Tri Cultures of New Mexico

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New Mexico is a rich mixture of Indian, Spanish, and Anglo cultures. This combination of cultures has greatly influenced the growth of range management and livestock dependency for a livelihood. Domestic livestock grazing along the Rio Grande is one of the oldest uses of rangeland forage in the West. Rural New Mexico, which consists of all three cultures, still utilizes rangelands for subsistence.

Indian Occupation

Archeologists have found evidence of man in the southwest earlier than 10,000 B.C. These early southwesterners originated as nomadic hunters of big game, but adapted to small game and the gathering of plants when the large game animals disappeared. As early as 3,000 B.C., Indian corn was being used extensively. Indian corn probably developed from Tesosinte, Euchlaena mexicana, a tall annual grass. By 1,000 B.C. squash and beans were added to the diet. Permanent habitations and pottery did not occur until 300 B.C.

The Anasazi, a subculture of Southwestern Indians, was dominant in northwest New Mexico between 1,100 to 1,300 A.D. Having achieved cultural florescence in the fourteenth century, Anasazi communities were suddenly abandoned. The population had relocated into a much smaller area at the time of Spanish entry into the Southwest. This relocation and retraction was apparently due to drought and climatic change, or possible harassment from nomadic enemy peoples. The term Pueblo was applied by the Spaniards to Indians living in compact villages who subsisted on a predominant agricultural economy. Most Pueblos were located along the middle Rio Grande. The major villages along the Rio Grande were perhaps no more than 200 years old when the Spaniards entered the Southwest.

Nomadic Apachean or Southern Athapaskan, linguistically tied to Athapascans of interior Alaska and the Northwest Canada arrived in the southwest early in the 16th century. The descendants are the Navajos, Jicarilla Apache and Mescalero Apache.

During this time period, grazing by large herbivorous consisted of only wild game animals. Buffalo were essentially confined to the eastern plains of New Mexico. Elk, deer, big horn sheep, and antelope grazed the mountains and basins of central and western New Mexico.

Spanish Occupation

In 1528, Estevan, a member of a Spanish exploration party from Florida, traveled across western U.S. and southern New Mexico and writes up his experiences stating he had heard there were cities to the north (Seven Cities of Cibola—which was misinterpreted as seven cities of gold). Coronado traveled to New Mexico in 1540 searching for the seven cities of gold. He never realized that the gold was the color of the pueblos in the afternoon sun. Coronado brought with him the first domestic livestock, horse and churro sheep. These large range animals provided subsistence for the Spanish and materially changed the way of life for the Indians. Conclusions drawn from Coronado’s exploration and others that followed were that the blessings of crown and cross should be extended to the area, and not incidentally, the search for gold should go on even though the illusion of quick riches began to fade.

In 1598, Onate became the first governor of the Spanish colony, bringing along 3,000 head of sheep and established the capital at San Juan, near present-day Española. In 1610, Governor Peralta relocated the capital to Santa Fe. Peralta and others brought additional Churro sheep from Mexico. In 1634, Ceballos drove a large number of livestock from the Rio Grande valley to Santa Barbara, California, this first recorded livestock exporta-
tion, which will not effect the economy or life style for another 30 years. For the period of 1620 to 1670, both Pueblo Indians and the Spanish were subsistence farmers with some livestock. Native Indians had grown accustomed to utilizing livestock for meat, wool and transportation. With the development of markets for churro sheep, elk hides and pinyon nuts in northern Mexico, the Camino Real was established linking Mexico with Santa Fe.

In 1680, the famous Pueblo Revolt occurred as a result of Spanish religious suppression and taxation of the Pueblos. After the Revolt, many Pueblo Indians feared retribution by the Spaniards and escaped into the Jemez Mountains to live with the Navajo. The Navajo were distinguished from other Apaches as the "Apaches de Nabahu" or "Strangers of the Cultivated Fields". They did a little farming, but mainly hunted and gathered, and traded with the Pueblos. The close contact resulted in the Navajo acquiring weaving, pottery, and pasturage skills from the Pueblo Indians. The addition of pastoralism into the farming base allowed expansion of the Navajo population and the occupied area. Horses and sheep had been acquired earlier through raiding the Spaniard herds. The Navajo gradually shifted their area of occupancy from the valleys north and west of the Jemez Mountains to the Four Corners area, probably responding to needs of their herds of sheep and in response to raiding by the Ute Indians from along the Colorado border.

DeVargas returned in 1692 to re-colonize following the Pueblo Revolt. He brought along 900 head of livestock and found that some sheep still existed in the Pueblos. Indians and the Spanish became accustomed to livestock and their byproducts. In the early 1700's an embargo was placed upon exporting livestock because of its detrimental effects on local needs. Grazing of livestock was confined to the Rio Grande Valley during most of the 1700's and problems of overgrazing began to appear. In 1705, an Order by the Governor was made to exclude livestock from La Cienega and to hold it for haying. In 1730 similar attempts were made to exclude livestock from Taos and Isleta. By 1736 there was a general shortage of grass near the Rio Grande since livestock could not be herded into the nearby mountains due to fear of losses to non-Pueblo Indians. Hostile Comanche to the east and Apache to the west frequently raided the Pueblos and Spanish livestock. However, records indicate that by 1757 there were 7,000 horses, 16,000 cattle and 112,000 sheep. There were only three ranches of record.

The Spanish established a new system of land disposal with the reign of DeVargas in 1692. Indian Pueblos were given Four Square Leagues, as measured from a cross in front of the Church. Spanish Colonists must not infringe upon Indian lands and the land must be cleared and farmed by irrigation for four years. Hills were common lands available for grazing and firewood. Homes were established on small parcels adjacent to farm lands. Land Grants were given by the Governor, not by the King of Spain. These could not be sold. If abandoned, the land was reassigned by the Governor.

After the return of the Spanish following the Pueblo Revolt, the buffalo and elk hide trade with Chihuahua resumed, with many hides coming from trade with Comanches, Utes, and Apaches at fairs in Taos and Pecos. Later the Spaniards, without permission of the Governor, ventured into Colorado to trade for hides and slaves with the Utes. The initial threat to Spain's monopoly over New Mexico's commerce came from France, whose great North American empire was based heavily on trade with Indian tribes for fine furs like beaver. New Mexico was prohibited from allowing French intrusion or trade. Still, illegal trapping and trade of the French and Americans occurred between 1800 and 1821.

In 1785, the Spanish established an uneasy peace with the Comanches and allied with them to fight the Apaches. This forced the Apaches into increasingly remote areas. The Comanche peace permitted expansion of sheep raising. The Churro breed of sheep introduced by the Spaniards could withstand drought and were very good for meat. Their wool, a long-staple fleece, was easily hand processed. Rams with four horns characterize this breed. A booming market occurred in Northern Mexico, causing sheep numbers on the range lands outside of the Rio Grande Valley to expand. This market began to soften in the 1830's and collapsed during the War with Mexico in 1846. The market shifted from Mexico to California in support of the Gold Rush of 1849. This west coast market lasted only until the beginning of the Civil War.

Anglo Occupation

When Anglo-Americans arrived a third, distinctive cultural component was introduced into New Mexico. In 1821, two major events took place: first, Mexico's Independence from Spain; and second, establishment of the Santa Fe Trail. An independent Mexican Government encouraged trade with the United States, which had previously been prohibited. Trade
flourished as Anglo traders coming in on the Santa Fe Trail dealt with Mexican silver coins and brought inexpensive, higher quality manufactured goods. Santa Fe became a distribution point to Chihuahua and California. News rapidly spread of New Mexico’s abundant, virgin beaver steams. Within a few years, trappers from Taos and Santa Fe had trapped most of New Mexico and Arizona. Some of the most noted trappers during this era—Peg-leg Smith, Old Bill Williams, and Kit Carson—trapped in New Mexico during this period. Trapping soon decimated the beaver population and it has been suggested that deterioration of riparian areas began as abandoned beaver works deteriorated.

Early military field notes provided by Lts. Abert and Peck and Capt. Cooke provided the best sources of information on range conditions at the close of the Mexican era. According to their ledgers of 1846, the plains south and east of Santa Fe and the Rio Grande Valley from Santo Domingo northward almost all the way to Taos were virtually barren of grass. The Rio Puerco watershed was also noted for its poor forage condition. Poor forage conditions higher up the Rio Puerco drainage was attributed to the thousands of head of Navajo sheep. Thus, prior to the Anglo occupation, only areas along major drainages near settlements and Navajo land in the north central New Mexico had been overgrazed. It can be assumed that most of the remainder of New Mexico was relatively unaffected by grazing due to the shortage of permanent water and Comanche and Apache resistance to Spanish and Mexican expansion.

Present-day New Mexico became property of the United States following the Mexican War by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In 1849, in response to the “Gold Rush”, many stockmen in New Mexico and Texas realized that fortunes might be made driving sheep and cattle westward to California, where the demand for meat seemed limitless. Trailing peaked in 1854 and tapered off during the Civil War. The fact that New Mexico was a territory of the United States was of little consequence until after the Civil War. It was not until the last four decades of the 19th Century that New Mexico finally felt the influence of being part of the United States.

Following the Civil War, western stockmen began their final conquest of the West. In 1866, Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving took their Texas herd up the Pecos no farther than Fort Sumner in the Bosque Redondo. Here they found a ready market with the military, which needed to feed troops and the thousands of Navajo they were detaining. Obstacles to further expansion of the livestock industry were hostile Indians and lack of markets. By the early 1870s, General George Crook had driven the remaining hostile Apaches to cover with a force of 6,000 soldiers and numerous forts. Geronimo, the famous Apache warrior, surrendered in 1886 after a long, well-fought campaign against overwhelming odds and technology. With Indians, soldiers, and settlers to feed, the western grasslands began to fill with livestock. Drought, overgrazing, and taxes forced many Texas ranchers to seek new ranges in New Mexico. By 1880, the State was supporting 3–4 million sheep, as well as upwards of 130,000 head of cattle. An Army surveyor declared New Mexico the superior livestock producing area west of the Mississippi and the “par excellence future great wool producing center of the west”.

John Chishum, a Texan, was a prominent figure in the Lincoln County War that brewed through the 1870s. The Lincoln County War centered around government beef contracts to supply the forts. The war made a legend out of “Billy the Kid”.

The Santa Fe Railroad reached Albuquerque in 1880.
Now a livestock market to the East could be reached, enabling the livestock enterprises to expand rapidly. During this period, investment in New Mexico ranches became fashionable for doctors, lawyers, and corporations. English investors, hearing glowing reports, rapidly got into the ranching business and built large ranch operations throughout the State. By 1885, a spur railroad was built to Magdalena. A “Hoof Highway” brought sheep and cattle into the Magdalena railhead from as far as 125 miles away. The Highway was 5–10 miles wide and covered 200 square miles. In 1908 an observer noted one herd was being loaded at the Magdalena railroad, one being held out on nearby hills, and eight herds trailing across the adjacent San Augustin Plains.

By 1884, over-crowding on rangelands was occurring. The need for livestock associations and public land leasing laws were being discussed. In the late 1880’s, cattle prices began to fall and in 1891 the drought began. As a result of the drought and inadequate forage thousands of cattle died or were shipped out of the State in 1892. At the turn of the century there were still 5 million sheep and 1 million head of cattle.

The grizzly bear and other predators were pursued as the livestock associations grew stronger politically. Government hunters were hired to reduce predators for the sole purpose of improving livestock production. Ben Lilly became the most famous hunter in the Southwest. Lilly’s stories of tracking grizzlies for days on foot and fighting bears with a knife have become legends. The last recorded grizzly bear in New Mexico was just north of Albuquerque in the Jemez Mountains during the 1940’s; it apparently died of natural causes. The lobo wolf and the coyote were also the subject of concentrated control efforts, with coyote control continuing through the mid-1900s. Discussions on reintroduction of the wolf are now being hotly debated in New Mexico.

New Mexico includes some unique landownership patterns: (1) Indian Pueblos were lands granted to peaceful Pueblo Indians by the Spanish and Mexican Governments and honored by the United States; (2) reservations were established by USA Treaties with Apaches and Navajos; (3) Land Grants were the result of land titles made during the Spanish and Mexican periods; (4) private lands are the result of homestead laws and railroad grants; (5) the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management-administered lands are public lands to resolve the “tragedy of the commons”; and (6) other public lands were created as military reservations.

New Mexico’s grazing history starts earlier than anywhere else in the West. However, only a few areas were detrimentally impacted by grazing prior to Anglo entry in the mid-1880s. Technological development, railroads, and improved markets all contributed to overstocking and stress on the ecosystems. With low average annual rainfall and frequent droughts, disaster was in the making.

Frequent wildfires in the period before overgrazing in the 1870s and 1880s permitted grasses to survive and even flourish while significantly reducing the competition of woody plants. In the absence of grass competition and fire, pinyon and juniper trees encroached on the grasslands and the original stands of trees became more dense. Similar changes also occurred with other woody plant and brush species such as mesquite, sagebrush and creosote bush. Early in Aldo Leopold’s career, while working in New Mexico and eastern Arizona, he recorded some of the first observations of brush encroachment as seedlings/saplings. As a result, plant diversity and forage production were further reduced by these woody species. Arroyos, which now dominate the New Mexico landscape, are a result of down cutting of drainages, and are believed to be the result of a combination of factors, including grazing, associated primarily with the Anglo development period.

Reacting to these political and environmental concerns, Forest Reserves were established and homestead laws were phased out. The Jornada Range reserve was established in 1910 for range research. The end of the open range period, “tragedy of the commons”, was marked by the creation of the BLM. Land allocations and market conditions contributed to a drastic reduction in the sheep industry. Today both cattle and sheep numbers have stabilized, with cattle being the dominant livestock industry in New Mexico. Few flocks of Churro sheep still exist.

New Mexico rangelands have made a dramatic comeback from the depleted conditions that occurred near the turn of the century. New Mexico has emphasized its concern for improving rangelands through active programs in the New Mexico State Agricultural Department, universities, and extension programs. Numerous New Mexico ranches are now standards of excellence. New Mexico has had a substantial number of residents become presidents of the Society for Range Management, an international organization for responsible sustained range use.

References