Proper Grazing Can Save the West

Alan Day

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the The Arizona Daily Star, Tucson, Arizona on Wed, 26 Feb. 1986. The article is reprinted in its entirety.

The writer, Edward Abbey, referred to in the article, is the author of "Even the Bad Guys Wear White Hats" which appeared in Harper's, January, 1986.

DUNCAN, Ariz.—As a rancher in the West, I suppose I am, by Edward Abbey's definition, a "welfare parasite" and "simple-minded peasant." In "Taking Stock of the Cowboy Myth," (Feb. 9) he claims to "despise arrogance and brutality and bullies," yet his article is as vitriolic as it is ignorant. His fanatic hatred of cattle and cowboys slips over the edge of rationality.

The main thesis of his article is that cattle and cattlemen are destroying the West's range land; therefore, the public-lands cattle industry should be phased out. Is a man who proposes an "open hunting season on range cattle" rational? Come on now!

First, let me say that there has been overgrazing in this country in the past, and there are still cases of overgrazing, just as there has been misuse of other natural resources in this country over the years. However, a blanket condemnation of grazing is as shortsighted and counterproductive as all the overgrazing in history.

Obviously, hindsight is better than foresight. The settlers of this land had no precedent; they assumed that the land and forage were renewable resources that would always regenerate themselves.

My ancestors were among those early settlers. Lazy B Ranch has been in my family since 1880. Most of Lazy B Ranch, the land that is public, is land that nobody wanted. The good land, the land that people thought was desirable, was taken under homestead in early times, so what we ranch on today is the least productive land in this part of the country.

Ranching never has been an easy way to make a living, and for the first quarter century my family ranched out here, it was simply a case of survival. This has been the history of the cow business and the history of the settlement of the West. People were not aware that cattle could be detrimental to the land, and they did what they had to do to survive.

We are now learning that if the land is managed and grazed properly, we can not only save the West from declining, but actually reverse the trend of the first half-century of settlement in this country. It is the rancher who can and will bring the land back to productivity through constructive grazing.

Abbey says that ranchers have been 'getting a free ride on the public lands for over a century,' and that taxpayers would save tax money on subsidies for things like range improvement if ranching were eliminated.

These statements are puzzling at the very least. In the first place, the purpose of range improvement is as much to benefit wildlife as it is cattle, and in the second place, there is no free ride. The rancher pays for almost all the improvements.

We operate on 300 square miles of land at Lazy B (mostly federal and state lease), and there is not one single spring or stream, nor has there ever been, in this high desert region.

Over the years, our family as spent in excess of $250,000 drilling wells, building stock ponds and putting in pipelines for water troughs. Every bit of that water is available to quail, javalena, antelope, mountain lions and coyotes. Nor is this an isolated case. All ranchers bear the bulk of expense for land improvements, and if you take away the economic advantage of doing so, who will pay for it?

This brings me to my real point—that this land is going to change whether man is here or not, whether domestic livestock are on the land or not. If we are smart, we can use domestic livestock to achieve our goals of regeneration. The critics of the livestock industry who say all grazing is harmful are wrong. They are ignoring the vast tracts of land that have been ungrazed for many years and are in pathetic condition.

The Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico is one such area. Fifty years ago, Teddy Roosevelt persuaded Congress to make this 500,000-acre tract a wilderness area. Since that time, it has been ungrazed and in terrible shape. The grass and forage have no vigor, and the main reason is understure. The wildlife in this area are actually far fewer than on the neighboring ranches where cattle graze.

The intelligent and proper use of grazing is the best tool we have to enrich wildlife habitat, water quality and regeneration of the land. The key word here is proper.

Yearlong grazing is no longer a workable option. The problem with it is that cattle tend to eat the new, tender growth as soon as it arrives. After repeated grazing in this manner, the plants lose their vigor and die out. However, the combination of grazing followed by proper rest results in a great deal more forage and makes the plants healthy and viable.

This is not my theory alone. Allan Savory, a wildlife biologist from southern Africa who now makes his home in Albuquerque, calls the current movement to remove cattle from the lands of the West "extremely dangerous." He's head of the Center for Holistic Resource Management.

Savory's studies in Africa determined that the "hoof action" of animals breaks up and loosens crusted soil and tramples down old plant matter, allowing moisture and new seeds to penetrate.

He found that areas that were heavily grazed and then rested would recover dramatically in the next growing season. According to Savory, the herding of livestock is the only thing that can save our declining lands, as well as prevent continuation of the loss of 100 farm families each week.

Abbey professes his dismay over the destruction of our agricultural economy. What does he think will happen to those ranch families he intends to deprive of their livelihood? He says only 2 percent of the nation's beef cattle are pro-
duced in the 11 Western states, but he is grossly misinformed. U.S. Department of Agriculture figures over the past few years show that figure to be closer to 20 percent. In addition, many of those cattle accounted for in the Midwest or in feed lots spent a portion of their lives grazing in the West.

I submit that grazing in the 11 Western states is a significant factor, and if all grazing on public lands were eliminated tomorrow, it would have a dramatic impact on the beef industry in the nation as a whole. (Just think what a 20 percent decrease in beef production would do to beef prices.)

At Lazy B Ranch alone, we support six families on this piece of dry Arizona-New Mexico desert. We pay income tax, county tax, property tax, sales tax, and we make a living.

Abbey's statement that "ranchers don't work very hard" is preposterous. Abbey's idea of a cowboy is the Eastern myth, and this obvious from his description of the so-called cowboy in his story. The cowboy spends far longer hours, in far worse conditions, than Abbey does at his typewriter, and he does it regardless of how cold it gets, or how wet, or how dark.

The cowboy's job is one of the few professions left that allow one to see the wonders of nature in an unspoiled fashion, to experience the change of the seasons, and to see birth and death firsthand.

Ranching is the ultimate form of organic production, the harvest of a portion of what is grown naturally. If we can't live in harmony with nature and make productive use of this desert, then should we live in the West at all?

I say we can live here, and we can make the West a better place for all forms of life if we don't get caught up in a hysterical negativism. There are positive solutions to every problem.

Alan Day is a rancher whose grandfather settled the Lazy B Ranch in 1880.

Ranching Efficiency in South Texas—a Rancher’s Viewpoint

Kenneth D. Sparks

The opportunity for additional flexibility in both livestock and grazing management are major reasons for the interest in short duration grazing in southwest Texas. Alvis Cardwell, who ranches 2,300 acres in Zavala County—about 20 miles south of Uvalde, Texas—has been using some type of rotation grazing for several years. Cardwell states, "I started rotating 1 herd of cattle through 7 pastures in the early 1970's. My goal at that time was to divide my pastures into about 300-acre units. Because my operation is small for this country, I knew I had to intensify management."

A director of Winter Garden Soil and Water Conservation District, Cardwell runs commercial crossbred cattle. He continues, "I rarely keep any replacement heifers. This allows me to keep my cattle in 1 herd most of the time, and I am able to use exotic bulls without fear of calving problems.

"In my rotation, I have found the greater the number of pastures available, the better my cattle do. Also, with more pastures my range is receiving more deferment and I get faster improvement."

He is presently rotating through 21 pastures, which average just over 100 acres in size. Grazing periods per pasture generally range from 2 to 4 days, depending on growing conditions.

Some of the pastures are fenced in a cell arrangement, with central livestock watering facilities serving several pastures.

Regardless of the fencing arrangement, Cardwell has learned that frequent movement of his cattle is not a problem because they are accustomed to moving and are ready to move to fresh forage.

The availability of high tensile fence wire and improved fence chargers has allowed him to use permanent electric fences, keeping his fencing cost well below conventional barbed wire. Cardwell says, "Most of my country is blackbrush-guajillo hills. About 80% of the soils on the ranch are relatively shallow and gravelly.

"I figure without a rotation, you have to allow 30 to 35 acres per cow on this type country. I have been running from 75 to 150 cows since I started rotating my grazing.

"I know I can run more cattle with the rotation. But, the

---

The author is a range conservationist, USDA Soil Conservation Service, 1022 Garner Field Rd., Uvalde, Texas 78801.