years when he helped on a roundup for a few weeks in the fall.

Why isn't a crane operator, a machinist, a school teacher, a nurse, a traffic cop, and other such occupations as noble? They are. But there has not been as much romanticism associated with them or their resources.

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We are all very much aware of the traditional romantic view of the western lands. Wilderness is a frontier to be conquered. The range is a source of feed for livestock that are the lifeblood of a noble industry. Wildlife such as deer and elk are competition for forage that could be used by livestock. Predators, such as coyotes, bears, and cougars are natural enemies to the industry to be shot on sight. Cowboys or buckaroos, as many now prefer to be called, and ranchers are independent, naturally wise, and brave—a special breed of man.

The traditional view of the West and its wild rangeland, however, is changing. Conservationists and environmentalists are no longer just a fringe interest group. Ranchers still use the word environmentalists as a swear word, or at least, in association with them. They view recreationists and conservationists as tree-hugging, posy-sniffing wimps that are trespassing not just on lands that they view as theirs by right of conquest, but on ranchers' social status as well. The problem is that environmentalists, the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and other such groups, are now part of main stream America. Wildlife specials are more common on TV than Westerns. The Marlboro man on a horse is being replaced with Mark Harmon fishing or hiking in public wildlands. The West is not a land of rural people trying to conquer the frontier; it is a region of scattered cities of urban people that often want recreational and emotional access to the public rangelands and forests. Cowboys are increasingly being viewed as subsidized exploiters of the range. Elk, deer, and other wildlife including predators, are increasingly being viewed as the noble part of nature. Man is not part of this alternative romantic view of our public wild lands, but is only a visitor to it. And the cow is increasingly viewed as a domestic beast that should be confined to feed lots and to the Mid-west. In this new romantic version of the western rangeland, the cow is more menace even than intruder.

In order to gain a flavor of the emotions felt on this issue, Edward Abby told a group at the University of Montana in May 1985 that:

Our public lands are infested with domestic cattle. Almost anywhere and everywhere you go in the American West, you will find herds—herds—of these ugly, clumsy, shambling stupid, bawling, bellowing stinking, fly-covered, [manure]-smeared, disease-spreading brutes. They are a pest and a plague. . .

Romance and emotions akin to it seem to be more powerful in the struggle in the allocation of public rangelands than economic analysis. The two different romantic notions of the West share a love of the land and outdoors, but from different perspectives that leave little room for compromise. As American society in general, and the West in specific, moves more toward the second view—and as this is getting reflected in public land politics—public lands ranchers and their supporters that continue to accept the first view are becoming angry and paranoid.

Economists are sometimes employed to show the importance of livestock. Our results are increasingly bad news. Economic principles suggest that we allocate rangeland such that the value of the last unit of rangeland used for cattle equals the value of the last unit of rangeland used for say elk. As the real marginal value of elk to society is increasingly high and that of cattle low, economic analysis increasingly does not favor cattle on public rangeland.

Economists have been getting increasingly ridiculed in the livestock-oriented publications. Studies by economists relating to the value of forage have been ridiculed mercilessly by cattlemen's groups and supporters of them. I have studied these studies. I have even done one of my own. The studies are clear. The average market value of forage on public lands is often much larger than the \$1.35 per AUM currently being charged. To say this makes cattlemen and their supporters livid. The Utah Cattlemen's Association as part of their official resolution in December 1985, states that, "The current grazing fee formula has a proven and scientific history for being a fair and equitable. . ."

I'd like to meet the economist that can give scientific proof for what is fair and equitable. Economists can find market value of an AUM with reasonable accuracy. They cannot determine with any accuracy if that market value or any other is fair or equitable.

Management attempts, by Public Land Management Agencies, to reflect society's changing values are rarely met with economic efficiency arguments but with emotional reaction. For example, David Witts, an attorney supporting cattlemen's interests, stated:

Only recently, when Environmentalist met Bureaucrat, things changed. Small government agencies such as the BLM, Fish and Wildlife, and Park Service, have become bloated bureaucracies stuffed with fauna sniffers. Smokey, the Bear, traded his hat for a Sherman tank. Obstructionism is in the saddle.

We accept that romance and other emotions akin to it are an important force in the allocation of rangeland resources. The truth is, romance is used to help sell everything from jeans, soda pop, toothpaste, cigarettes, and beer, to wildlife preserves and wilderness areas. We should be aware of it and its implications. To the research economist dealing with the public rangeland, and even private rangeland to some extent, good research requires that we deal with it directly. For the Natural Resource or Agricultural Economist, the issues have become extremely complex and their work is done in an increasingly emotional environment. The various sides sometimes seem to be economist shopping. The good economist who, based on economic principles carefully weighs different values, rarely gets results that are fully to the liking of any group or special interest.



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# Conflicts in California Range Management

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As California's Secretary for Resources, I am the chief administrator of the Resources Agency, which includes the Department of Fish and Game, Conservation, Parks and Recreation, Water Resources, Forestry, Boating and Waterways, and the California Conservation Corps. Range management is not a topic that fits neatly into any of the 7 departments or 20 boards and commissions that make up the Resources Agency. But I am comfortable talking about conflicts in range management because there are few aspects of resource management that are without conflict. And many of these resource management conflicts can be found near Arcata, in California's north coast region.

The ocean waters and coastal streams and rivers of the north coast support one of the nation's outstanding salmon fisheries. Major conflicts exist between sport anglers, commercial fishermen, and native Indians who enjoy special fishing rights under government treaties. To the north, just below the Oregon border, the Smith River—an outstanding salmon and steelhead stream and a part of both the federal and state Wild and Scenic River Systems—is the site of conflict between anglers and environmentalists and mining interests who want to develop a major cobalt deposit in the river's upper drainage.

The creation of the Redwood National Park brought timber interests, environmentalists, local residents, and economic interests into one of the most intense resource conflicts the state has seen in many years. Timber harvesting on private lands of the North Coast, as elsewhere in California, is conducted under the strictest set of environmental regulations of any state in the country. Although these regulations have been in effect for a number of years, they are viewed differently by timber interests—which contend they are too strict

and increase their costs unnecessarily—and others, including anglers and environmentalists, who contend they are not strict enough.

When Mark Twain visited California in the days of the Gold Rush, he said, "In the West, whiskey is for drinkin' and water is for fightin' about." I can assure you that things haven't changed much—Californians are still fighting about water. The chief problem is that nearly all of California's water is in the northern third of the state, and two-thirds of our population is in the southern third of the state. Water interests and politicians from Southern California view North Coast rivers as logical sources of water to meet future population growth and farming needs, while people from the San Francisco Bay area northward fear that exports of additional water will be harmful to northern California fisheries, wetlands, and water resources.

I am no stranger to conflicts when it comes to resource management, but before talking about range management I want to define my subject. The U.S. Forest Service has its own definitions for "range," "forest land," and "rangeland" (USDA-FS, 1979). The Bureau of Land Management has definitions for "native grazing land," "rangeland," "grazeable woodland," and "native pasture" as well as ordinary "range" (USDA-SCS, 1976). The State Forest and Rangeland Resources Assessment and Policy Act of 1977 defines rangeland as land on which the existing vegetation, whether growing naturally or through management, is suitable for grazing or browsing domestic livestock for at least a portion of the year. That is the definition I will use.

## Rangelands in California

California rangeland varies both in the amount and timing of forage production. Lush meadows in the Sierra Nevada may produce well over one AUM on each acre during the