On Rewarding Good Stewards
A Viewpoint

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The health of America’s rangelands is a major national environmental issue. Even experts argue over the condition of the range. Regardless of who is right, the land should be managed for sustainability. The best way to accomplish this may be as simple as Aldo Leopold’s formula for maintaining his land ethic: rewarding good stewards and punishing those who abuse the resource. This concept seems to have become lost in the argument over the present condition of our rangelands.

In one camp we find environmental activists who point out, quite correctly, that overgrazing can severely damage the land. They want livestock removed from the public range. Their position was stated succinctly by Dr. Paul Ehrlich in a NBC Today Show last year. Their extreme remedy is found in Earth First!’s slogan “cattle free by 93”. They feel that all grazing is overgrazing, and is therefore bad for the environment.

In another camp, we find some livestock producers who tend to be defensive and see environmentalists as enemies. They point out, again quite correctly, that they have developed water and made improvements that benefit wildlife, recreation, and other uses. Their extreme position is that grazing is not a privilege guided by the ethics of stewardship, but a right. They feel that a lack of grazing is unhealthy for the land, therefore all ranchers are doing good for the land.

Most range professionals believe that grazing is a natural process; plants evolved with grazing. Overgrazing, overstocking to the point where the plant community and soil deteriorate, is bad. Proper grazing is an effective tool in maintaining a sustainable environment. We send a mixed message: some grazing is good for the environment; some is destructive.

It is easy to see why the lay public is confused. Who is right? What should we believe and what do we do about it?

Some say it is not possible to have hummingbirds, clean water, and to protect endangered species where cattle graze. Those things are not possible on land Edward Abbey said was “cow burnt.” Yet the Nature Conservancy bought the Gray Ranch in southwestern New Mexico because it had rare species and beauty. It has been grazed as a commercial cattle ranch for over a century. Its wildlife and aesthetic values have been maintained while its owners produced livestock. Managers of a working cattle ranch knew that in order to grow cattle effectively, it paid to protect the land.

Many of the first European settlers in America overestimated carrying capacity, and many range areas were at some time “burnt” by cows and sheep. But it is also true that range plants evolved with grazing, and that the grazing animal is the most powerful tool available for improving the range. Grazing animals are not nearly as environmentally damaging as herbicides, improper burning, or yellow tractors. A goal of many good ranchers is for their children to be ranchers; to meet this goal they must protect the land.

Since the first national range survey was done in 1936 ranges have slowly improved. In 1936, the U.S. Senate report showed 16% of rangelands to be moderately depleted (good condition), 5% materially depleted (fair), and 58% severely or extremely depleted (poor condition). In 1987 the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management reported the range to be 40% in good and excellent condition, 40% in fair condition, and 16% in poor condition. A report by the National Wildlife Federation and the Natural Resources Defense Council, published in 1989, shows that the public range is 33% good and excellent condition, 42% fair, and 26% poor. Any data set that is used shows range improvement.

Rangeland classification is confusing to laymen and professionals alike. Currently, committees from the Society for Range Management and the National Academy of Science/National Research Council are attempting to standardize terms and make sense out of variable data.

The debate continues as to the true condition of the range. Well-meaning people look at similar data: one says the glass is half full; the other that it is half empty. Both ignore the improvement that has been demonstrated in the last 60 years. Instead of suggesting models where livestock grazing has worked to improve range condition, the debate centers around eliminating or keeping grazing on the public range.

What the land needs is a system to encourage good management; a program to reward good land stewards and remove poor graziers. While most range people agree with the general concept of rewarding good stewards and removing poor ones, most are skeptical that it can be done fairly. Some have serious doubts that our profession has the tools to measure range condition and best management practices accurately. Others doubt that the range profession can even define best management practices for rangeland. There is also distrust from both ranchers and environmentalists that any system of rewards and punishments will be administered properly.

While we range professionals argue and express doubt

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about our ability, we find that auditors and lawyers are defining best management practices for the land we say we represent. In my opinion it is time to test a system to reward good management.

One possibility for rewarding good stewards might be through a variable grazing fee tied to the health of the range. Such a proposal would (1) stimulate debate on the concept of incentives for good management and (2) focus our profession on the kinds and precision of measurement tools needed to administer such a concept fairly.

Now all ranchers pay the same fee based on a formula that has been battered out in public hearings, courts, and dozens of articles. It varies with the year, depending on the price of livestock and other factors, but it is a little less than $2.00 per animal unit month.

Environmentalists say the rancher is subsidized; ranchers say that they pay a lower fee than lessees on private land because they have to take care of fences, water developments, and other improvements. The debate centers around the economic valuation of an average “fair fee” rather than applying the best management to the range.

Public land laws and the courts say grazing on public lands is a privilege, not a right. Ranchers, backed by the IRS and bankers who loan money based on grazing permits, say it is a property right. In practice, the value of the permits is now capitalized into the value of most ranches: the larger the number of permitted livestock, the greater the value of the ranch.

For example, a ranch with 200 permitted animal units on poor condition range is worth more than a ranch with a permit for 150 head on good condition range. Whether the permit is a privilege or a right, the person who wants his estate to have a higher dollar value will fight to keep more permits. The system has told him that his wealth depends upon keeping as large a permit as possible. A recent study by Dr. Allen Torell of New Mexico State University supports the ideas that the value of a ranch is directly related to the cost of the grazing fee.

Why couldn’t an incentive for good management be created by charging less for good condition range? For example, a standard fee of about $2.00 per animal unit month could be charged for grazing fair condition range (the average condition of most of ranges). If the range was in good condition, the fee could be $1.00 per AUM; 50 cents for excellent condition range. On poor condition range the fee might jump to $4.00 or even $8.00 per head.

This approach would accomplish several things. First, a variable fee based on condition would set new values on all public land ranches. Those who have been good stewards would see the value of their ranches increase. Those who have practiced average management would not be affected. People who have “mined” the land would pay for past abuse through a reduction in the value of their ranch.

Second, a strong incentive for good management would be created. If a rancher could improve the condition of the allotment it would lower his operating costs and increase the capitalized value of his land. The rancher would make more profit, and we citizens would see our public rangeland managed to keep options open for the future generations.

Conservationists would benefit because ranges would improve with grazing as a solid partner in multiple land use. The livestock industry would benefit by removing the operators who are giving good ranchers a bad name. Society would benefit because the land would be managed to leave options open.

When ranches are sold today the grazing permit usually goes with the base property, or private land. The public land manager usually adjusts the number of permitted livestock at the time of transfer. Sometimes a buyer thinks he is buying a 500 cow ranch and finds out later that the revised stocking rate may be 400. Although the reduction in stocking rate may be well justified and long overdue, the buyer usually attacks the Government agency rather than suing the seller for fraud. A higher charge for grazing fees on poor condition range would lower the selling price of the range, and should alert the buyer that he thought he was buying something that could not be his.

Every rancher who has a permit or applies for a transfer to graze the public land should be required to make his track record as a land steward a part of the application. We require an intensive investigation of a couple’s moral and financial condition before we allow them to adopt a baby, yet we allow them to adopt a piece of land with only cursory examination.

Let’s look at the buyer of the previously described 500 cow ranch. The old permit is for 500 cows; the professional range conservationist says the land will safely carry only 400. Whatever the suggested stocking rate, the land should not be passed to another poor manager. If an examination of the records showed the applicant’s current range (privately owned and/or public permit) is in good condition, his calf crop 90%, aesthetics protected, and other measures of good management achieved, he should be given a permit for 400 cows at the lower, good condition, fee. If the newly leased range did not improve in 5 years, the fee would then be based on the actual condition of the land.

If an applicant has no record, coming out of some other business for instance, he would pay the standard fee based on the actual condition of the land until he is able to establish a record of his management.

If the buyer is a rancher whose current land, public permit or private ground, is in poor condition, the transfer of any permits to him should be denied.

Society loses when livestock is forced off the public ranges or when livestock producers defend poor ranchers with a “my industry right or wrong” policy. The goal should be to get best management practices on the land. Environmentalists, indeed all citizens, need good ranchers to take care of the land. Ranchers must make a profit or they cannot take care of our public ranges. We need a flexible grazing policy that will make the rangelands, and the rural communities around them, sustainable.
We should celebrate good land managers, public and private; we should admit that ailing areas of rangeland remain, and apply what we know to make them well. We should never tolerate poor land use. We should punish those who deplete the land, whoever or wherever they are. In *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold wrote beautifully of a land ethic: “The mechanism of operation is the same for any ethic: social approbation for right actions; social disapproval for wrong actions.” 

Now is the time to apply that land ethic. We should do it for the sake of good ranchers, for environmental activists, and for those born far away from the controversy over rangeland’s present use.

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