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Book Review: *Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West*,
George Wuerthner and Mollie Matteson, eds.
(Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002)

Public Lands Ranchers: Heading for the Last Roundup?

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

Ranching's devastating impacts upon the American West have drawn the attention of environmentalists since the writings of John Muir in the 1870s. Yet not until 1983, when Denzel and Nancy Ferguson published *Sacred Cows at the Public Trough*, have activists had a book that advanced a case for ending ranching on our public lands. If this otherwise excellent book had a deficiency, though, it was the total absence of photographs, thereby leaving to the reader's imagination images of wrecked landscapes and oppressed wildlife.

Inspired by the Fergusons' book, Lynn Jacobs produced his encyclopedic *Waste of the West* in 1991. Within its 600 pages it touched upon every aspect of public lands ranching and unlike *Sacred Cows* it contained hundreds of photos, albeit only in black and white.

In 1999, law professor Debra Donahue energized the anti-grazing movement with her book *The Western Range Revisited* in which she argued that under certain environmental conditions current law is sufficient to end ranching on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. But with the book's focus on outlining a legal case, rather than on public education, Donahue chose to include no photographs at all.

Although first-rate literary treatments of their topic, none of these books have provided the detailed visual information that only large color photographs can convey. In *Welfare Ranching* we finally have such a book; one whose statistics mirror the vastness of the western lands it portrays. Here we find the work of thirty-three authors and twenty-one photographers combined into forty chapters of seven sections with 217 color photographs all weighing in at more than six pounds. If there remains doubt about the destructiveness of ranching to the environment, to wildlife or to human health this book will put an end to it.

In building its comprehensive case the book begins with nine single-page broadsides against the most cherished myths of the livestock industry: among them that ranchers are good stewards of the land, that rangeland conditions are improving, that livestock benefit wildlife, and that public lands ranching is the foundation of rural economics. Several of

these topics are later revisited with entire chapters; the remainder are crushed under a preponderance of evidence scattered throughout the book.

The next section examines the cultural and historical roots of ranching, proceeding from the mythology of cattle in ancient societies through current U.S government management. The concluding chapter personalizes this history lesson with the transcript from a recording of a speech by the late Edward Abbey in which he recalled his transformation from cowboy worshipper to ranching opponent. Audience jeers and gun shots brought to mind the hazards faced by others who had opposed western ranchers, of the Fergusons who had suffered physical assault and of Lynn Jacobs whose dog's skinned carcass had been thrown on his doorstep.

The book's extensive third section is its distinguishing feature: a visual tutorial on environmental degradation caused by ranching. Full-page color photographs contrast rare pristine landscapes with those on which livestock have grazed for decades. Captions explain environmental details that will be apparent to few readers from the photographs alone.

Chapters by eminent scientists further explore ranching's role in degrading grasslands and streams, thus laying the basis for understanding the decline of native wildlife such as fish, frogs, snails and birds. Particular attention is given to the sage grouse, 90% of whose habitat has been degraded by ranching and whose population has accordingly plummeted from an estimated 2 million individuals to roughly 140,000 today.

Other chapters chronicle efforts by ranchers or government to decimate wildlife populations viewed as a threat to ranching. The indigenous victims: grizzly bears, wolves and prairie dogs have been extirpated from vast regions either by guns or poison.

The book next examines several costs of meat production on public lands. Mark Salvo, for example, exposes the government's complicity in allowing public lands ranchers to use grazing permits as loan collateral, a practice that can undermine the government's ability to protect wildlife habitat from degradation. Dietitian Virginia Messina and vegetarian activist Richard Schwartz conclude the section with chapters arguing against the consumption of meat based on considerations of personal and environmental health.

Having built its case for ending public lands ranching, the book concludes with outlines of litigation and legislation for achieving that goal. Litigation based on government failure to uphold existing environmental laws has been ongoing for more than twenty years and has achieved notable success. But litigation alone won't finish the job. Legislative proposals of various kinds provide the greater promise. Those wishing to advance these legislative efforts will find no better source than this book from which to learn the arguments against ranching on our public lands.