

Nature's Aesthetics Fall to the Plague of Ranching

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27 October 2011

An earlier version of this essay was issued in November 2010 as a podcast of the same name.

Ranching on federal public lands of the American West is typically criticized on the basis of two broad factors:

- 1) harm that it inflicts on natural resources, including wildlife, and
- 2) taxpayer subsidies that it requires to remain economically viable.

In waging a nationwide campaign to persuade the public that such ranching is undeserving of their support and indeed that it should even be abolished, I propose that a third objection take precedence—an objection based on the philosophical concept of aesthetics. While a fact-based presentation appeals to the intellect, a presentation that draws upon sensory experiences has the additional benefit of speaking directly to the emotions. Combine the emotional with the intellectual, and I'll wager that we'll have a more committed activist than one motivated by facts alone.

I further propose that the aesthetic argument has an additional, site-specific application: challenging the review of resource management plans involving grazing, particularly those for allotments within designated wilderness areas. In such situations, one will definitely want to cite the provision regarding aesthetics in the National Environmental Policy Act—a topic I'll address at the conclusion of this essay.

But before examining the aesthetic approach in some detail, let's look at the standard arguments that are made against public lands ranching. In any case, they should be kept close at hand in our efforts to educate the public.

First, ranching harms wildlife by damaging habitat. More than 150 wildlife species are federally listed as threatened or endangered, are candidates for listing, or are proposed for listing at least in part for this reason.¹

Then there's the government's Wildlife Services—an agency that typically responds with lethal force to even the possibility that a coyote or other predator might attack livestock. Every year tens of thousands of animals are shot, trapped, or poisoned by this federal agency and its state counterparts.

Public lands ranching is also criticized for the high taxpayer subsidy it receives, especially when that subsidy is viewed against the small amount of beef this ranching produces, the relatively small number of ranchers who benefit from the subsidy, and the meager economic contribution provided to most of the rural communities in which the ranching occurs.

1. George Wuerthner and Mollie Matteson, eds. 2002. *Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 252–53.

According to a 2005 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, grazing programs operated by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), receive an annual subsidy of almost 115 million dollars.² And this is just for the direct costs of managing these grazing programs.

Indirect costs, which have not been calculated by the government, are estimated to be much greater. In a 2002 report titled “Assessing the Full Cost of the Federal Grazing Program,” researchers estimated that 280 million dollars spread across a variety of agencies’ annual budgets would be unnecessary if ranching did not occur on federal public lands.³ And even this figure may be too low, as officials from the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign, citing the same data, estimated the subsidy at \$330 million.⁴

Combining these direct and indirect costs brings the total annual subsidy of federal public lands ranching above 445 million dollars.

And what do these subsidies produce? A very small amount of beef—estimated at about two percent of the national total, based on the BLM and Forest Service lands yielding that percentage of the nation’s livestock feed.⁵

And how many ranchers benefit from the subsidies? About 26,300⁶—that’s less than one-and-a-half percent of ranchers in the United States.⁷ And even in the eleven western states, only about twelve percent of the ranchers hold federal grazing permits.⁸

Finally, there’s the minuscule economic contribution that federal public lands ranching makes to the West. University of Montana economics professor Thomas Michael Power has estimated that across the eleven western states, only 0.07 percent of the jobs and 0.04 percent of the income are derived from ranching on federal public lands.⁹

A finer-grained analysis of the economic contribution attributed to public lands ranching can be found in Power’s study of seven states in the Columbia River Basin. There, of 102 counties, only eleven had more than one percent of total income or employment that resulted from public lands ranching.¹⁰

These then have been the broad complaints leveled against public lands ranching in recent times. But as I stated at the beginning of this essay, there’s another significant objection we can raise—that ranching diminishes our aesthetic experience of nature. Here I’ll turn to philosophy, rather than to ecology or economics. Specifically, I’ll draw upon the field of study known at its

2. Government Accountability Office. 2005. *Federal Expenditures and Receipts Vary, Depending on the Agency and the Purpose of the Fee Charged*. GAO-05-869. Washington, DC: USGAO, 147.

3. Karyn Moskowitz and Chuck Romaniello. 2002. *Assessing the Full Cost of the Federal Grazing Program*, 17.

4. National Public Lands Grazing Campaign. http://www.publiclandsranching.org/htmlres/fs_fiscal_costs.htm (accessed 26 August 2011).

5. *Welfare Ranching*, 5.

6. Paul Rogers, “Cash Cows,” *San Jose Mercury News*, November 7, 1999.

7. Lynn Jacobs. 1991. *Waste of the West: Public Lands Ranching*. Tucson: Lynn Jacobs, 569.

8. *Waste of the West*, 569.

9. Thomas M. Power. 2002. Taking Stock of Public Lands Grazing: An Economic Analysis. In *Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West*, ed. George Wuerthner and Mollie Matteson, 263–69. Washington, DC: Island Press, 264.

10. *Taking Stock*, 266.

inception in the 18th century as the aesthetics of nature. Nowadays it's typically called environmental aesthetics.

My remarks will be based on information found in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*¹¹ to which I direct the reader for further details.

As the encyclopedia notes, the field known as the aesthetics of nature was founded on the concept of disinterestedness, meaning that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is disassociated from the appreciator's particular personal, religious, economic, or utilitarian interests. Disinterestedness then is a precondition for interpreting the aesthetic dimension of nature in terms of three distinct conceptualizations.

The first is that of the "beautiful"—sometimes applied to objects small and smooth, but subtly varied, delicate and fair in color. Generally the concept applies to "whatever excites the keenest of pleasure to the senses and stirs emotion through the senses."¹² For people with some understanding of ecological processes, it would also include notions of ecological harmony and interdependence. Depending on circumstances, gardens or landscapes might be regarded as beautiful.

The second conceptualization is that of the "sublime." Entities so described include those experienced as powerful, vast, terrifying, and defying definition. Mountains and wilderness are typical examples.

And the third conceptualization is that of the "picturesque," which holds the middle ground between those aspects of nature experienced as either sublime or beautiful. Descriptive phrases of the picturesque include "striking," "visually pleasing," "interesting in an unusual way," and "irregularly or quaintly attractive."¹³

During the past two centuries, philosophers have broadened our understanding of environmental aesthetics to include notions drawn from the emerging field of ecology, as well as from developmental and environmental psychology. But for the purposes of this essay, the concepts of "beauty," the "sublime," and the "picturesque" will suffice to provide a cursory analysis of writings and sayings about what ranching has done, and continues to do, to nature in the American West.

Before I begin, I want to address what may appear as a contradiction: how disinterestedness, which is the fundamental underlying principle of aesthetics, can serve as a partial basis for environmental activism directed towards removing livestock from public lands. While disinterest may appear to suggest lack of interest¹⁴ in the fate of adversely-impacted grazed public lands, the concept of disinterest ultimately implies just the opposite—specifically, a deep engagement with wild nature, respect for nature, and a commitment to caring for those lands damaged by ranchers and their livestock. How can this be?

Environmental philosopher, Holmes Rolston, III, points out that disinterest is "always to be separated from uninterest," although "disinterest might still be an unlikely motivator for

11. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/environmental-aesthetics/> (accessed 26 August 2011).

12. *Merriam-Webster*. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beautiful> (accessed 30 September 2011).

13. *The Free Dictionary*. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/picturesque> (accessed 30 September 2011).

14. For more about the historical and current meanings of "disinterested" and "uninterested," see <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/disinterested> (accessed 17 October 2011).

caring conservation.”¹⁵ Rolston then proposes a way past the apparent contradiction by noting that “Aesthetic experience of nature is in engagement as much as in detachment. Disinterest does preclude utilitarian concern, immediate self-interest or instrumental uses; but disinterest is not passive observation. There is immersion and struggle for us, as much as for the fauna and flora we observe.”¹⁶ And therefore “just this being drawn out of ourselves into this autonomous nature, out there independently of ourselves, commands respect and responsibility, and we find ourselves reformed, with deeper identities than we had before.”¹⁷

In summary then “What is ‘owing’ to fauna, flora, species, ecosystems, mountains and rivers, to Earth, is appropriate respect. This expanded aesthetics includes duties, if you wish to phrase it that way; or this enlarging aesthetics transforms into caring, if that is your linguistic preference.”¹⁸

Rolston thus makes explicit how the aesthetic experience of degraded nature can (and should) spur one to conservation action.

In the remainder of this essay I’ll cite several passages about ranching’s negative impacts on the environment as examples of the aesthetic approach—examples that can either be adapted for use in new situations or that may inspire the creation of similar rhetoric.

I’ll begin our investigation of ranching’s assault on nature’s aesthetics with a few passages by the 19th century American naturalist and Sierra Club co-founder John Muir. In his book *The Mountains of California*, Muir passionately wrote about his encounters on public lands with the devastation left behind by domestic sheep:

Returning from the glaciers shortly afterward, my worst fears were realized. A trail had been made down the mountain-side from the north, and all the gardens and meadows were destroyed by a horde of hoofed locusts, as if swept by a fire. The money-changers were in the temple.¹⁹

Here, Muir broadens his aesthetic pallet by characterizing a natural landscape in terms of a domestic one that may be more familiar to his readers—and by choosing words that suggest the concept of beauty, as well as the picturesque. Going beyond aesthetics, Muir invokes religious symbolism that itself evokes an aesthetic response. First, his reference to “locusts” recalls the Old Testament story about the “plague of locusts” brought upon Egypt by Pharaoh’s refusal to free the Israelites.²⁰ And just as that terrible image of a vast, ravaged landscape is brought to

15. Holmes Rolston, III. 2002. From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics. In *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics*, ed. Arnold Berleant Aldershot, 127–141. Hampshire, UK, and Burlington, VT, 138.

16. From Beauty to Duty, 138.

17. From Beauty to Duty, 139

18. From Beauty to Duty, 140.

19. John Muir. 1894. *The Mountains of California*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 91.

20. Exod. 10:14–15: “And the locusts went over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous *were they*; before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such. For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.” (King James Version).

mind, Muir follows it with a reference to the New Testament story about the defilement of the Jerusalem temple by money changers.²¹ Muir thereby establishes that wilderness, like a religious temple, is sacred ground. And with the shepherds fulfilling the role of moneychangers in the biblical story, Muir leaves no doubt as to what he'd like to see happen to them and their sheep.

Elsewhere in *The Mountains of California*, Muir describes in greater detail the environmental consequences of bringing domestic sheep to the Sierra Nevada. I quote:

Incredible numbers of sheep are driven to the mountain pastures every summer, and their course is ever marked by desolation. Every wild garden is trodden down, the shrubs are stripped of leaves as if devoured by locusts, and the woods are burned. Running fires are set everywhere, with a view to clearing the ground of prostrate trunks, to facilitate the movements of the flocks and improve the pastures. The entire forest belt is thus swept and devastated from one extremity of the range to the other, and, with the exception of the resinous *Pinus contorta*, Sequoia suffers most of all. Indians burn off the underbrush in certain localities to facilitate deer-hunting, mountaineers and lumbermen carelessly allow their campfires to run; but the fires of the sheepmen, or muttoneers, form more than ninety percent of all destructive fires that range the Sierra forests.²²

Observe Muir's choice of words and phrases that suggest a brutal tyranny—words such as “driven,” “trodden down,” “devoured,” “running fires,” “devastated.” And when even these terms from the standard lexicon proved insufficient for Muir's word painting, he then concocted a new word, “muttoner,” to evoke the connotation of “buccaneer” as a plunderer.

There's no agonizing here over values of the sheepmen that conflict with his own. No mention of their economic concerns, nor those of the communities in which they reside. Nor mention of the food and fiber that the sheepmen might claim are necessary to feed and clothe the nation.

In the Sierra at least, Muir's values are clear—he is for wilderness. And much of the way he expresses that view is through an appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of his readers.

I turn now to observations about ranching that occurs on public lands in our time. The speakers are people who I interviewed for my book *Western Turf Wars*. Their comments, like those of John Muir, have a decidedly aesthetic quality to them.

Steve Johnson, a former public school biology teacher and representative of the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife, has lived in the American West since the mid-1940s.

His remarks remind us that there's a difference between seeing and perceiving. And that without the latter, there may not be much of an aesthetic response. Here's what he said:

Being outside. Watching. Seeing the evidence of cattle. It was just kind of a background. The cattle shit was everywhere. I just assumed, never thinking about it, that we must produce a

21. Mark 11:15–17: “And they come to Jerusalem: and Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves; And would not suffer that any man should carry *any* vessel through the temple. And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves.” (King James Version).

22. *The Mountains of California*, 152.

lot of cattle on western public lands because I saw so many signs of the cattle, if not the cattle themselves. It took me a long time to realize that really very little was produced in terms of beef by the cattle that I saw. And yet I was increasingly aware of damage done by the cattle to everything that, to me, was most important. That is, the natural settings, the plants, the native wildlife. It took a long time, though, because I was never conscious of it as an issue until I began to really look at it.²³

Steve Johnson, like John Muir, speaks of damage to the landscape—damage that nearly everyone would regard as diminishing one’s aesthetic experience of nature. Who, except perhaps a rancher, would call a landscape “beautiful” that is covered in cattle excrement?

And like Muir, Johnson personalizes his description by putting himself onto the cattle blasted landscape in a way with which the reader can easily identify. Then, in taking the reader through his own educational process about the landscape, the reader is similarly educated.

Another person with formal environmental training whom I interviewed is Leon Fager, a retired 20-year veteran of the U.S. Forest Service. Here he speaks about a favorite place in Arizona.

There are a few areas in this region that haven’t been grazed by livestock for fifty years or more. Large areas, many thousands of acres, in fact. One is called the “Three Bar Wildlife Area” on the Tonto National Forest. Hasn’t been grazed since 1943. And where it has not been grazed, you’re waist deep in desert shrubs, grasses, and other plants. Each canyon has a little spring or seep in it. Consequently, there’s lots of plants and animals that rely upon those habitats.

South of the boundary fence, it’s strictly bare desert and, what we call in the West, creosote bush. Some people call it greasewood. And it’s absolutely unpalatable for anything except the one lizard that survives on it. Other than that there’s no vegetation out there. It’s gone. It’s gone to livestock.²⁴

Unlike John Muir, Fager, along with all of our contemporary commentators, avoids religious metaphors—perhaps an indication that religion currently permeates our culture less than it did in Muir’s day. But like Muir, Fager draws upon universally understood concepts of human existence. He associates the absence of livestock with intuitive notions of ecosystem health—abundant vegetation, presumably native, and water which is essential to life.

He notes that where cattle roam, the landscape is impoverished—only weeds and a lone species of lizard survive. And Fager emphasizes that humans have chosen the loss of water and vegetation in return for cattle production. Of that water and vegetation he laments: “It’s gone. It’s gone to livestock.”

Another of my interviewees, like Fager, focused on what has been lost because of ranching. But Charmaine White Face of the Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Great Sioux Nation emphasized the loss of wildlife in her remarks:

There were wolves in this area—where we live in western South Dakota. There were bears. There were a lot more bobcats. There were a lot more predators than there are now.

23. Mike Hudak. 2007. *Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching*. Binghamton: Biome Books, 272.

24. *Western Turf Wars*, 39.

Where are the wolves? They're gone.
Where are the bears? They're not here anymore either.
Where is the buffalo?
Where are all the different kind of grasses?
Where's the tallgrass prairie?

Even at the time of my great-grandfather there was still tallgrass prairie—grasses that were taller than his horse. Grasses, of course, that would be taller than me if I stood up. Where are they?²⁵

Through her succession of rhetorical questions that mimic a futile quest through a cattle-impoverished landscape, White Face provides an ecology lesson that anyone can understand, and most likely feel badly about. Here we have the loss, certainly of the picturesque; maybe even of the sublime.

Like Muir and Johnson, White Face, personalizes her story by putting herself onto the landscape—but here only by recalling the image of her great-grandfather upon that lost biologically abundant landscape that should have been her birthright.

Patrick Diehl, yet another interviewee, initially learned most of what he knew about ranching's environmental impacts by reading Lynn Jacobs' book *Waste of the West*. Several years later, when Diehl moved to southern Utah, he had the opportunity to view these impacts within the newly established Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Here Diehl tells about conditions in the monument on the Kaiparowits Plateau:

Incredible views from up there. And no roads. North of this section of the Kaiparowits are a series of deep canyons that have eroded all the way back to the Straight Cliffs rim on the west. So to get a road in you'd have to drop down into a series of canyons and climb out again, over and over. There's no town there—there's only been wild country and then sheep and cattle. So it's not only an unroaded place; it's a place that feels like it will never have roads. To me it was very exciting because there are really very few places left in the West that you can day-hike into that don't have roads in them.

So it could have been a wonderful natural area, but instead what we found when we went up there in June of 2000 was this cow-beaten, thoroughly trashed place. Arroyo bottoms had no riparian vegetation. Only a trickle of water. Cow trails going up and down. The springs were beaten into a mire. ...

It must have been a wonderful place a hundred years ago and now—kind of the “bones” are still there. You're still three thousand feet in the air, and there are canyons in the top of the plateau. And all these wonderful views. And there are places where there is some vegetation, like oak brush. And it feels really wild. But if you look at the detail, you can see the terrible impact of public lands grazing on these allotments.²⁶

From the start, Diehl's account benefits from the region having interesting place names that intrigue the reader. Then, having established the wild nature of the landscape (incredible views,

25. *Western Turf Wars*, 336–37.

26. *Western Turf Wars*, 221–22.

deep canyons, no roads, no towns), Diehl casually “drops” livestock (the antithesis of “wild”) into the mix and describes how solely because of their presence the whole place has been transformed into the mythical image of death—a skeleton (after a hundred years of ranching only the bones remain).

Diehl then spoke in more detail about the devastation that cattle have brought to the landscape:

The bottom of the canyon is a moist meadow that looks a lot like a golf fairway. The reason the meadow looks like that is not just that it’s grassy. It’s because cows mow the grass down. And even after the cattle removals this continued to be the case. In 2001, some of the springs had stopped running, but this one was still running, so the cows were coming there big time—the trespass cattle on the Griffin allotment. They were hammering the spring there. You could see the aspen dying along the north-facing edges of the moist meadow, which is the last place you’ll find aspens as you go down in elevation.

And there are other places up there where you can see the same thing happening. There are no young aspen. The cows have been in there and trashed the spring near the aspen. And they’re not gonna reproduce themselves with the cows up there.²⁷

In at least one respect, Diehl’s account of a cattle-damaged landscape rivals that of our other speakers. Here not only has vegetation died, not only are specific plants in the process of dying, but even the possibility of the vegetation’s reproduction has been rendered impossible by the actions of cattle. Broadly speaking, we have the gruesome image of not just the dead, but also the dying, and the castrated.

Julian Hatch, like Patrick Diehl, is a southern Utah resident who possesses an intimate knowledge of the land that’s now encompassed by the Grand-Staircase Escalante National Monument. Although this region is not officially designated as wilderness, much of it certainly has a wilderness quality, which Hatch cited in his description of ranching there:

I have to mention the latest thing that we’ve seen the last couple years—they look like half of fifty-gallon drums. They’re yellow plastic, and they’ve got supplemental feed in them. It’s like molasses mixed with other nutrients—like vitamins for cows. We’re seeing the winter allotments having these all over the place. And, of course, the cows stand around and lick them until they’re empty. Then you see those plastic barrels blowing around out in the wilderness.

The point of this is that the cows lick these nutrients out of these barrels, and then they can just eat sagebrush. They have the nutrients, and they have something in their stomach to keep them going through the winter. It’s like they could eat cardboard, and lick these nutrients and do fine. That’s how bad it is. These animals are actually starving to death out on the landscape.²⁸

In Hatch’s characterization, not only have cattle created a landscape with diminished ability to sustain native wildlife, but additionally that landscape has become virtually uninhabitable

27. *Western Turf Wars*, 225.

28. *Western Turf Wars*, 241.

even by cattle. Only human intervention now allows *them* to survive there. As a consequence, the picturesque, perhaps even sublime, nature of the landscape has been further diminished by the sight of plastic barrels blowing in the wind.

I conclude this essay with the testimony of Steven Herman, an ecologist and retired member of the faculty at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. It was his remarks that inspired me to more deeply examine the application of aesthetics to the effects of ranching on public lands. And by way of further introduction, I note that Herman's mention of "Hart Mountain" is to the wildlife refuge of that name located in southern Oregon. Here's what Herman had to say:

As I get older I'm much more concerned with beauty than I am with data. And I feel that we should elevate our argument to include a consideration of the aesthetics of landscapes. It's my understanding that there's something in the National Environmental Policy Act that would be receptive to that approach.

When I was at a workshop on Hart Mountain in the run-up to the removal of the cows, when all stakeholders were present, a guy named Doc Hatfield, a rather loquacious Oregon rancher, kind of took over the opposition. He got up and said to all of us, "Tell me, what do you want here? What is it you want?"

And I said, "A cow-free landscape."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, Steve. What is it you *really* want?"

I said, "A cow-free landscape."

And he couldn't deal with that.

So I think that it would be useful to experiment with looking at that level of argument. That's much of what we do with our slideshows anyway. Certainly bare ground—that's deleterious to some wildlife. What we're showing, for the most part, is damage to landscapes. Visual damage. Aesthetic damage. It's just a waste of all that beauty to deface it with cows or sheep.²⁹

Herman here captures the essence of our topic. But what of his reference to the National Environmental Policy Act? Well, section 101, paragraph (b), subparagraph 2 of the Act states in part that "it is the continuing responsibility of the federal government to use all practicable means, consistent with other essential considerations of national policy, to improve and coordinate federal plans, functions, programs, and resources to the end that the Nation may assure for all Americans ... aesthetically ... pleasing surroundings."

If only the federal government would actually apply that provision to our ranches and public lands.

Let's make 'em do it.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Carol Hee Barnett, Eileen Patch, and Todd Shuman for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

29. *Western Turf Wars*, 270.