

Originally published in *EarthTimes*
Newsletter of Earth Day Southern Tier, Binghamton, NY USA
January/February 1998, p. 3

Cows on the Dole: Ranching and the Destruction of the West

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

I first sensed that something was “wrong” when I hiked through the western Sierra Nevada during the summer of '92. Here a meadow littered with “cow pies.” There a wide, shallow stream. And nearby, a weather-beaten storage shack cluttered with barbed wire, empty wine bottles and beer cans. Wasn't this a designated wilderness?—land set aside by federal law where “... the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man,” with “... the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable ...” I saw a lot of “man's work” here, all centered around the grazing of livestock.

In the years since then I've hiked extensively in the American West and have encountered cattle throughout our national forests and other federal public lands. Even half of our designated wilderness areas are grazed; those areas that aren't being mostly rock or ice, or so degraded by past livestock grazing that they can no longer support livestock. All told, 267 million acres of Western federal public lands are grazed by livestock, although their numbers account for only 2% of annual U.S. cattle production.

As one who appreciates well-functioning ecosystems I became increasingly upset by the impact these creatures were having on their environment. Fundamental is the question: what are animals that evolved in the moist climate of the Old World doing on mountainsides above 9,000 feet in northern New Mexico? Or in the arid Sonoran Desert of southwestern Arizona (where there haven't been large native ungulates for the past 10,000 years)? Or in the conifer forests of California's Sierra Nevada? The answer, I've learned, is “tradition and politics.”

In June 1997 I set off on a 159-day, 21,800-mile journey through the American West determined to learn as much as I could about the social, economic, political and environmental aspects of public lands ranching. I sought out environmental activists, scientists, ranchers and authors from New Mexico to Oregon, photographing as I went: in New Mexico's Gila Wilderness, in Arizona's Sonoran Desert, in the foothills of the western Sierra Nevada and throughout Oregon.

My travels have made me wiser but sadder from learning the disastrous effects that livestock grazing has on native wildlife populations. For example:

- Grazing domestic livestock on arid lands is the chief factor responsible for the decline of native trout in the West. Of thirty-two fish species native to Arizona, five are extinct and twenty-one of the remaining twenty-seven are officially listed as threatened or endangered, or are being considered for listing—all due largely to ranching.
- Perching bird and songbird populations have been decimated. For example, at Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge bird counts were 5–7 times higher on an ungrazed area of the Refuge, compared to surrounding grazed lands.
- Wild turkey and other upland “game” birds such as ruffed grouse, blue grouse and lesser and greater prairie-chickens have also suffered, as have Gambel's quail, Montezuma quail, and scaled quail. Livestock have destroyed their food sources, cover, and essential understory vegetation. Intensive reintroduction and recovery efforts for the wild turkey have restored it to some areas, though generally only to about 10%–20% of its original population.
- Displaced by domestic livestock, elk populations are estimated at 10% of their original number; pronghorn at 5%.

Aside from the injustice to native wildlife and the destruction of habitat, one may ask why someone living 2,000 miles from these western lands should be concerned. One reason is that our federal taxes subsidize public lands ranching. Although ranchers pay a fee for grazing their livestock on public lands, taxpayers get stuck for approximately 90% of the costs (e.g., for fences, wells, water tanks, pipelines and grass seeding).

Federal taxes also fund much of the Agriculture Department's program to kill livestock predators (mountain lions, bears, foxes, bobcats, etc.) and livestock competitors (gophers, rodents, prairie dogs, etc.). In 1994 (the most recent data available) the agency spent more than \$38 million to kill 783,500 animals.

There are actions that we as individuals can take to oppose this taxpayer subsidized destruction of wildlife. I'll be suggesting some as a guest speaker of the Sierra Club on February 17th (7:30 pm) [1998] at the Central United Methodist Church, 17 Nanticoke, Ave., Endicott [NY]. I look forward to seeing you there.