

DOES IT HAVE TO STOP?

A Look at Threats to Livestock Grazing

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When my ancestors first carved a living from the western rangelands from Montana to Colorado, they fought harsh weather, desert-like environments, sagebrush higher than the tops of covered wagons, predators, and all odds to establish their families and produce life from a country which produced, according to their accounts, not even much wildlife, let alone agricultural crops. Now their descendants face an even more dangerous threat in the form of: "We're destroying the earth, and we're doing it for the sake of cattle. That's obscene and it has to stop. Now." Or so says a member of an organization called Rest the West. Is she right? Does livestock grazing really ruin the earth? Does grazing have to stop? Before we decide one way or the other, let's look more closely at the affects on the environment, and take a look at what legislation is doing to grazing.

If you were used to the lushness of the Midwest and the east coast, and were to see much of eastern Montana and Wyoming, you might think that grazing really does ruin the earth. It's not exactly "grass taller than the trees," or even green grass most of the summer, but it never has been. In fact, most all of the public land is what was unclaimed under the homestead act because farmers in the 1800's were unable to make a living on 160 acres of it! Much of the west is still just not suited for farming or developing. It is best suited for growing grass, and people just can't eat range grass. In fact, in Montana alone, 56 million acres, 60% of the state, is best maintained as native rangelands. But never fear, grazing animals can turn that grass into food people can eat.

Whether some people prefer to overlook the valuable potential of range or are truly in the dark about it, they still fight livestock grazing. Some say, like a spokesman for the Oregon Natural Resources Council, "The cow is a very productive vegetation destroying machine; however, it is very ineffective in utilizing the vegetation as it uses very much of it. And in the arid west where you are talking about acres per cow instead of cows per acre, you are talking about a very fragile environment that did not evolve for grazing." Well, although many of the grazing animals today are introduced, grazing is not. Bison, deer, elk, and antelope have been here grazing as long as our history!

In fact, our arid western rangelands did evolve by **grazing itself, and grazing actually helps this environment.** An easy

example of this is what happens to an unmowed lawn—well let's just say it isn't pretty green and lush, but the old grass chokes out the rest, weeds take over, and bare spaces increase. Before long it looks like it has a bad case of mange! I'll be the first to admit that some people misuse the land, but saying that is why rangelands should not be grazed is like saying we shouldn't have police officers because some of them misuse their power!

Another concern of the environmental extremists is that livestock push wildlife off the land and that they take their food. We would all miss the western wildlife if this was the case, but really livestock have helped their wild cousins in at least three ways.

First, there is much of the grasses that the deer and elk dislike but the cows prefer. The differences in diets are sufficient to allow both livestock and wildlife to complement each other in utilizing and maintaining rangelands.

The second way in which livestock on rangelands help wildlife is through proper livestock management and monitoring changes. This means that the ranchers know that they need to manage their livestock and to rotate their pastures to allow maximum growth and potential. Since the cows don't know this, and the ranchers depend on the land's ability to continue to support livestock, the ranchers move their stock. Not understanding this principal was one of the bison's biggest problems. They would eat all there was in one place, leaving the land looking like a dust bowl, then they would have to move

to a new place and not come back for a long time until the grass had a chance to regrow.

The third way that livestock help, rather than hurt, wildlife is that livestock are fed hay in the winter, and thus the deer and their friends also eat from hay fields in the summer, and have easy feed for the winter, because eating hay beats stripping bark from trees.

If ranchers were put out of business, then most of the land would become

either overgrown, decadent, and non-productive, or would be subdivided. Even environmental extremists can see that building subdivisions over the land really would destroy the west and push wildlife off their lands! As a former Wyoming senator said about the concern of environmental extremists about public lands, "The reason they can care about it [federal land] is that good people have been running it for a century."

Grazing on public land has been a pressing issue in legisla-

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tion for quite some time. Those opposed to grazing on public land have powerful Washington-based lobbies to influence not only legislation, which is voted on, but also regulation, which is not. Subtle changes in regulations of public lands which seem innocent on the surface can be, in real-life, devastating to healthy, productive use of the land. One example of this is the push to raise grazing fees to what opposition groups consider a fair market value, as compared to leased private lands which offer much more in exchange for their use than a percentage of the grass alone. Such price increases can drive operations out of business, especially since beef isn't worth very much—at the producer level any way, you can try 79 cents a pound as a rough figure to work with. But driving livestock producers out of business seems to be the actual objective of some groups.

More devastating to the use of public lands can be regulations such as, the new "Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Livestock Grazing Management," the Bureau of Land Management's rule book for Montana. Let's take a quick peek at a few of these "guidelines" for eastern Montana. On the surface, guidelines may seem harmless and even helpful, like "proper functioning condition of riparian areas," or "water quality meets Montana standards." We have to be concerned how these regulations are interpreted, like when a functional pasture is suddenly declared a "riparian area," or when a cow happens to defecate in a stream as someone is taking a water quality sample. The guideline list goes on, and so do the threats to grazing on our western range lands.

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the vegetation quality and maintains the grasslands and wildlife populations that depend upon it; and most importantly, that grazing gives a wonderful, renewable source of food and fiber for people.

Does grazing have to stop now? No, of course not, it must continue to maintain the west!

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