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JULY 1999

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## Who Owns the West?

**A** FORCE akin to persecution has been gathering momentum.

Environmentalists from the desert Southwest to the Great Basin to the Rocky Mountain Front have been mounting a barrage of lawsuits calculated to shut down or cripple commodity uses of public lands and further incapacitate land-management agencies that are already suffering from congressional budget cuts and layoffs.

In 1994 the National Wildlife Federation sued the Forest Service for not complying with the Beaverhead Riparian Guidelines and demanded that all grazing allotments not in compliance be suspended. The same group later scored a court victory in Utah that forced the BLM to remove all cows from the canyons of the Comb Wash grazing allotment. The Oregon Natural Desert Association sued the BLM for violations of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, ultimately seeking a permanent ban on grazing. Gila Watch, a local watchdog group, appealed the 230-square-mile Diamond Bar allotment, in southern New

Mexico. In Idaho a campaign by activists forced the Forest Service to remove two thirds of the cattle grazed on the Stanley Basin allotment, in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. And in the Southwest a zealous assortment of biologists, land planners, and other activists, known as the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity, has created a legal "train wreck" with more than a hundred lawsuits against federal agencies, hindering range and timber management until forest plans are amended.

It's no accident that these clashes are escalating at a time of new westward migration. The population of the West has increased by 14 percent since 1990, and the nation's five fastest-growing states are in the West -- Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado. These are also among the states where ranchers are the most dependent on public-lands grazing. Since 1982 urban growth in the West has consumed more than two million acres of land. In Montana alone, where the land rush is slower than in other western states, about three million acres of agricultural land have been subdivided since 1985.

Rarely do New West migrants blend seamlessly into Old West culture. KEEP OUT signs now bar country lanes that once were open to the community. Drugs and gangs are overtaking some small-town secondary schools. Traffic jams and road rage are becoming more common than tractors on the highways. Off-road,

mountain bikes roam the range. For good or ill, the last remnants of the Old West are dying.

What we lose with the cowboy is far more than some antiquated and romantic notion of the West. When we lose the family ranch, we lose much that we need as human beings, and much of what brought migrants like me to the inland West in the first place: a daily, personal relationship with nature; a social contract that works; a sense of connection with others; a sense of fully inhabiting a place for the long haul. Ranching communities are ruled by ethics that knit neighbors tightly and securely together -- the antithesis of the alienated urban culture in which 75 percent of Americans now live.

If ranches are to work as businesses and as a way of life, says Aaron Harp, a rural sociologist at the University of Idaho, ranchers need to rely on social relations established over years, even generations -- such as buying feed from the same local retailer their grandfathers bought feed from, even though it might be cheaper to send to Billings. Newcomers want a small-town feeling, but they don't recognize that their insistence on changing how things are done displaces exactly what they say they came for. "You have to interact -- pitch in and sandbag the creek when it floods," Harp says. "When the neighbor's cows get into your garden, you have to round them up for him and not complain -- then maybe he'll

plough out your driveway for you in the winter."

Social issues are never explicitly addressed as a significant component of the grazing debate. Instead it is framed as a controversy over public-land use. When environmentalists and agency managers promote tourism and recreation as alternatives to the prevailing agricultural economy, they don't stop to ask whether tourism will force established communities to give up their traditional livelihoods, because hikers don't like cow pies. Meanwhile, bankruptcy by bankruptcy, family ranching is vanishing. "It comes down to who will live and who will die," Harp says. "Who gets to stay? What people? What wildlife?"

The irony is that most ranchers share most environmentalists' objectives: clean water, flourishing wildlife, and healthy ecosystems. Unlike the farmer, who must break the soil, the progressive rancher adapts to the land he grazes. His understanding of the ecosystems on his land is built on years of daily observation and interaction. This is an untapped reservoir of knowledge that could be of great value to federal land managers, who rarely have the luxury of getting to know one landscape well. Ranchers want to leave the range in better condition than they found it, and they have made a multi-generational commitment to that ethic. There should be common cause between ranchers and

environmentalists, not divisiveness.

## Working Together

AN Dagget is an unlikely defender of the cowboy. While living in southeastern Ohio in the early 1970s as part of a back-to-the-land community, Dagget fought a company that wanted to re-open a major coal strip mine adjacent to his farm. He became a relentless environmental advocate, organizing demonstrations for Earth First! and similar groups. The Sierra Club declared him one of the most effective grassroots activists in America. He entered the range wars when he worked to dismantle a state predator-control program and supported the reintroduction of the endangered Mexican gray wolf. It was as a wolf advocate in Arizona that he first encountered ranchers.

### Related link:

**"It's unAmerican, or at best unWestern, but cooperation works," by Dan Dagget (October 16, 1995)**

"I had forgotten how uplifting it is to be part of a group of people who don't paint the world in shades of guilt."

"I was convinced there was nothing for an enviro like me to talk to ranchers about," he says. But more-moderate wolf advocates, concerned that extremists like Dagget would make things so hot with the ranchers that the wolf would never be reintroduced, invited him and five other radical environmentalists to meet with six archconservative ranchers. They were asked to try to find common ground with the help of a facilitator.

The ranchers and the environmentalists found they wanted the same things: a relationship with the land that would sustain them and future generations ecologically,

An article published in *High Country News*, "a paper for people who care about the west."

economically, and spiritually -- that would, above all, leave a healthy environment as a legacy. The six ranchers took the six environmentalists to visit their grazing allotments and showed them their efforts to restore the ecosystem. To Dagget's amazement, he says, "I saw the ranchers were achieving my goals better than I was."

The "Six-Six Group" began working together to adopt environmental-restoration goals and implement practical solutions. They also began to visit and exchange ideas with similar coalitions around the Southwest. And Dagget experienced a conversion: as relentlessly as he had once fought ranchers he became vociferous in their defense, promoting cattle grazing as a tool for range rehabilitation. In his book, *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict*, he tells the stories of ten ranches where livestock grazing is compatible with healthy range and wildlife habitat. He says that he chose these ten from many around the West that are meeting environmental goals.

The grazing methods advocated by the Six-Six Group are revitalizing the ecosystem, Dagget claims. Whether it and similar groups will prevail and save the land for both people and wildlife may depend on whether they can win policymakers' attention away from the extremists on both sides of the debate.

These coalitions are beginning to get the recognition they deserve. In June of last year a MacArthur grant was awarded to

William McDonald, a rancher and a director of the nonprofit Malpai Borderlands Group, at the juncture of Mexico, New Mexico, and Arizona. The group's mission statement declares a commitment to restoring and maintaining "the natural processes that create and protect a healthy, unfragmented landscape to support a diverse, flourishing community of human, plant, and animal life in our Borderlands Region." The Malpai Group, which is managing a million-acre ecosystem divided almost equally between public and private lands, consists of about twenty ranchers, the Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Forest Service, the BLM, and a team of conservation biologists and other scientists from all over the country. So far it has preserved a threatened population of Chiricahua leopard frogs during a drought, by hauling 1,000 gallons of water a week to stock ponds; funded brush removal and native range reseeding programs; and begun to study the character and causes of rangeland vegetation shifts -- a source of heated debate about the effects of cattle grazing.

The group is also working to preserve the endangered rancher. One of its innovations is the Grassbank. If a neighbor needs to rest his pasture, because of drought or other environmental concerns, he can graze his herd on a neighboring ranch without paying the usual leasing fees. In return for use of the Grassbank, the rancher places a conservation easement, held by the Malpai Group, on his own ranch, barring

subdivision and forfeiting his development rights.

Conservation easements are among the most powerful tools available for saving family ranches and protecting wildlife habitat. State governments, nonprofit agencies, and private coalitions buy the development rights to ecologically valuable private ranchland; the family retains ownership of the land itself, and the right to continue using it in the traditional agricultural way. Such an agreement reduces the land's market value, generates cash for the family, and thereby reduces or pays for estate taxes when the time comes to pass the ranch on to the next generation. Ranchers can stay on the land, wildlife winter range is protected, and the public continues to enjoy undeveloped scenic vistas.

Near the town of Brothers, Oregon, Doc and Connie Hatfield, the owners of the High Desert Ranch, have helped to organize the Trout Creek Mountain Working Group, one of the first and most successful efforts to bring ranchers, environmentalists, and agency managers together to solve rangeland problems. They are marketing hormone- and antibiotic-free beef through a cooperative that includes other area ranchers. The Hatfield ranch is open to the public, to demonstrate how sound ranching practices can improve the environment.

In 1996 Jack Ward Thomas, then the chief of the Forest Service, and Mike Dombeck, then the acting director of the BLM,



initiated the National Riparian Service Team. The project sends a team to assist local cooperatives in improving their watersheds. It also offers public demonstrations of good management practices and helps conflict-ridden regions to forge collaborative partnerships and find local solutions to riparian problems.

More and more environmentalists are recognizing the stake that all westerners have in the preservation of private ranchlands -- and the inevitable consequences of inflaming the range wars. COWS NOT CONDOS is a bumper sticker seen around Montana's more liberal communities lately. It's the concept behind the [Montana Land Reliance](#), a conservation group that is helping ranchers find tools -- such as conservation easements -- to save family ranches from subdivision and thereby keep ecosystems intact. [The Sonoran Institute](#), in Tucson, Arizona, is another conservation group dedicated to finding collaborative solutions to the grazing controversy, and the Nature Conservancy is also a major player in ecosystem ranching -- from the famous Gray Ranch, in New Mexico's bootheel, to Utah's Canyonlands region, where it recently spent \$4.6 million to save a working ranch from real-estate developers. The Conservancy will continue to run the 5,167 acres of deeded land plus 250,000 acres of public grazing allotments as a model of sustainable ranching. The previous owners of the ranch want to preserve its

fragile desert, wildlife, and archaeological sites, including forty-two miles of riparian areas, and will continue to manage it for the Conservancy.

Despite these models of how ranchers and environmentalists can together achieve their goals, some ranchers will go down defending the way they've always done things, and some environmentalists will never veer far from regarding ranchers with an attitude that approaches a form of racism. "I have rancher friends, too," say many environmentalists who nevertheless advocate the wholesale removal of ranches from the range. "But ranchers are obsolete anyway -- why waste our time and money on them?"

Those ranchers who have survived until now have made it because they are as tough and as adaptable as coyotes. Given half a chance, they will survive the new westward migration as well. The real question is whether the people at either extreme -- who want public land used only as they see fit -- will get what they wish for. If they do, they may ultimately regret it.

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**Perri Knize** is a freelance writer who lives in Montana. Her articles on environmental policy and on travel have appeared in *Audubon*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Condé*

*Nast Traveler.*

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