

REVOLUTION ON THE RANGE

Prologue

“Out beyond the ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

- Rumi

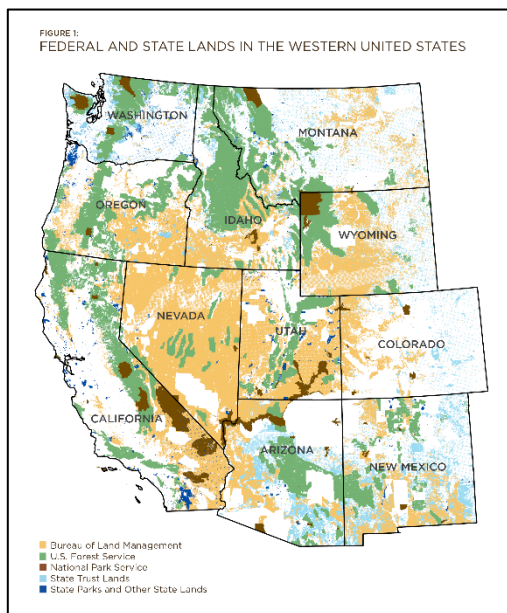
In 1996, I had an anguished question on my mind: why didn’t environmentalists and ranchers get along better? In theory, they shared many of the same hopes and fears – a love of wildlife, a deep respect for nature, an appreciation for a life lived outdoors, and a common concern for healthy water, food, fiber, and liberty. That was the theory, anyway. The reality was that by the early 1990s environmentalists and ranchers, along with loggers, federal land managers, elected officials, private citizens, and others in the American West, were locked in a bitter struggle with one another, exemplified by two popular bumper stickers of the era: *“Cattle-free by ’93!”* shouted one. *“Cattle galore by ’94!”* retorted the other.

I felt anguished because this fight had all the hallmarks of a tragedy: both sides and all of us in between seemed destined to lose what was most valued by everyone: the health and diversity of the West’s wide open spaces. And it wasn’t just the West, the hard-headedness of this particular fight reflected other divides in the nation at the time – the “red” and “blue” split, for instance, that would soon engulf our national politics.

The causes of the conflict between ranchers and environmentalists were more social and historical than simply ecological, in my opinion. To be sure, overgrazing by livestock in the arid West had damaged, and in some cases irreparably altered, native plant and animal communities, raising legitimate cries of alarm. However, other issues fueled the “grazing debate” to a larger extent, including class, political power, and prejudice. Ignorance played a role too, unfortunately – a point brought home in force one day when an environmental activist told me, with a straight face, that cattle were “immoral animals.”



Cattle on healthy grasslands in Colorado (C. White)



The struggle focused primarily on the publicly owned half of the American West's 425,000 square miles, including national forests, national rangelands, and wildlife refuges. The fundamental issue was influence. For a century or more, these lands were in the de facto control of those who lived near them and worked on them – ranchers, principally – who operated largely without oversight. After World War Two, however, influence began to shift to a new breed of westerner, including hikers, fishermen, day-trippers, and other types of often urban-based recreationalists. At first, their influence was largely economic, though over time it grew politically, especially as the populations of western cities boomed.

Concurrently, a concern for the welfare of nature in the form of a resurgent conservation movement – now called environmentalism – started to blossom across the nation. Increasingly, the attention of activists turned toward actual and perceived abuses of the public domain, including clear-cut logging, open-pit mining, and overgrazing. The alarms they raised contributed to a raft of consequential environmental legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Richard Nixon, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and a bill creating the Environmental Protection Agency.

The downside, however, of all this activism and bill-passing was the commencement of a kind of tribal warfare between denizens of the 'Old' West and advocates of the 'New,' with lassos on one side and lattes on the other. Caught in the middle were the employees of the federal land management agencies – the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Fish & Wildlife Service. The "feds," once considered by environmentalists to be in the pocket of ranching, mining, and timber interests, by the 1980s were viewed by ranchers, loggers, and miners as allies of their enemies instead. This meant they found themselves in the crosshairs of both sides.



Meanwhile, across the West, accelerating suburban and ex-urban (ranchette) growth shared the same source: former farm and ranch land. When making their case against cattle, environmental activists frequently pointed out that half of the West is publicly owned and, therefore, should be

managed with public goals in mind. But they overlooked their own statistic – the other half of the West is privately owned, much of it by ranchers. Deliberate or not, by weakening ranchers, environmentalists abetted the very thing they decried loudest about the New West – its breakup by sprawl and other forms of land fragmentation.

There were other reasons to worry about the fate of ranchers besides the loss of open space. Healthy food, for one thing. As Wendell Berry has repeatedly observed, eating is an agricultural act. We all do it three times a day – which is why it’s worth thinking long and hard about where our food comes from, who grows it, under what conditions it is produced, and what the consequences are of letting a global, industrialized food system fill our bellies. The family rancher



Father and son (C. White)

could produce healthy, locally grown food under humane conditions at a reasonable price. Throw in good stewardship of the land, and you have the possibility of an unbeatable combination – which is why the prospect of eliminating the family rancher, even on public land, was so distressing.

Ranchers also had legitimate historical and cultural claims to existence. In northern New Mexico, where I live, the ranching tradition stretches back 400 years – and much farther if you trace it back to Spain. Any knowledgeable historian or anthropologist would agree that ranching is an important subset of American society – and not because of its influence on Hollywood, Nashville, or Madison Avenue. Ranchers are a critical part of America’s ethnic and historical tapestry and remain so to this day.

Lastly, ranching matters because work matters and because land matters. Although I had spent a lot of time backpacking as a youth, enjoying the recreational fruits of our robust economy, I also spent many summers surveying the desert of southern Arizona as a professional archaeologist. It was a form of hiking, but it was also *work* – and as a consequence, I came to appreciate the value of labor on the land. I gained a physical and emotional relationship with nature that wasn’t play-based, and this made a huge difference.

For all these reasons, the conflict between ranchers and environmentalists began to look like a tragedy of rather serious proportions to me.

By the mid-1990s, in fact, the feud between industry and activists had reached a dispiriting crescendo. Newspaper headlines reported a seemingly endless cycle of unhappy news: effigies of environmentalists hanging from street lamps; road building equipment disabled in the dead of night; federal property attacked by anonymous assailants; hiking trails booby-trapped with explosives; trees ‘spiked’ with large nails to prevent their harvest; cattle shot; endangered species threatened by a campaign of ‘shoot, shovel, and shut up;’ public meetings dissolving into shouting matches; shadowy militias organizing in remote locations; federal raids ending disastrously; livelihoods ruined by lawsuits; and so on.

Emblematic of the times was a lengthy brawl in the mountains above Silver City in southwestern New Mexico. Called the ‘Diamond Bar’ fight – for the 90,000-acre Forest Service allotment (ranch) on which the fight took place – it featured an angry young ranching couple, Kit and Sherry Laney, who were determined to prevail over the United States Forest Service, and an even angrier local environmentalist equally determined to put them out of business. On the surface, the fight focused on the government’s attempt to force the Laneyes to abide by certain regulations – restrictions that the young ranchers rejected and that environmentalists demanded be upheld. The real issue, however, was power – who would win and who would lose.

Stuck in the middle was a fumbling federal bureaucracy whose attempts at compromise only succeeded in stoking the conflict. Charges, counter-charges, lawsuits, appeals, and threats flew in all directions as both sides marshaled their supporters for what appeared to be the Final Showdown over livestock grazing on public land in the Southwest.

In the end, the Laneyes lost. Acting unwisely on poor legal advice, they refused to sign their grazing permit, asserting that the government had no right to regulate them – which meant they were breaking the law. When a judge upheld the Forest Service’s position, the Laneyes lost their permit and their ranch, as well as their livelihood.

Environmentalists were elated. A significant corner, they said, had been turned in the struggle over public lands in the West.



Newspaper headlines in 1997

To this particular environmentalist, however, there was no cheer in the court's verdict. I did not join the celebrations when the victorious activist came to Santa Fe, but neither did I mourn the demise of the young ranchers, who had arrogantly thumbed their noses at public opinion. Instead, I just felt depressed. There were no winners in the Diamond Bar fight, only losers – including all the spectators. That's because nothing had been gained – lives had been ruined, not enriched; land had been abandoned instead of stewarded properly; bad blood had been created instead of hope; anger ruled, not joy.

My anguished question involved more than just bad blood between ranchers and environmentalists, however. The 'Diamond Bar' fight fit a national mood in the mid-1990s that had suddenly veered onto the rocky shoals of partisanship, confrontation, and political brinkmanship. From the jeremiads of talk radio hosts, which capitalized on the new rancor emanating from Washington, D.C., to repeated shutdowns of the federal government, America seemed suddenly caught in a destructive tug-of-war between Wrongdoing (them) and Rightdoing (us) with no room for anybody in between.

And the more we yelled at one another, the deeper my spirits sank. Then, one day, something snapped inside me, and I knew I had to act.

It happened on April 15th, 1995 – the day Timothy McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, killing 168 innocent people, including 19 children, and injuring over 800. I worked for the National Park Service as an archaeologist at the time, as did my wife, and I remember vividly my reaction as I listened, stunned, to the news report of the bombing coming in over a radio in the office.



The Oklahoma City Bombing

At first, I was mortified, then I grew angry – but not just at McVeigh. I was angry at the whole culture of conflict and odium represented by this horrible tragedy. McVeigh wasn't simply a madman, he had *motivation*, as he explained later. He *hated*. It didn't matter that the object of his ire was the federal government, what mattered was the emotion itself – the same negativity circulating around the nation, the same emotion at work in the mountains above Silver City. Although conservative pundits denied any causal connection between McVeigh's act of terrorism and the partisan cultural climate in America, I knew the bombing had happened for a reason.

It happened because it was ok to hate.



Newt Gingrich and his "Revolution" in 1994

I had to do something – but what? The previous fall, alarmed by the ‘Republican Revolution’ in the 1994 Congressional elections and Speaker-elect Rep. Newt Gingrich’s declared intention to roll back twenty-five years of critical environmental legislation, I called a representative of the Sierra Club to volunteer my services. I was quickly recruited as a foot soldier for the Club’s local group in Santa Fe, and less than two months later I was sent into battle at the state

capitol during the 1995 legislative session, assigned the job of fighting ‘takings’ legislation – a complicated legalistic assault on the public good by private property rights advocates. For my efforts, and to my surprise, I wound up on a stage in an auditorium that summer debating ‘takings’ with the Executive Director of the New Mexico Cattlegrowers’ Association in front of a large crowd of businesspeople. I have no idea who won the debate, though I recall being embarrassed at my decision to wear cowboy boots. It was an attempt at an ironic statement, but it came across as just silly. I also recall the empty feeling the debate left inside of me. Intellectually, I understood the need to push back against wrongdoers – as the environmental movement was successfully doing against the Republican agenda in Washington – but emotionally I felt adrift.

Eventually, an unexpected opportunity to act on my anguish came. Walking into a statewide meeting of the Sierra Club one day, held in the former mining boomtown of Kingston, New Mexico (not far from the Diamond Bar allotment), I saw a cowboy hat sitting on a table. It belonged to Jim Winder, who lived and ranched nearby. If that wasn’t surprise enough, I was told Jim was there because he had accepted the invitation of the chair, Gwen Wardwell, to become a member of the Executive Committee.

A rancher on the statewide Executive Committee of the Sierra Club? And a Republican to boot! What was going on here? Jim boasted that he ranched in a new, ecologically friendly style. He bunched his cattle together into one herd and kept them on the move so that any particular patch of ground would be grazed only once a year, mimicking the manner in which bison covered the land. He didn’t kill coyotes. In fact, he didn’t even mind wolves because bunched-up cows can protect themselves. There was more: because he



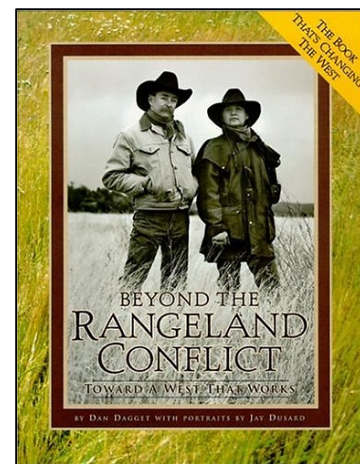
Jim Winder

ranching for rangeland health, Jim said he got along great with government employees, he had more water in his streams, and most importantly, he was making money.

Curious about this new-fangled ranching, in early 1996, I joined a tour of the Winder family ranch Jim had organized for his fellow Sierra Clubbers. Attending was Tony Merton, an anti-grazing activist who had recently transplanted himself from Colorado to a remote part of southern New Mexico. I didn't know it at the time, but Tony was the prime suspect in a spate of cattle murders in the area. It would be an investigation with tragic consequences. Whether from fear of a potential indictment, mental instability, or a deep sense of despair for the fate of the planet (or all three), Tony would commit suicide three months after the tour of Jim's ranch.

On that day, however, it became clear to all that Tony's mission was to provoke Jim into a confrontation. He obnoxiously challenged nearly every positive statement Jim said, whether it was about cattle, grass, or termites (a favorite subject of Jim's). It didn't work. Jim parried each attack with a patient explanation of ecological principles and a fine sense of humor. In fact, it quickly became clear that Jim knew far more about the environment than any environmentalist on the tour (myself especially). He was far funnier, too.

Impressed, embarrassed, and perplexed, upon my return home, I picked up a copy of *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict: Toward a West That Works*, a book by environmental activist Dan Dagget. In it, I learned that there were other ranchers of Jim's stripe across the West – people managing for healthy ecosystems through progressive cattle management and collaboration. The book confirmed what I saw on Jim's ranch: thick grass, healthy riparian areas, young plants, wildlife, open space – all the things I *said* I wanted as a conservationist. Of course, I saw livestock, too.



The anguished question began to grow.

Inspired, I called Jim and asked him if we should try to create a neutral forum where anyone who loved the land, wildlife, and cultures of the Southwest could meet, look, learn, and listen. He enthusiastically endorsed the idea. We were joined by Barbara Johnson, another Sierra Club activist. The three of us quickly decided that there was no point in engaging the extremes. Instead, we would walk to a new field beyond the continuum of argument, where we would wave our arms and ask people to join us. Jim called this place the “third position.”

I called it The New Ranch.



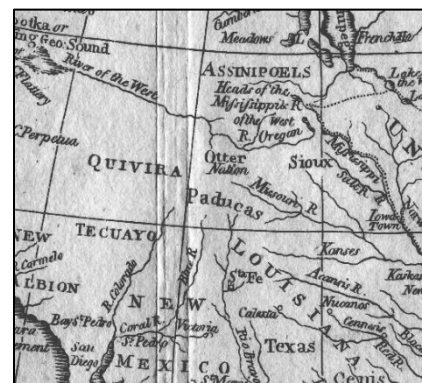
Our first newsletter (June 1997)

I wrote a definition: “The New Ranch describes an emerging progressive ranching movement that operates on the principle that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity, and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land productive for livestock. They are ranches where grasslands are productive and diverse, where erosion has diminished, where streams and springs, once dry, now flow, where wildlife is more abundant, and where landowners are more profitable as a result.” The New Ranch became the foundation for an exploration of our larger goal: “to explore our common interests instead of argue our differences,” in the words of Bill deBuys, a leader in the collaborative conservation movement.

Exploring common interests was an idea gaining traction at the time. In pockets across the West, groups of ranchers, federal managers, and environmentalists had been attempting to start meaningful dialogues. One successful effort was located in the ‘bootheel’ of southwestern New Mexico, where a diverse group had come together to put ecologically beneficial fire back on the land as well as shield private lands from the predatory attention of subdividers. They called themselves the Malpai Borderlands Group.

We called ourselves The Quivira Coalition. On Spanish colonial maps of the Southwest “Quivira” designated unexplored territory. Following the lead of other ‘common ground’ efforts, we vowed to avoid lawsuits and legislation, sticking instead to the grassroots – literally the “grass” and the “roots.” It was our belief that the grazing debate needed to start over at the place it mattered most – on the ground. We knew it was a gamble. When we organized our first workshop in a church in Santa Fe in June 1997, we sent out notices to every moderate rancher, environmentalist, land manager, and scientist we knew in New Mexico. Then we crossed our fingers. When fifty people showed up, we knew we weren’t going to be alone in our little field.

In the years that followed, as the grazing debate faded in the region and as hope and trust began to grow alongside the wildflowers and bunch grasses, an answer to my anguished question began to reveal itself. Ranchers and environmentalists *could* get along and, in places, *did* –



especially where the dialogue started with soil, grass, and water. Peace, in other words, was possible – and as a result, progress was possible as well.

But there was more. In fact, a new anguished question had begun to grow.

It started with a map I saw of a 500,000-acre watershed in southern Arizona. It was a map of rangeland health, meaning it viewed the land from a functional perspective – from the angle of soil, grass, and water. According to the analysis represented on the map, significant amounts of the watershed were in poor condition, including big portions of a national wildlife refuge, which had not been grazed by cattle in sixteen years. “Goodness,” I thought to myself after studying it, “how much of the rest of the West is in this condition?”

This issue hit home one day as I walked up a deep arroyo (wash) on a ranch in eastern New Mexico. As I came to the boundary between the private land and the Forest Service property, I saw a barbed wire fence suspended fifteen feet above my head, complete with fence posts, stretching across the arroyo. I knew from a conversation with the rancher that the fence was built in 1935 – and the posts rested on the ground. Poor grazing management played a role, undoubtedly. When the ground lacks a vigorous cover of healthy vegetation, its exposure to the erosive effects of pounding rain dramatically increases. But my work with Jim Winder had taught me that cattle could be managed in a positive manner for the health of the land. Jim – and others – taught me that cows weren’t the problem, poor management was. Things could be different.



Old fence and arroyo (C. White)

Looking up at the fence suspended above my head that day, I began to ask questions: how do we restore this land to health? What are the tools? How do we pay for it?

Fortunately, a pattern of answers was already visible. The work of the New Ranchers demonstrated that sustainable and regenerative land management was not only possible but profitable, too. At the same time, new restoration methods had been developed, which also worked within ‘nature’s model’ of land health, providing relatively simple and cost-effective strategies for reversing ecosystem decline.

In short, peace-making led me to see how healthy land and healthy relationships could be restored, one acre at a time.

The chapters in this book – representing a personal journey – are my attempt to illustrate how ranching and environmentalism are changing in the West, and with them, the West itself – and with the West, the nation too, possibly. Each person profiled not only asks questions of their own, but they also share a part of the pattern of solutions. Linked together, they are part of an intriguing mosaic of human creativity, energy, and hopefulness.

This is a book about relationships – between people, between people and land, between ecological processes – and their resilience. When I first started writing the essays that eventually led to this book, I wanted to do nothing more than hold up what I considered to be my most valuable discoveries. Over time, however, I realized that the discoveries were not nearly as important as the relationships that lay behind them. Ultimately, I came to see that, whether in the American West or beyond, healthy *things* – cattle, wolves, watersheds, communities, economies, nations – depend on a foundation of healthy relationships. And often, the key to enhancing the resilience of those relationships was to discover a field beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing.

I'll see you there.



Chapter One

The New Ranch

“Ranching is one of the few western occupations that have been renewable and have produced a continuing way of life.” – Wallace Stegner

It had been a bad year to be a blade of grass.

In 2002, the winter snows were late and meager, part of an emerging period of drought, experts said. Then May and June exploded into flame. Catastrophic crown fires scorched over a million acres of evergreens in the Four Corners states, making it a bad year to be a tree, too.

The monsoon rains failed to arrive in July and by mid-August hope for a ‘green-up’ had vanished. The land looked tired, shriveled, and beat up. It was hard to tell which plants were alive, dormant, or stunned and which were dead. One range professional speculated that perhaps as much as sixty percent of the native bunch grasses in New Mexico would die. He looked

gloomy. It was bad news for the ranchers he knew and cared about, insult added to injury in an industry already beset by any number of seemingly intractable challenges.

For some, it was the final blow. Ranching in the American West, much like the grass on which it depends, is struggling for survival. Persistently poor economics, tenacious opponents, shifting values on public lands, changing demographics, decreased political influence, and the temptation of rapidly rising land values for development have all combined to push ranching right to the edge. If the experts are correct – that the current drought could rival the decade-long ‘megadrought’ of the 1950s for ecological, and thus economic, devastation – then the tenuous grip of ranchers on the future will be loosened further, perhaps permanently. The ubiquitous ‘last cowboy,’ mythologized in a seemingly endless stream of table-top photography books, could ride into their final sunset once and for all.

Or would they?

After all, for at least the past sixty-six million years, grass has always managed to return and flourish. James Ingalls, United States Senator from Kansas (1873-1891), and father of ‘Little House on the Prairie’ author Laura Ingalls Wilder, once wrote:

“Grass is the forgiveness of nature – her constant benediction. Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grow green again with grass, and carnage is forgotten. Streets abandoned by traffic become grass grown like rural lanes, and are obliterated; forests decay, harvests perish, flowers vanish, but grass is immortal.”

Few understand these words better than ranchers, who depend on the forgiveness of nature for a livelihood while simultaneously nurturing its benediction. And like grass, ranching’s adaptive response to adversity over the years has been patience – to outlast its troubles. The key to survival for both has been endurance – the ability to hold things together until the next rainstorm. Evolution favors grit.

Or at least it used to.

Today, grit may still rule for grass, but for ranchers, it has become more of a hindrance than help. “Ranching selects for stubbornness,” a friend of mine likes to say. While admiring ranching and ranchers, however, he does not intend his quip to be taken as a tribute. What he means is this: stubbornness is not adaptive when it means fighting new knowledge, technology, and values in a rapidly changing world.

This is where ranching and grass part ways ultimately – unlike grass, ranching is not immortal. Fortunately, a growing number of ranchers understand this and are embracing new ideas and methods, with the happy result of increased profits, restored land health, and repaired relationships with others. I call their work *The New Ranch* – a term I coined years back in a presumptuous attempt to describe a progressive ranching movement emerging in the region. A New Ranch for a New West, that sort of thing.

But what did I mean exactly? What were the ‘new’ things ranchers were doing to stay in business? How did they differ from ranch to ranch? What was the key? Technology, ideas, economics, monitoring, or all of the above?

During that summer of fire and heat, I took a drive to see the New Ranch up close.

Mostly, I wanted to know if ranching would survive this latest turn of the evolutionary wheel. Was it still renewable, as Stegner observed, or is the Next West destined to redefine a ranch as a mobile home park and a subdivision? I wanted to see the shape of the future and, with a little luck, find my real objective – hope – which, like grass, is sometimes required to lie quietly, waiting for rain.

***The James Ranch
north of Durango, Colorado***

One of the first things you notice about the James Ranch is how busy the water is. Everywhere you turn, it seems, there is water flowing, filling, spilling, irrigating, laughing, moving. Whether it is the big, fast-flowing community acequia, the noisy network of irrigation ditches, the deliberate spill of water on pasture, the fish ponds, or the low roar of the muscular Animas River, take a walk in any direction on the ranch during the summer and you are destined to intercept water at work. It is purposeful water, growing trees, refreshing chickens, quenching cattle, raising vegetables, and, above all, sustaining grass.

All this energy is no coincidence – busy water is a good metaphor for the James family. The purposefulness starts at the top. David James grew up in southern California, where his father lived the American dream as a successful engineer-inventor, dabbling a bit in ranching and agriculture on the side. David attended the University of Redlands, where he majored in business, but cattle got into his blood, and he spent every summer on a ranch. David met Kay,

a city girl, at Redlands, and after getting hitched, they quickly agreed to a plan: raise a large family in a rural setting.

In 1961, they moved to a ranch north of Durango and got busy raising five children and hundreds of cows. Before long, David secured a permit on nearby public land and began to manage his animals in the manner to which he had been taught: uncontrolled, year-round continuous grazing.

“In the beginning, I ranched like everyone else,” said David, referring to his management style, “which means I lost money.”

David followed what is sometimes called the ‘Columbus school’ of ranching: turn the cows out in May and go discover them in October. It often leads to overgrazing, especially along creeks and rivers, where animals like to linger. Plants, once bitten, need time to recover and grow before being bitten again. If they are bitten too frequently, especially in dry times, they can die. Since ranchers often work on a razor-thin profit margin, it doesn’t take too many months of drought and overgrazing before the bottom line begins to wither, too.

Grass may be patient, but many bankers are not.

Through the 1970s, David’s ranchlands and his business were on a downward spiral. “I thought the answer was to work harder,” he recalled, “but that was exactly the wrong thing to do.” Slowly, David became aware that he was depleting the land and himself to the point of no return. By 1978, things became so desperate that the family was forced to sell a portion of their property, which is visible from the highway today as a residential subdivision called “The Ranch.” It was a painful moment in their lives.

“I never wanted to do that again,” said David, “so I began to look for another way.”

In 1990, David enrolled in a seminar taught by Kirk Gadzia, a certified instructor in Holistic Resource Management – a method of cattle management that emphasizes tight control over the timing, intensity, and frequency of cattle impact on the land. ‘Timing’ means not only the time of year but how much time, often measured in days (as opposed to months) the cattle will spend in a particular paddock. ‘Intensity’ means how many animals are in the herd for that period of time. ‘Frequency’ means how much time the land is rested before the herd returns. All three elements are carefully mapped out on a chart, which is why it is often called ‘planned grazing.’

It has other names – timed grazing, management intensive grazing, rapid rotational grazing, short duration grazing, pulse grazing, cell grazing, or the ‘Savory system’ – after the

Rhodesian biologist who came up with the basic idea. Observing the migratory behavior of wild grazers in Africa, Allan Savory noticed that nature, often in the form of predators, kept herbivores on the move, which gave plants time to recover. He also noted that too much rest was as bad for the land as too much grazing. In dry climes, one of the chief ways old and dead grass gets recycled is through the stomachs of grazers, such as deer, antelope, bison, sheep, or cattle. Fire is another way to recycle grass, though this can be risky business in a drought. Either way, Savory's insight was to manage animals in a manner that resembled nature's model of herbivory.

As David and Kay James will tell you, however, the most important lesson they learned from Kirk was that their problem wasn't with their cattle management. What was lacking was the proper goal for their business.

"We really didn't have a goal in the early days," noted David, "other than not going broke."

To remedy this, the entire James gang (David thinks he might be related to the famous outlaw) sat down in the early 1990s and composed a goal statement. It reads:

"The integrity and distinction of the James Ranch is to be preserved for future generations by developing financially viable agricultural and related enterprises that sustain a profitable livelihood for the families directly involved while improving the land and encouraging the use of all resources, natural and human, to their highest and best potential."

It worked. Today, David profitably runs cattle on 220,000 acres of public land across two states. He is the largest permittee on the San Juan National Forest. Using the diversity of the country to his advantage, David grazes his cattle in the low (dry) country only during the dormant (winter) season; then, he moves them to the forests before finishing them on the 400 acres of irrigated pasture of the home ranch.

That's enough to keep anybody incredibly busy, of course, but David complicates the job by managing the whole operation according to planned grazing principles. Maps and charts cover a wall in their house. But David doesn't see it as more work. "What's harder," he asked, "spending all day on horseback looking for cattle scattered all over the county, like we used to, or knowing exactly where the herd is every day and moving them simply by opening a gate?"

It's all about attitude, David observed. "It isn't just about cattle," he said, "it's about the land. I feel like I've finally become the good steward that I kept telling everybody I was."

And the goals keep coming. Recently, the family developed a vision for their land and community 100 years into the future. It looks like this:

- *Lands that are covered with biologically diverse vegetation*
- *Lands that boast functioning water, mineral and solar cycles*
- *Abundant and diverse wildlife*
- *A community benefiting from locally grown, healthy food*
- *A community aware of the importance of agriculture to the environment*
- *Open space for family and community*

And they have written out the lessons they have learned over the past dozen years:

- *Imitating nature is healthy*
- *People like to know the source of their food*
- *Ranching with nature is socially responsible*
- *Ranching with nature gives the rancher sustainability*

Like the busy water at work on their home ground, David and Kay know exactly where they are headed.

It didn't stop there. Years ago, David and Kay told their kids that in order to return home, each had to bring a business with them. Today, son Danny owns and manages a successful artisanal dairy operation that he began from scratch on the ranch; son Justin owns a profitable local BBQ restaurant; daughter Julie and her husband John own a successful tree farm on the property; and daughter Jennifer and her husband grow and sell organic vegetables and plan to open a guest lodge nearby. Only one child, Cynthia, has flown the coop, though fittingly, she runs the charitable giving program at a major corporation.

In an era when farm and ranch kids are leaving home, not to return, what the James clan has accomplished is significant. Not only are the kids staying close, they are diversifying the ranch into sustainable businesses. Their attention is focused on the Next West, represented by Durango's booming affluence and dependence on tourism. Whether it is artisan cheese, organic produce, decorative trees for landscaping, or a lodge for paying guests, the next generation of Jameses has their eyes firmly on new opportunities.

This raised a question. The Jameses enjoy what David calls many "unfair advantages" on the ranch – abundant grass, plentiful water, a busy highway, and close proximity to Durango – all of which contribute to their success. By contrast, many ranch families do not enjoy such advantages, which made me wonder: what lesson can the James gang teach us?

I posed the question to David and Kay one evening.

“The key is community,” said Kay. “Sure, we’ve been blessed by a strong family and a special place, but our focus has always been on the larger community. We’re constantly asking ourselves ‘what can we do to help?’”

Answering their own question, David and Kay James decided ten years ago to get into the business of producing and selling grassfed beef from their ranch.

Grassfed, or “grass-finished,” as they call it, is meat from animals that have eaten nothing but grass from birth to death. This is a radical idea because nearly all cattle in America end their days being fattened on corn (and assorted agricultural byproducts) in a feedlot before being slaughtered. Corn enables cattle to put on weight more quickly, thus increasing profits while also adding more “marbling” to the meat – creating a taste that Americans have come to associate with quality beef. The trouble is cows are not designed by nature to eat corn, so they require a cornucopia of drugs to maintain their health.

There’s another reason for going into the grassfed business: it is more consistently profitable than regular beef. That’s because ranchers can directly market their beef to local customers, thus commanding premium prices in health-conscious towns such as Durango. It also provides a direct link between the consumer and the producer – a link that puts a human face on eating and agriculture.

For David and Kay, this link is crucial – it builds the bonds of community that hold things together. “When local people are supporting local agriculture,” said David, “you know you’re doing something right.” Every landscape is unique, and every ranch is different, so drawing lessons is a tricky business, but the lesson of the James Ranch seems clear: traditions can be strengthened by a willingness to try new ideas.

Later, while thumbing through a small stack of information given to me by David and Kay, I found a quote that seemed to sum up not only their philosophy, but also that of the New Ranch movement in general, and the optimism it embodies. It came from a wall in an old church in Essex, England:

A vision without a task

Is but a dream.

A task without a vision

Is drudgery.

A vision and a task

Is the hope of the world.

*The Allen Ranch
south of Hotchkiss, Colorado*

Stand on the back porch of Steve and Rachel Allen's home, located on the western edge of Fruitland Mesa, and you will be rewarded with a view of Stegnerian proportions: Grand Mesa and the Hotchkiss Valley on the left, the rugged summits of the Ragged Mountains in the center, and on the right the purple lofts of the West Elks, a federally-designated wilderness where Steve conducts his day job.

I met Steve three years ago when I asked him to speak at a livestock herding workshop I organized at Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico. I knew that his grazing association, called the West Elk Pool, had recently won a nationwide award from the Forest Service for its innovative management of cattle in the West Elk Mountains. The local Forest Service range conservationist, Dave Bradford, had won a similar award for his role in the West Elk 'experiment.' Intrigued, I invited them both down to speak about their success.

Steve began their presentation that day with a story. Driving to the workshop, he said, he and Dave found themselves stuck behind a slow-moving truck on a narrow, winding road. At first, they waited patiently for a safe opportunity to pass, but none appeared. Then, they grew impatient. Finally, they took a chance. Crossing double yellow lines, they hit the accelerator and prayed. They made it. There was nothing but open road ahead of them, he said.

It was meant as a metaphor – describing Steve's experience as a rancher and Dave's experience with the Forest Service. The slow-moving obstacle, of course, was tradition.

In the mid-1990s, Steve and Dave convinced their respective peers to give herding a chance in the West Elks. They proposed that six neighboring ranchers combine their separate cattle herds into one big herd and move them through the mountains in a slow, one-way arc. By allowing cattle to behave like the roaming animals that they are (or used to be) – on the move constantly – the plants are given enough time to grow before being bitten again, which, in the case of the cattle of the West Elk Pool wouldn't be until the following summer.

This is unusual because tradition urges ranchers to spread their cattle out over a landscape, especially in times of drought, not bunch them up. Less management is the norm, which is why herding – real herding – is a rare activity in the West.

Dave and Steve described the herding process as looking like a large flowing mass, with a head, a body, and a tail, in almost continuous motion. Pool riders don't push the whole herd

at once; instead, they guide the head, or the cattle that like to lead, into areas that are scheduled for grazing. The body follows, leaving only the stragglers - those animals who always seem to like to stay in a pasture, to be pushed along.

It is not as hard as it looks, they said at the workshop. When they first began the 'experiment,' they thought they would need twenty riders to do the job. That just created chaos. Today, for key moves, they only need six people, supplemented with the energetic assistance of border collies, and most days, the 800-head herd is tended by a solitary rider. The single herd approach allows the permittees to concentrate their energies on all of their cattle at once, they said, as well as allowing them and the Forest Service to more easily monitor conditions on the ground.

In fact, the monitoring data showed such an improvement in the health of the land over time that the West Elk Pool recently asked for and was granted an increase in their permitted cattle numbers from the Forest Service; this at a time when cattle numbers on public land are mostly headed the other direction.

Of course, it was more than just the good practice of herding. Once again, it was about a vision. After the workshop, Dave sent me the three-part goal statement for the West Elk allotment.

Our goal is to maintain a safe, secure rural community with economic, social, and biological diversity...that respects individual freedom and values education, and that encourages cooperation... Our goal is to have a good water cycle by having close plant spacing, a covered soil surface, and arable soils; have a fast mineral cycle using soil nutrients effectively; have an energy flow that maximizes the amount of sunlight converted to plant growth and values the seclusion and natural aesthetics of the area.

In an era of increasingly volatile debate about the role of livestock on public land, what Steve, Dave, and the rest of the West Elk Pool accomplished was quietly significant.

Standing on the Allens' back porch, I asked Steve the question that had been on my mind since the workshop: What set him up for crossing double yellow lines like that?

Steve grew up in Denver, he said, where his father was an insurance salesman. He met Rachel at Western State College in Gunnison, where they discovered that they both liked to ski – a lot. Steve joined the ski patrol in Crested Butte, and eventually, both of them became ski instructors. It was 1968. They were young and living the easy life. But restlessness gnawed at

Steve. “The ski industry is designed to make ski bums, not professionals,” said Steve, with his easy smile. “It was fun, but we wanted more.”

They were also restless about the changes happening in Crested Butte. Even in those early days, signs of gentrification were visible everywhere in town.

“The problem with resort communities,” said Steve, “is that they attract people who act like they’re on vacation the whole year.”

Steve and Rachel decided to join the back-to-the-land movement, trading their skis for farm overalls. “We weren’t hippies, mind you,” interjected Rachel, laughing. “We took farming seriously. I just want to get that on record.”

They moved over the mountains to the sleepy village of Paonia, where they planted what eventually became a large garden. They grew vegetables, raised chickens, produced hay – and learned from their farm neighbors.

“Because we admitted we didn’t know very much,” said Steve, “and because we were willing to learn, people were willing to teach.”

In 1977, restlessness struck again. They traded the garden for a run-down farm on the edge of Fruitland Mesa, where the hay was so bad the first few years they had to give it away. They bought a few cattle, and eventually, ranching caught Steve’s eye. In 1988, he bought a Forest Service permit in the nearby West Elks, mostly as drought relief for his animals. His interest was not purely economic, however. Steve had always been attracted to mountains, and now he had a chance to work in them daily.

Still eager to learn, Steve took a Holistic Resource Management course the same year that Dave James did. It made him restless to give herding a try in the wilderness. With the arrival of Dave Bradford to the Forest Service office in Paonia a short while later, the opportunity to cross the yellow lines suddenly presented itself.

As part of the process of pulling the West Elk ‘experiment’ together, Steve became a student of a new method of low-stress livestock handling, sometimes called the ‘Bud Williams school’ after its Canadian founder. Its principles fly in the face of traditional methods of cattle handling, which are full of whooping, prodding, pushing, and cursing. Putting stress on cattle is as customary to ranching as a lasso and spurs.

That was Steve's point: customary, yes, natural, no. And that's where herding comes in: pressure from predators in the wild made grazers bunch in herds naturally. Unfortunately, on many ranches today, the herding instinct has been prodded out of most cattle.

"Nature," Steve said simply, "has the right ideas, but we keep messing them up."

It is this return to nature's original model – such as grassfed livestock and low-stress herding – that defines the progressive ranching movement underway today.

Ranching needs good students, but it needs good teachers, too. Grass may lie patiently for the benediction of rain, but people need inspiration.

***Twin Creek Ranch
south of Lander, Wyoming***

Driving through the dry heart of the drought that summer, which was centered on southern Wyoming, I knew the precise moment when I had arrived at Tony and Andrea Malmberg's ranch. Rounding a big bend in the road, I was suddenly confronted with the sight of green grass, tall willows, sedges, rushes, and flowing water.

I had arrived at Twin Creek.

Driving up the lush creek toward the ranch headquarters, I recalled a story Tony had recently written in the Quivira Coalition's newsletter in an article titled "Ranching For Biodiversity." In it, he described an experience from his youth when he and a brother-in-law decided to blow up a beaver dam on the creek:

Jim and I crawled through the meadow grass under his pickup giggling. Jim pulled the wires in behind him, leading to the charge of dynamite.

"This will show that little bastard," I said. Jim touched the two wires to the battery. WOOMP! The concussion preceded the explosion. Sticks and mud came raining down on the pickup. As soon as it stopped hailing willows and mud, we scrambled out from under our shield.

"Yeah!" I hollered as we ran down the creek bank. "I think we got it all."

Water gushed through the gutted beaver dam and we could see the level dropping quickly. The next morning, I rode my wrangle horse across the restored crossing. The beaver dam had gotten so deep I couldn't bring the horses across. But that was taken care of now. I galloped down the creek. The water ran muddy and I couldn't help but notice creek banks caving into the stream.

I wondered.

Tony kept wondering, especially after his family was forced into bankruptcy because of high-interest payments and tumbling cattle prices, costing them the 33,000-acre ranch.

Two years later, Tony leased back the ranch before eventually buying it. But he knew things had to be different this time.

Upon completing a course with Kirk Gadzia, Tony began to see that biodiversity was a plus on his ranch, not a minus. “I shifted my thought process to live with the beaver and their dams,” he wrote in his article. “With this commitment, I viewed the creek as a fence rather than something I could cross. This attitude gave me an extra pasture, a higher water table, less erosion, and more grass in the riparian area. The positive results energized me, and I began to curiously watch in a new way.”

As the beaver returned, he began to notice increased biodiversity. Soon, a University of Wyoming study found a fifty percent increase in bird populations. Moose, previously a rare sight on the property, began to appear in larger numbers. He even began to appreciate coyotes and prairie dogs and the role they played in the health of his land.

All of which led him to formulate two guiding principles:

“First, I avoid actively killing anything, and notice what is there. Whether a weed or an animal, it would not be here if its habitat were not. I plan the timing, intensity, and frequency of tools (grazing, rest, fire, animal impact, technology and living organisms) to move community dynamics to a level of higher diversity and complexity.

Second, I ask myself what is missing. Problems are not due to the presence of a species but rather the absence of a species. The absence of moose meant willows were missing, which meant beaver were missing and the chain continues.

If I honor my rule of not suppressing life, I will see beyond symptoms to address problems. If I continue asking “What is missing?” I will continue to see beyond simple systems and realize the whole. When I increase biodiversity, I improve land health, I improve community relations, and I improve our ranch profitability.”

To accomplish his goals, Tony employs livestock grazing as a land management tool. To encourage the growth of willows along the stream and ponds, for example, he grazes them in early spring to assist seedling establishment. By concentrating cattle for short periods of time, Tony breaks up top soils and makes the land more receptive to natural reseeding and able to hold more water.

What brought me to Twin Creek, however, wasn't the tall grass, the flowing water, or the progressive ranch management exhibited by Tony and Andrea, though these were important.

What I wanted to see was the very nice Bed and Breakfast they operated.

As I pulled up to the spiffy, new three-story lodge, I was greeted with a sunny wave by Andrea. A child of the Wyoming ranching establishment – her father traded cattle for a living – Andrea heard Tony speak passionately about the benefits of planned grazing at a livestock meeting some years ago (where his talk was coolly received) and wrote him an equally passionate letter challenging his beliefs. They corresponded back and forth until she accepted his dare to come to the ranch and see the proof herself.

Later, over a glass of wine, I learned that the lodge is the happy ending to a story that has its roots in anger. “When my family lost the ranch,” recalled Tony, “I blamed everyone but ourselves. I blamed consumers, environmentalists, liberals. But most of all, I blamed our new neighbors.”

In 1982, as the family was slipping into bankruptcy, a man from California bought a neighboring ranch for twice what a cow would generate per acre.

By the time Tony returned to the property, however, he had a revelation: markets don’t lie. In addition to the cattle operation, he knew it was time to start a ranch recreation business and market it directly to people such as his new neighbors. He learned quickly, however, that paying guests wouldn’t tolerate dirt or mice as much as he did, so he and Andrea took the plunge and built a pretty lodge with a capacity for fourteen guests at a time.

But they didn’t stop there.

Andrea convinced Tony that the next step was to “go local” – meaning, find ways to tap local markets. They started by hosting a class on weed control for new, local ranchette owners, focused on goats – which will eat every noxious weed on the state list.

It was a big hit. That was followed by a seminar on rangeland health, which proved popular with their ranching friends. Then came a foray into the grassfed beef business, which has been successful too.

Next up was Andrea’s decision to start teaching yoga lessons. A recent winter solstice party packed the lodge with what Tony admitted was the “strangest assortment of people I’d ever seen together.”

Yet there was a lesson here, too.

“The hodge-podge appeared to be a demographic accident,” he continued, “yet they all ended up in central Wyoming because they wanted the same things we want: a beautiful landscape, healthy ecology, wholesome food, and a sense of community.”

In this, Tony drew a parallel with the benefit of increased biodiversity on the ranch. “In the old days, I didn’t have to deal with people different from me,” he said. “But this is better.”

Tony explained how his indicators of success have changed over the years, reflecting not only their personal journey but the New Ranch movement in general.

In 1982, his primary measure of success was a traditional one: increased weaning weights of his calves. By 1995, Tony’s measure had shifted to the stocking rate (of cattle), which was up 75% from years prior due to their planned grazing. By 1998, the indicator shifted to monitoring – transects of land health – and what the data said about trend, up or down (up mostly). By 2000, Tony used the diversity of songbirds on the property as his baseline (over sixty species currently). By 2002, however, the main measure of success had changed to how many values generated income for the ranch in a year (three now).

Tony explains the last shift this way: “If we’re going to manage for biodiversity, we need to be able to get paid for it. And we need to educate people to be responsible and accountable for how they spend their dollars.”

In order to do their education properly, they have to learn to speak various languages.

“I realized that if I’m going to survive in the 21st century, I need to be trilingual,” Tony explained. “Ranchers tell stories. The BLM wants to talk data. And then we’ve got the environmentalists. Lander has a lot of them. To connect with them, you need to use poetry.”

In other words, success in ranching today is as much about communication and marketing as it is about on-the-ground results. As the farm population across the United States continues to dwindle – now down to less than 2% nationally, according to the U.S. Census – it has become imperative that farmers and ranchers find new ways to be heard, both economically and politically.

As Tony and Andrea’s story suggests, it is not enough to simply DO a better job environmentally, even if it brings profitability. One must also SELL one’s good work and do so aggressively in a social climate of rapid change and increasing detachment from our agricultural roots.

From all the indicators that I saw, Tony and Andrea are on the right track. The lodge was clean, comfortable, and airy; the food was wonderful, and the visitors were happy.

But this is no dude ranch. Tony makes his guests work; in fact, he very cleverly employs them in his progressive ranch management. According to his planned grazing schedule, his cattle need to be moved almost every day – so he has paying guests do it. They love it, of course, and since his cowboy does the supervisory work, Tony is free to explore other business ideas.

And the ideas keep coming.

Red Canyon Ranch
west of Lander, Wyoming

When I met Bob Budd at The Nature Conservancy office in Lander, he was pacing the floor, waiting for my arrival.

“The ranch is on fire,” he said quickly, “let’s go.”

And go we did. Despite being a foot taller than Bob, I had to hustle to keep up with him as we headed outside. A Wyoming native son, a member of a well-known ranching family, and former Executive Director of the Wyoming Stockgrowers’ Association, Bob managed the Red Canyon Ranch for The Nature Conservancy’s Wyoming office when I met him. He also served as their Director of Science. Bob had earned a master’s degree in Ecology and was in line to become president of the Society for Range Management, a highly respected national association of range professionals.

Without a doubt, he was a man on the move.

I jumped into my truck and followed Bob rapidly to the headquarters of the 35,000-acre Red Canyon Ranch, which borders Lander on the south and west. The Nature Conservancy, Bob said when we arrived, had purchased the property for three reasons: to protect open space and the biological resources held there, to demonstrate that livestock production and conservation are compatible, and to work at landscape-level goals.

The first two goals have been achieved, more or less, he said as I jumped into his truck. It is the third goal that motivated him now. What Bob wants is fire back on the land, brush, and trees thinned, erosion repaired, noxious weeds eradicated, perennial streams to flow fuller, riparian vegetation to grow stronger, and wildlife populations to bloom.

And judging by the speed at which we traveled, he wanted them all at once.

Bob was thrilled about the lightning-sparked fire, for example, which was burning a chunk of forest and rangeland right where he had been encouraging the Forest Service to light a prescribed fire for years.

“I love lightning,” he said with a twinkle in his light blue eyes, “because there’s no paperwork.”

As we sped into the mountains in search of a suitable vantage point to observe the progress of the fire, talking energetically about the ecological theories of disturbance, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, cascade effect, scale, and so forth, I recalled another accomplishment in Bob’s long list of achievements - that of essayist. Three of his essays, in fact, had been published recently in a book titled *Ranching West of the 100th Meridian*. In one, he wrote: “I am an advocate for wild creatures, rare plants, arrays of native vegetation, clean water, fish, stewardship of natural resources, and learning. I believe these things are compatible with ranching, sometimes lost without ranching. Some people call me a cowboy. A lot of good cowboys call me an environmentalist.”

Bob has strong words for both, especially about their respective defense of myth. He likes to remind environmentalists, in particular, that nature is not pristine, as many assume. For thousands of years, he observed, Wyoming has been grazed, burned, rested, desiccated, and flooded. In saying so, he consciously tilts at an ecological holy grail called the ‘balance of nature.’

“In landscapes where the single ecological truth is chaos and dynamic change,” he wrote, “we seem obsessed with stability. Instead of relishing dynamic irregularities in nature, we absorb confusion and chaos into our own lives and then demand that natural systems be stable. We ask systems that evolved in geological time to respond and perform in our own lifetime.”

He likes to tell both environmentalists and ranchers that grazing, like fire, is a keystone process in North American ecosystems.

“Like fire, erosion, and drought, grazing is a natural process that can be stark and ugly,” he wrote. “And, like fire, erosion, and drought, grazing is essential to the maintenance of many natural systems in the West...And because adults tend to overlook other grazing creatures, we forget the impact of grasshoppers, rodents, birds, and other organisms that have long shaped the West.”

Bob observed that prescribed fire, once controversial, is now widely accepted. He thinks it is simply a matter of time before the same change of thinking happens to grazing. In the meantime, he worries about scale. Humans tend to think and work at human-sized scales in both time and place, but nature works far differently.

“If we wish to maintain intact systems,” he concluded in his essay, “we must learn to manage and inquire on a scale that recognizes biological lines rather than lines of property ownership. What is best for the landscape will only be realized when it can be accomplished in a manner that follows the flight of the falcon....And intact systems are ranches.”

I asked him about this observation as we sped through the forest, still searching for a spot to view the fire.

“Western ranches are often disparaged for the damage they do to natural systems,” he said, “yet much of the natural landscapes and crucial habitats in the West are directly tied to the future of the ranching industry. In Wyoming, as throughout much of the West today, unbridled development has resulted in habitat fragmentation and destruction. As land is subdivided, associated roads and human development often interrupt wildlife migration corridors, decrease habitat for rare plants and animals, and make ecosystem management ever more difficult. Ranchlands are the final barrier to this type of development in many areas. The economic viability of ranching is, therefore, essential in maintaining Wyoming’s open space, native species and healthy ecosystems.”

As we traveled, Bob pointed out the unhealthy condition of the trees that we passed through and listed restoration actions that are required to get the forest back into shape.

“Our common goal must be to provide the full range of values and habitat types that a variety of species need, including us,” he said. “We achieve it by assuring that there are sites in various states of degradation, maturation, and successional movement both toward and away from the extreme. We need to be thinking in terms of the full range of variability on a landscape if we want to manage for biodiversity and long-term sustainability.”

In other words, ranchers need to become restorationists. In fact, ranchers are, in Bob’s view, uniquely positioned to deliver ecological services – as landowners, as livestock specialists, and as hard-working sons (and daughters)-of-guns.

Suddenly, we stopped. The fire had proved elusive, and it was time to turn around and head back to headquarters. I couldn’t ignore the symbolism. While landscape-scale

opportunities for ranchers may be plentiful, as Bob suggested, so are the obstacles, especially on public land, where every action seems to engender an equal and opposite reaction by someone. Even the smallest restoration project, whether it involves livestock or not, can very quickly become mired in red tape and conflict.

Nevertheless, Bob said he remained optimistic. He admitted that he had to be.

Returning to the ranch headquarters, Bob kept moving. He needed to take his son to baseball practice. I followed him into the house for introductions to the family. We talked for a while longer, shook hands, and before I knew it, he was gone.

Rather than drive off immediately myself, however, I walked down to a bridge that spanned the burbling, contented creek. Enjoying a momentary respite from the dust, driving, and cascade of ideas, goals, and practices that dominated the whole trip, I leaned against a wooden post and listened to the wind.

One thread that tied Bob Budd to the Jameses, Allens, and Malmbergs, it occurred to me, was the desire to heal. Whether it was restoring land to health, strengthening community relations, teaching, feeding, or peace-making, every person I encountered was engaged in an act of healing. This is good news for grass, especially in these dry times. It is probably good news for us as well.

Grass may seem immortal, but in reality it needs water, nutrients, animals, and, occasionally, fire to stay vigorous. Communities of people are no different. Whether it is a ranch, village, small town or city, every community needs to be diverse, resilient, opportunistic, flexible, and self-reliant if it is to survive inevitable disruption.

For example, by setting water to work with a purpose – to earn a living within nature’s model – the James gang has buffered themselves well against uncertainty and, in the process, protected 400 acres of prime land along the Animas River from the subdivision. The potential financial haul from busting their land into small lots is astronomical – but they won’t do it because it doesn’t fit their goal for their family, their land, or their community. Moreover, they don’t have to do it, not anymore.

Or take the Allens. How many of us city folk are willing to cross the double yellow lines in our lives? Do we even know where the yellow lines are? Would we know how to get around the slow-moving vehicle if we wanted to? And what would we do with the open road once we achieve it?

Unfortunately, given the number of challenges and crises that are beginning to stack up in the early part of the twenty-first century – water shortages, global climate change, rising energy costs, just for starters – these are not insignificant questions.

Then there's the issue of what story to tell. What language do we choose to speak so that our goals and methods may be clearly understood? Must we be trilingual, or at some point, will one vocabulary suffice – the language, say, of grass? Or food? When might we stop killing things we don't understand, as Tony Malmberg did, and start inquiring instead about what might be missing from our lives? How do we put the pieces back, especially the ones that we, ourselves, knocked out? And if we can figure all that out, how, then, do we make it *pay* – as in paychecks?

What about the big picture? How do we work at scale, as Bob Budd advocates – and not just on ranches and farms, but all over the globe? How do we take a landscape perspective in a world balkanized into countless, and often feuding, private, state, tribal, and federal fiefdoms? How do we overcome the paperwork, the lawsuits, the power struggles, and the politicking necessary to get the big work done?

I turned my back to the creek. It was time to go home. This was way too much thinking for one road trip.

I had set out with the goal of investigating what worked on four progressive ranches so that I might be able to better help other landowners, and I ended up learning a lesson about the insoluble bonds that connect city and country, land and people. We *are* indivisible – as a species, as a nation, as a planet. It's all hitched together, it's all endlessly changing, and it's all totally bewildering.

No wonder mankind invented alcohol.

Perhaps ranching *is* immortal, I thought as I drove away. After all, humans have been living and working with livestock for a very long time and through a great deal of historical change. The human need to be near animals and be outdoors hasn't altered much over the centuries; it just transformed and, sadly, recently shrunk (temporarily, I suspect) as a result of industrialization. But the basic solar principles haven't changed. We need ranching because we need things that are renewable and regenerative. We need these things for the lessons they can teach us, and we need them in order to *survive*.

Ranching must be immortal because our bond with nature is immortal. All flesh is grass, as the Bible reminds us. But we've forgotten this instruction – I know I had.

Perhaps it is time to consider it again.



Why Ranching Matters

One of my favorite bumper stickers is this one: “*Don't Believe Everything You Think.*” I like this message because it reminds me to lighten up and because, hopefully, it encourages others to do the same. In fact, if I had a dozen, I know which vehicles I'd slap them on right away.

Of course, the trouble with bumper sticker slogans is that they're easier said than done, as I learned recently when I emailed an op-ed essay that I had composed to an acquaintance of mine who works as an editor at the Los Angeles Times.

I direct a small nonprofit organization that works to build bridges between ranchers, environmentalists, federal land managers, scientists, and others in the Southwest, and I was sure I had found the perfect story to tell a wider audience about the progress being made on this front.

The piece profiled a combative rancher in New Mexico's arch-conservative Catron county – one of the centers of anti-federal and anti-environmentalist sentiment in the West – who had transitioned from confrontation to collaboration and was doing well as a result. His adoption of a new approach to land stewardship meant his land was healthier, the creek on his property was improving, he was on good terms with the Forest Service once more, and he could refuse the offer from a developer to sell and subdivide his attractive private land.

It was a hopeful story, and I was sure it would appeal to newspaper readers, so I squashed the narrative into seven hundred words and sent it to the editor, who I knew would be sympathetic to my intentions.

I was right. When he called, he praised my effort. He knew the rancher personally, having interviewed him while researching a book on the changing West, and thought I had done a credible job in capturing the essence of the progressive ranching movement underway in the region. But, he said, the LA Times wouldn't publish the piece. In fact, he wouldn't even show it to his fellow editors. There wouldn't be any point.

“I know what they’ll say,” he told me. “They’ll say our readers don’t care about ranching anymore, no matter how good a job they’re doing on the land. And you know what, they’re right.”

He anticipated my objection. “Look,” he continued sympathetically, “a couple of months ago, we took a gamble and ran a front-page story about the last rancher in that new national preserve they created out in the Mojave desert. The reporter liked the guy, and the angle was positive. Still, we braced for the usual negative reaction. But you know what happened? Nothing. The story sank like a stone.”

Attempting to salvage my spirits, he suggested that I rewrite the op-ed and give it a new twist by linking it to a controversial Hollywood movie about gay cowboys currently in the theaters.

I declined and thanked him for his time.

I was slightly stunned, actually. I knew that America’s bond with the Old West and its iconic cow-puncher had frayed over the years, but I assumed that ranching, at some level, still mattered to Americans. Didn’t it?

It did to me – and I don’t wear cowboy hats or boots or listen to country music. Instead, as a conservationist, I was in it for healthy wildlife, land, and people. I assumed the environmentally conscious, reasonable readers of the LA Times wanted the same things. Apparently, I was wrong. What was I thinking?

Not long after my conversation with the editor, I accepted an invitation to speak to an audience that cared very, very much about ranching.

The occasion was the convening of the West’s most hardcore anti-grazing environmental activists. Dubbed *RangeNet*, the stated purpose of the annual event, which began two years earlier, in 2002, was to celebrate the impending demise of ranching on public land. Since my day job was dedicated to keeping ranching alive and well on public and private lands, I assumed I would be the event’s equivalent of red meat (a poor metaphor, perhaps). Specifically, they wanted me to ‘debate’ a prominent opponent of ranching in front of a ballroom of his fellow travelers.

I accepted on one condition: there wouldn’t be a debate. Instead, as I explained to the event’s organizer, I would make my case that ranching was a legitimate enterprise in the West, and my opponent, a professional anti-grazing activist and author, could follow with his case to the contrary. And I told him. In my opinion, the “grazing debate” was over. There was no more debate. It had been settled in favor of ranching.

Naturally, he disagreed, but since both of us knew what the RangeNet jury's verdict would be, he agreed to my terms. He also thanked me for being "sporting."

I created a new talk for the occasion, titling it: "The Four Reasons Why We're Looking at the Grazing Debate in the Rear-View Mirror." My goal wasn't so much to provoke a tough crowd, which I did, as it was to respond to those LA Times editors who thought their readers didn't care about ranching. I decided it was an opportunity to explain what I thought.

And the best place to start, it seemed, was in the lion's den.

I had in mind my opponent's oft-quoted claim that ranching was an "irredeemable" occupation both ecologically and economically and thus needed to be run out of town as fast as possible. I begged to differ, and for an hour I walked the audience through my four main arguments, which were:

1) Ecologically sustainable ranching is possible on most western landscapes.

The consumption of grass by ungulates has been going on in North America for at least sixty-six million years, I told the ballroom crowd. Not by cattle, of course, but because they are domesticated animals, they can be managed in a way that mimics the behavior of bison and other migratory herbivores, recreating a relationship between grass and grazer that can be ecologically sustainable.

I went kept going. Progressive ranches bunch their cattle together and keep them on the move, rotating them through numerous pastures every seven to ten days or so. Ideally, no single piece of ground gets grazed by cattle more than once a year, thus ensuring plenty of time for the plants to recover. Furthermore, from the plant's perspective, it doesn't matter what animal, native or wild, did the grazing. Sustainable livestock management, I summed up, has proven itself to be effective, practical, and economical on a scale and in a diversity of landscapes, including arid ones, that make its reality undeniable. Science is just now catching up to what many land managers already know – that by letting animals behave within "nature's model" they can have their grass and eat it too.

2) Cultural diversity matters.

Ranching and ranchers are a legitimate subset of American society and have every right to endure and thrive as any other "minority" group, I told the room. Additionally, ranching is a cherished element of American, and perhaps global, popular culture – as unique and vital to our heritage as jazz music and sandlot baseball. In an age of increasing cultural homogenization,

ranching remains stubbornly distinct in look and in action – which is a good thing. Furthermore, in places like northern New Mexico, which has a 400-year tradition of livestock production, ranching cannot be separated from issues of cultural identity, history, subsistence, and security. To wave a hand dismissively and say “get ‘em off *our* land,” as anti-grazing activists are wont to do, is to be profoundly insensitive to a litany of racial, historical, and economic injustices in the region.

Also, as Dr. Gary Nabhan and other researchers have demonstrated, there is a strong link between cultural and biological diversity worldwide – in fact, they may be inescapably intertwined. For all these reasons, therefore, cultural diversity is as important as biological diversity, I concluded (to some noisy sounds of disapproval).

3) Ranchers protect open space.

According to one estimate, over one hundred million acres of private land in the West are controlled by public lands grazing permittees, I said. Much of this land is at lower elevations, in more productive soils, and thus critically important to the recovery and maintenance of wildlife populations, especially the aquatic zones known as riparian areas, which were the first to be homesteaded historically.

Many ranchers need public land to maintain a viable economic operation; therefore, if they are forced off public land, then much of their private land will become vulnerable to disposal the old-fashioned way: by sale to developers.

Half of the American West is public land, I reminded the audience unnecessarily, but that means the other half is privately owned. If we care about the quality and quantity of open space in the West, I continued, we must concern ourselves with the fate of the region’s private lands. That means ranchers.

I went on to point out that when a rancher decides *not* to sell his private property, he is, in a sense, providing a subsidy to urban populations. That’s because if society values a particular piece of land for its conservation benefits and that land goes up for sale, then society will have to buy the property at fair market value (i.e., subdivision rates) if it wishes to conserve those values over time.

In contrast, it is far cheaper to help the rancher stay in business, by whatever mechanism, and keep his land intact than to attempt to purchase ranch after ranch after ranch as they come on the market, I said. And if that rancher adopts sustainable practices that also increase his bottom line, then everyone wins.

4) Ranchers can help create a healing economy.

The American West comprises over 420,000 square miles, I went on, the vast majority of which needs some sort of ecological restoration, including many protected areas such as national parks and wilderness areas. Much of this land was degraded between 1880 and 1920 as part of that era's "cattle boom" and has not sufficiently recovered. And who is better to do this big job of healing than the families who live nearby, who know the land intimately, who are willing to work, and who have the skills?

In other words, we need more and better stewardship of our land, not less – but less is what you get when you push ranchers off the land, I said.

Instead, we need to create a *healing* economy that pays landowners to restore damaged land, I continued. The scale of the opportunity is huge. The work needs to be done; management tools have been designed and tested; scientific protocols are being published; markets are in sight (urban populations that value the services that healthy land provides); and, I concluded, the raw resource – the land – is not only abundant, it will always be local.

I laid down my laser pointer and braced for the reaction.

There was a fifth reason why the grazing debate had drawn to a close, by the way, which I didn't mention for lack of time – food.

One of the standard arguments for eliminating livestock production on public lands is that it supplies only 3% of the nation's beef (more or less). Therefore, eliminating it – in the minds of anti-grazing activists anyway – would have a marginal effect on the availability of meat to consumers. There would be no pain, in other words, in rubbing out the public lands rancher – unless, of course, you were one of those being rubbed out.

My response is this: why isn't 30% of our beef coming from our public lands? What could be a better source of beef than a herd of cattle eating grass, managed for land health, handled according to low-stress principles, raised and processed locally?

The alternative is to continue participating in an industrialized food system that trucks animals thousands of miles to gigantic feedlots where the poor beasts are fed a diet of corn (which they are not designed by nature to digest) and other associated agricultural byproducts, pumped full of drugs, handled roughly, and ultimately wind up as a fast food hamburger patty in a restaurant on the other side of the nation.

I mean, from the perspective of environmental impacts, which is worse?

Of course, had I the opportunity, I might not have been able to resist pointing out that it was hypocritical of activists to work to eliminate the family rancher on public land while consuming meat produced by the industrial food system, but I assumed I was already in enough hot water.

Fortunately, my opponent, who loves to talk, gave a lengthy sermon on the sins of ranching as a rebuttal, replaying, with my rather bewildered permission, my presentation, slide by slide! To my further surprise, he didn't disagree with some of my points. Rather, he just ran over them, saying "Courtney, might be right, but we just want the cows off our land!" (to loud applause). Then, he ate up the entire question-and-answer period with equally long-winded responses. I barely got a word in edgewise, which was fine with me, and since no one threw a tomato, verbal or literal, I got out of there relatively unscathed.

There's another reason ranching matters – one that I didn't bring up that day because I've only come to realize it recently: ranchers who work 'within nature's model' of herbivory have a lot to teach us who live in cities about sustainability.

Actually, the word I prefer over sustainability is *resilience*. It is defined in the dictionary as "the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change." In ecology, it refers to the capacity of plant and animal populations to handle disruption and degradation caused by fire, flood, drought, disease, or insect infestation. That's only the dramatic stuff. Resilience also describes a community's ability to adjust to incremental change, such as a slow shift in rainfall patterns or a rise in global warming.

The ranching community, for instance, is the epitome of resilience, having endured a century or more of cyclical drought, low cattle prices, as well as a host of modern challenges. Of course, some ranches were not strong enough to ride out the storm, succumbing to sprawl, loss of income, or the loss of the next generation. But many endure and are finding ways to keep hope alive.

For those of us who live in cities, there is a lot to think about in resilience. Take local food and energy, for instance. If there was a major disruption in our food supply – what would we do? Where would next week's meal come from? Are there enough farms and ranches in the area to feed all of us? Do we have enough resilience as a community to weather an energy crisis? Or a water shortage?

It doesn't need to be a crisis, either. In fact, the most resilient communities are ones that develop an innate ability to adapt slowly to changing conditions. For example, in nature the ultimate durable community may be grass. If damaged by drought or fire, grass has the strength to recover. If blessed with good rains, it flourishes.

Like grass, we need to build communities that can ride out the bad times and flourish in the good ones. In addition to local food and energy production, this means a healthy local democracy, a regenerative economy, shared goal setting, and work that strengthens the bond between people and the land – all built upon a foundation of healthy land.

It's not as idealistic as it sounds. Over the past twenty-five years, for instance, a progressive ranching and farming movement has held at its core those practices that work within nature's model of sustainability. This is one reason why many progressive ranchers today call themselves 'grass farmers.' It all starts with the resilience of the soil.

The proliferation of collaborative watershed-based groups in recent years is a sign that grassroots democracy is spreading. The rise of innovative restoration methodologies, whose aim is to repair and maintain land health, means we now have the knowledge to rebuild resilience in our ecosystems.

In the cities, resilience is also making a comeback. From the rekindled interest in gardening to the technological advances of 'green architecture' and other practices, cities, both large and small, are finding ways to 'get off the grid' of industrialism.

This is slow but hopeful stuff. What needs to be kept in mind, though, is this: we used to be more resilient. Over the years, and for a variety of reasons, we let our capacity to recover from misfortune erode along with the topsoil. Today, our homework assignment seems clear: to rebuild this capacity. And we need to do it, one acre, one business, and one community at a time.

Resilience matters, and it's going to matter more and more in the coming decades. But that's another book.

Ranching matters because food matters, wildlife matters, culture matters, land matters, and people matter. Because it is not alright to get our beef from Brazil or China, or let our wide open spaces get chopped up for subdivisions, or let our sense of hope erode along with the topsoil. Ranching is both a bellwether and a vital necessity – it acts as a useful barometer of national priorities while supplying us with essential services. Its history is our history, its health is our health, its demise is our demise.

And in an era of war, ranching also matters because peace-making matters. Because coexistence matters. Because a civil society matters. As does democracy, especially at the grassroots level – starting at the grass and the roots.



My Resignation

June 2002

Carl Pope
Executive Director
The Sierra Club
San Francisco, CA

Dear Carl,

On June 11th, I resigned from the Executive Committee of the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club. I did so principally in order to create more ‘elbow room’ in my life for my family (I have toddler twins). However, I have also moved on to a new type of environmental activism, one that does not fit well with the Club’s current policies and approaches. “In fact,” I said in my resignation letter, “I have deep concerns about the future effectiveness of the Sierra Club on issues related to the public lands in the West.”

I want to explain this last thought, gleaned from eight years of intensive environmental activism at the grassroots level, in hopes of nudging the Sierra Club, an organization I still greatly admire, in a new direction.

The American West has witnessed tremendous changes in recent years, including the rise of sustainable use of public and private lands; the widening threat of recreation to biodiversity; the emergence of a ‘land health’ paradigm from the scientific community; the shift of conservation strategies from ‘protection’ to ‘restoration;’ and the expanding role of collaboration to resolve resource conflicts.

However, these changes, which are here to stay, are not yet reflected in the work of most mainstream environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club. As a result, environmentalists have begun to marginalize themselves in the debate over the future of our public lands.

If the Sierra Club desires to remain a player at the grassroots level – by that, I mean the level of grass and roots – significant changes will be necessary. I will use the issue of public lands ranching as an example.

It is critically important for the environmental community to understand that a model of sustainable use of public rangelands by livestock has emerged over the last fifteen years. Its form takes a number of shapes – herding, planned or rapid-rotational grazing, grassbanks, dormant season grazing – but its underlying principle is the same: that controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of livestock impact on the land can yield positive ecological and economic benefit to resource managers.

The science supporting this principle is strong and diverse, as is the small but growing number of ranches who put the principle to work with demonstrable results. There is also a growing body of evidence that says well-managed ranches harbor as much biodiversity, or more, than ‘protected’ landscapes, such as wilderness areas. This is not to excuse overgrazing, which remains a persistent problem in the West. But the existence of ecologically sensitive ranch methods means the goal of activists needs to shift from extermination to reformation.

However, this requires a big first step – an admission by environmentalists that *work* is no longer a dirty word.

The history of the environmental movement is chiefly the story of the struggle against bad management. Clear cuts, strip mines, overgrazed rangelands, toxic dumps, poisoned rivers, and, now, rampant oil and gas drilling – the catalog of abuse is all too familiar. As a result, a prejudice against commercial use of public land developed among activists, and rightly so. Ed Abbey was on target in his outrage when he called the West “cowburnt.”

But it is no longer the 1980s. The emergence of the progressive ranching model across a variety of western landscapes, including those that receive less than twelve inches of precipitation a year, means the goal of public lands environmentalism can no longer simply be to “protect” the land from human activity. Instead, its goal should be the same as the progressive ranchers’ – to figure out how to live sustainably in our native landscapes.

In the fall of 1999, twenty-two environmental groups (not including the Sierra Club) took out a full-page advertisement in the New York Times entitled “End Welfare Ranching.” It called public lands ranching “ecologically and economically unsustainable” and proclaimed livestock

production to be “the single largest source of water pollution, soil erosion, and species endangerment in the western U.S.”

In support of its call for the abolition of ranchers, the advertisement cited an article published in the peer-reviewed journal *Bioscience*, which claimed that livestock grazing had contributed to the decline of 22% of endangered animal species and 33% of endangered plants in the U.S. This article reported the conclusions of a study conducted by a group of scientists who had analyzed the effects of various extractive industries on the viability of endangered plants and animals and ranked them according to their severity.

Contrary to the claims of the ad’s authors, however, the greatest threat to endangered plants and animals, according to the researchers, was *not* ranching. At the top of the list was water diversion, principally dams. Ranching checked in at number three, ahead of logging and mining.

In second place was recreation.

Although the chief recreational threat to wildlife was identified as off-road vehicles, the underlying message of the study was clear: recreation is officially an “extractive” industry on public lands and should be treated as such.

Naturally, there has been no full-page ad in the New York Times calling for an end to public lands recreation. The reasons are obvious, including a huge case of denial. However, the 800-pound gorilla called ‘recreation’ can no longer be ignored, and if the environmental community does not begin to put play on public land under the same microscope that it does work, then its credibility will continue to erode.

I was encouraged to learn that Wendell Berry spoke recently to the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors. His invocation that “You cannot save the land apart from the people – to save either, you must save both” has been the guiding principle of my activism. Like Berry, I believe the ecological crisis confronting us is, at root, a cultural crisis. Poor human behavior has caused much of the environmental damage that surrounds us today, and only good human behavior can restore the land to health. Isolating people from nature, a current trend of thought among some activists within the Club, will only further alienate us from our roots and compound the environmental challenges confronting us.

The ranchers I have come to know over the past few years love the land and have developed a strong sense of place by living on it, working it sustainably, and acting collaboratively to restore

it to health. Each values the land in a different but legitimate way, with the common goal of seeing it become healthy and productive for wildlife and people.

Their sense of place, along with the new toolbox and scientific protocols for measuring land health, is the key to the future of the environment in the West. This is something difficult for the average city-bound Sierra Club member, much less an activist, to understand – that our western lands, all of them, need more and better stewardship, not less.

The Sierra Club's sense of place needs to expand beyond wilderness and national parks. It needs to include the 'forgotten' lands and the people who live there, and it needs to expand beyond knowing a place through recreation. Club members and leaders need to support reasonable rural people and encourage good stewardship. There are plenty of both out there, as well as a ton of common ground where urban and rural people can meet to bridge their differences.

As the saying goes, the only constant in life is change. Ranching is enduring big changes to its nature, but so is public lands environmentalism. Where this evolutionary process is headed is anyone's guess, but I remain hopeful the Club will develop a new sense of place to go along with the changing times.

Sincerely,
Courtney White