# The Conservation Perspective

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I have been asked to talk about "the conservation perspective" on the conflicts between livestock and big game—not just my own perspective or that of my organization, the Izaak Walton League, but the perspectives that characterize the conservation community at large.

Conservationists and environmentalists are a diverse lot. They hold a range of attitudes, opinions, concerns, and preconceptions. Stretching the term, "conservationist," to cover this diversity obscures serious disagreements over goals, perceptions, values, and understandings-of-the-facts. Some conservationists simply see livestock as the problem, and "Cattle-free-in-'93" as the solution. Others believe that livestock, wildlife and rangeland restoration are compatible; that livestock can be a tool for improving range health; and that the public interest in wildlife and riparians depends, in part, on keeping intermingled private rangelands in ranching uses. Most lie somewhere in between.

So, what do we see from the conservation perspective? What *do* conservationists want from the public rangelands? Let me hazard some generalizations:

- Conservationists are not satisfied with the balance between wildlife and livestock on the public rangelands. They tend to view livestock and wildlife as co-equal uses, with equal claims on available forage. By that standard, land management plans that allocate most of the available forage to livestock, leaving as little as 15 or 20 percent for wildlife, appear unbalanced and less-than-acceptable. Conservationists want to see abundant populations of wildlife on the public lands.
- Conservationists are skeptical that range condition is getting better, and not satisfied that it is getting better fast enough. We have been told, again and again, that range condition is the best it has been in this century, that the decline in range conditions has largely been stopped, and that the trend is generally steady or upwards. But many conservationists find it hard to square those claims with what they see on the public lands, or with that they hear from the GAO or glean from the agencies' own documents. Conservationists are not satisfied with the rate of progress; we do not accept that stabilizing range or riparian condition at depleted levels is somehow "good enough."
- Many conservationists believe that land management plans often allocate more forage than is actually available, so that overgrazing is built into the plan itself. This has happened, in particular, when plans assumed that major investments in range improvements would boost productivity, provide enough forage for watershed, wildlife and livestock uses, and make grazing adjustments unnecessary. Where the investments did not take place, existing forage is over-allocated, expectations are inflated, conflicts occur, and the resource is likely to be overgrazed.
- Conservationists' interest in wildlife extends far beyond an interest in big game. They are at least as interested in non-game species, biodiversity, and threatened and endangered species as in elk, bighorn, pronghorn, or deer. Plans or management initiatives that deal with the needs of livestock and elk, but don't meet the needs of non-game or endangered species, or provide for biological diversity are not likely to pass muster with large and vocal segments of the conservation/environmental community.
- In a larger context, conservationists want—and expect—abundant populations of wildlife; they want riparian areas restored to health and high productivity; they want rangelands in good-to-excellent condition and upward trend; they want watersheds that are functioning properly to recharge streams and hold back floods; they want easy access to the public lands for hunting, fishing, and general recreation; they want classic, open western landscapes; and they want this legacy to be passed on to future generations undiminished. In short, they want many of the same things ranchers want, with a few variations in emphasis.

**Across much of the public land West, the fate and the future of private livestock and public wildlife are inextricably linked. If ranchers are forced out of business, wildlife will suffer as ranch properties are sold off, ranchettes spread over big game winter ranges, and trout streams are piped to urban sprinklers.**

- Among conservationists, overgrazing by livestock is commonly seen as the cause of damaged rangelands, and removing livestock, or at least sharply reducing grazing pressure, is commonly seen as the cure. Livestock are viewed as generally detrimental to range vegetation and wildlife alike. Conservationists are skeptical about the evi-

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dence that livestock can have a beneficial effect on maintaining plant vigor and healthy range vegetation. Despite Aldo Leopold, conservationists do not normally see livestock as a tool to reverse plant succession, along with "plow, axe, and fire." This is an instance where ranchers and range scientists and managers have simply not gotten their case across to the conservation community.

- Conservationists, including those who embrace the doctrine of multiple-use, generally believe there are some areas of the public rangelands that should not be grazed by livestock. These are usually desert ranges: areas of sub-marginal productivity, severely degraded range condition, but significant value for wildlife, watershed or other non-commodity uses, where the remaining productivity will not simultaneously support wildlife, livestock, and the rehabiliation of severely degraded riparian zones.

- Conservationists understand that the country and the West are changing and that their power is growing. The West is urbanizing; fewer westerners are involved in agriculture; public land recreation is booming and fueling regional growth; non-commodity uses and values—wildlife, recreation, landscape, and especially water—are rapidly becoming more valuable relative to traditional commodity outputs. They realize that six out of ten Americans now consider themselves "environmentalists" and that over 80 percent of voters rank the environment as one of their three or four greatest concerns.
- Conservationists feel their numbers; they take their growing power seriously; they expect to have a voice and a role in range management and wildlife decisions. And they will not be satisfied with a role that is restricted to the abstract exercises of the planning process; they have learned they must also have a voice in the allotment-level decisions that put the plans into effect on the ground.
- Conservationists are impatient. For a full generation, we have waited with growing impatience for dramatic improvements in range condition: for the new balance promised by FLPMA, the massive investments promised in PRIA, and the on-the-ground data and decisions promised in the monitoring policy of the '80's. We have participated in planning, only to see plans go unimplemented. We have seen progress, but the progress does not match the promise; what we have seen does not match our expectations.

- We have noted improvement where managers and ranchers (and in some cases conservationists too) have made a concerted effort—

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where time and money and political will have been invested in rehabilitating damaged ranges or riparians—in places like the Prineville District in Oregon or the Wall Creek Allotment on the Beaverhead National Forest. We are convinced that ranges can be improved and restored, and some of us at least believe it can be done without long-term removal of livestock. But we don't see it happening on most allotments. Intensive management to improve range condition and productivity is still the exception; it should become the rule. Conservationists believe it is time to move beyond the stage of isolated demonstration efforts and to get on with the job of across-the-board range improvement.
- Conservationists are willing to look at market incentives for management practices that benefit wildlife. The economic logic is straightforward; farms and ranchers are faced with a bottom; they need to make a profit. If producing wildlife is profitable, there will be more wildlife on private lands; if wildlife provides no economic return, there will be less. Private landowners will favor uses that make a profit—whether cattle, elk, or trout. Conservationists have come to accept this logic only slowly. Wildlife has historically been a non-market good, and the principle that hunting should be free and available to all comers, rich and poor alike, is rooted deep in the American consciousness. But we are now willing to support mechanisms to help landowners make money from wildlife that is produced or nurtured on their lands—arrangements like the Habitat Partnership program of Colorado, Wyoming's coupon program, or New Mexico's policy of letting landowners buy licenses for out-of-state hunters—all of which offer market incentives to landowners, but do not privatize the wildlife itself. In increasing numbers, conservationists are coming to view the production and enjoyment of wildlife as a public-private partnership, and to recognize that, like other partnerships, it must yield benefits for all of the partners.
- Many conservationists tend to think of the public rangelands in isolation from private and state lands. But at least some of us see the intermingled nature of public and private lands as controlling. Because of the mosaic of ownerships—with winter range and riparians disproportionately in private hands and summer pastures and uplands in public—private and public interests depend on each other for producing wildlife, livestock, water, or recreation. Ranchers depend on public forage to raise their livestock; hunters depend on private ranchers to winter their elk and deer.

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sold off, ranchettes spread over big game winter ranges, and trout streams are piped to urban sprinklers. We need to find ways to keep ranchers in business and on the land, to keep private rangelands in ranching uses, and at the same time, to meet society's growing demands for water, wildlife, recreation, and riparian protection.

What, then is the conservationists' perspective on the report of the Forest Service Activity Review Team on Livestock/Big Game Interaction—a select group of Forest Service, livestock, and wildlife leaders who spent an intensive two weeks looking at livestock/big game problems, learning to see them through each other's eyes, and finding shared solutions?

As I read the Review team report, it holds four essential messages: (1) that we don't really know what's going on out there—at least at the needed level of detail—in terms of range condition, big game populations, or separating wildlife use from livestock use; (2) that we can't continue to manage aggressively for maximum outputs until we do know; (3) that we need to agree on what we're managing for—in specific terms, with quantified, measurable goals; and (4) that to set those goals and translate them to the allotment level, we need an open planning process, one that involves all the relevant interests, from the earliest possible stages. These findings and recommendations seem to apply, with only minor variations, to the BLM as well.

According to the Review Team, existing resource information is inadequate to support on-the-ground management decisions. Condition and trend data is not up to date. Monitoring has been underfunded and understaffed, and the monitoring task has frequently been left undone.

This conservationist, at least, was greatly encouraged by the report. I am encouraged because the report recognizes that sound, defensible decisions will not be made without better resource information on big game populations and herd movements, range capability, and utilization-by-species. That information is needed to build public confidence that the conflicts are real and the solutions are reasonable. Shared, reliable resource information provides the common ground on which all interests can come together and agree on solutions.

I am encouraged because the review team understood that, to resolve livestock/big game conflicts, we need to arrive at shared goals for wildlife populations and that those goals need to be expressed in quantitative, measureable terms, written into forest plans and AMPs, and put into effect on the ground. I am encouraged further because the report invites all interests to take part in setting wildlife goals and planning management actions; to participate from the beginning of the process; and to take ownership of the outcomes. Most basically, I am encouraged because I think the report has a chance to succeed—and that anything less, does not.

I can not speak for others in the conservation community; but, I think other conservationists will support the findings and recommendations of the Review Team, if they think it will be responsive to the needs and concerns I have outlined. Conservationists will help make this initiative work:

- If they believe it will produce targets for big game populations and habitats that give a fairer shake to wildlife;
- If they feel they are fully included in the process of setting goals and planning management actions, right down to allotment level decisions;
- If the new goals and management prescriptions take into account the full range of wildlife values, not simply big game, and if they will help improve the condition of range vegetation, soils, watersheds, and riparian areas;
- If this effort is based on reliable resource information that relieves our skepticism, and if the agencies manage range outputs "within-the-information"—giving the benefit of the doubt to protecting the productivity of the resource base;

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- Finally, conservationists will support this effort at conflict resolution if it eases their impatience—if they see it is producing results and making a difference in the here-and-now.

The review team's recommendations will almost certainly turn out to be more than the Forest Service or the BLM can implement all at once, across all allotments; they will be forced to set priorities and pick a place to start.

In my view, the place to start is with monitoring and resource information collection. Of the many needs identified by the review team, the need for better information seems the most pressing and most basic.

According to the Review Team, existing resource information is inadequate to support on-the-ground management decisions. Condition and trend data is not up to date. Monitoring has been underfunded and understaffed, and the monitoring task has frequently been left undone. Monitoring results are commonly unable to support management actions and grazing adjustments. Basic data on the size and trend of big game populations is not available. The information needed to sort out elk use from livestock use in conflict situations is usually lacking.

Better monitoring and resource data should identify the most serious conflicts and help the agencies focus their efforts efficiently. Better data

should also settle outright those conflicts that prove to be more apparent than real. A shared base of credible resource information will free everyone to focus on solutions, instead of arguing endlessly over the facts. Finally, better resource information will be absolutely necessary for building the sort of consensus on habitat capability and wildlife population objectives that the review team found was needed.

But, although gathering better resource information is the place to start, it is clearly *not* the place to stop. We will also have to set quantitative, measureable goals for big game populations and build them into the plans. And that will require greater consultation and public participation and a stepped-up research effort. A response that shorts any of these steps will not produce the shared confidence in either wildlife goals or management actions that will be needed for reliable and lasting solutions. The critical question is not whether these things need to be done, but how to make them happen.

To carry out this program for resolving big game/livestock conflicts will require strong personal support from the top leaders of the Forest Service and BLM and an exercise of political will by both agencies. It will need the active co-operation of the state fish and game agencies—in coordinating targets for big game populations and adjusting harvest levels to limit herd size. It will require the support and participation-in-good-faith of livestock and wildlife interests alike.

Unfortunately, all of this will not be cheap, and finding the money will not be easy. I think more money can be secured for range management and for dealing with livestock/big game conflicts. But it will take a broader, more diverse alliance of conservationists, state agencies, and livestock producers to make it happen. We will need to redouble our efforts, expand our constituency, and keep the heat on. It has taken over six years of that sort of effort to nearly triple the funding for the wildlife program of the Forest Service, but it worked. It can work for rangelands too.

The problems of livestock/big game conflicts are urgent but not insoluble. Ranchers who are losing haystacks and forage to growing elk herds want relief *now*. Livestock producers westwide fear they may be swamped by growing wildlife populations. The agencies are under pressure to act without the information or the personnel they need. Conservationists want elk or bighorn reintroduced but find they are blocked by ranchers who fear the herds will grow out of control. Each of those interests has something to gain and something to give; each has much to lose; each shares an interest in prompt solutions. Each will have to give up something to get there.

The bottom line is that the world is changing, and the West is changing with it. The future will be different than the past. We can not go back to the days when cattle were king, conservationists were a curiosity, and the public quietly watched Gunsmoke and minded its own business. The question is whether we will, by working together, manage change in ways that leave us all better off—or whether we will refuse to try, and let change manage us. It is time to move beyond differences over fees and other issues that currently divide us—time to come together to solve shared problems in ways that define common ground and can ensure a future for both public land grazing and abundant herds of big game. It is an historic chance; if we walk away from it and leave the field to voices chanting "Cattle Free In '93", we may regret it for a very long time.