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*C. Arden Pope, III on Rangeland and Romance*

## **More Than Economics Influences Allocation of Rangeland Resources**

I grew up the son of a rancher and farmer in the public lands states of Wyoming and Idaho. As a youth, I was exposed to the "Better-the-Devil-own-it-than-Uncle-Sam," and "Damn-the-BLM-and-Forest-Service" philosophy. As a boy, I cared little about anything but horses, guns, knives, and growing up to be a man. Like many boys in the rural west, manhood was exemplified by an image of the cowboy or rancher. Many of us have never completely overcome romantic notions of horses, cows, cowboys, and ranchers.

As I have been actively involved in research dealing primarily with agricultural production and natural resource economics, I have found it impossible to ignore the importance of romance in economic decisionmaking.

### **The Traditional Romance**

We are all very much aware of the traditional romantic view of the western lands. Wilderness is a frontier to be conquered. The range is a source of feed for livestock which is the lifeblood of a noble industry. Wildlife such as deer and elk are competition for forage that could be used by livestock. Predators, such as coyotes, bears, and cougars are natural enemies to the industry to be shot on sight. Cowboys, or buckaroos as many now prefer to be called, and ranchers are independent, naturally wise, and brave. A special breed of man.

Adherence to these romantic notions often distorts reality. For example, I recently conducted a funeral for a neighbor. He was 82 years old when he died in an accident while riding a horse. He loved horses and was good with them. He was a fine man. But he was never a rancher.

Over a period of days visiting with his family and listening to the talks at his funeral, you would have thought

he had been a cowboy or rancher his entire life. Romantic stories about him working on roundups and riding horses were told with reverence. But he was never a rancher. He worked for two summers back in the 30's as a rider for a livestock association. The rest of his working life was spent primarily as a construction worker and machinist at a local steel mill. He was an excellent, skilled crane operator and machinist, but that was rarely mentioned and seems to be nearly forgotten and replaced with the last few years when he helped on a roundup for a few weeks in the fall.

Why aren't crane operators, machinists, school teachers, nurses, traffic cops, and other such occupations conceived as noble? They are. But there has not been as much romanticism associated with them, nor with the resources they use to gain their livelihoods.

### **A New Romance**

The traditional view of the west and its wild rangeland, however, is changing. No longer are conservationists and environmentalists a fringe interest group. Ranchers still use the word environmentalist as a swear word, or at least, in association with them. Ranchers view recreationists and conservationists as tree-hugging, posie-sniffing wimps who are trespassing on lands that ranchers view to be theirs by right of conquest. Worse, environmentalists are challenging ranchers' social status as well.

The problem for ranchers and those who use public rangeland is that environmentalists—the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and other such groups—often seem to reflect mainstream America. Wildlife specials are more common on TV than Westerns. The Marlboro man on a horse is being replaced with Mark Harmon fishing or hiking in public wildlands.

The West is no longer a land of rural people trying to conquer the frontier. It is a region of scattered cities of urban

people who often want recreational and emotional access to the public rangelands and forests. Ranchers are increasingly being viewed as subsidized exploiters of the range.

Elk, deer, and other wildlife—including predators—are increasingly being viewed as the noble part of nature. Man is not part of this alternative romantic view of our public wild lands but is only a visitor to it. And the cow is increasingly viewed as a domestic beast that is more than an intruder on public rangeland—it is a menace.

Edward Abby's comments at the University of Montana in May 1985 reflect the flavor of the emotions felt on this issue. ". . . our public lands are infested with domestic cattle. Almost anywhere and everywhere you go in the American West, you will find herds—herds—of these ugly, clumsy, shambling, stupid, bawling, bellowing, stinking, fly-covered, -smearing, disease-spreading brutes. They are a pest and a plague . . ."

The two different romantic notions of the west share a love of the land and outdoors but from different perspectives that leave little room for compromise. American society in general—and the West in specific—is moving toward the newer view, which is reflected increasingly in public lands politics. Public lands ranchers and their supporters, who embrace the traditional view, are becoming angry and paranoid.

David Witts, an attorney supporting cattlemen's interests, stated, "Only recently, when environmentalist met bureaucrat, things changed. Small government agencies such as the BLM, Fish and Wildlife, and Park Service have become bloated bureaucracies stuffed with fauna sniffers. Smokey the Bear traded his hat for a Sherman tank. Obstructionism is in the saddle."

This anger and paranoia is often reflected in speeches and articles entitled, "Watch Out for Environmentalists. . . ." and "Enviros Must Go. . . ."

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### What Economic Studies Say

Economic principles suggest that society allocate rangeland such that the economic value of the last unit of rangeland used for cattle equals the economic value of the last unit of rangeland used for, say, elk. As the real marginal value of elk to society is increasingly high and that of cattle low, economic analysis increasingly appears unfavorable for cattle on public rangeland.

I grew increasingly aware of this situation while conducting research for the National Forest Service in Utah. Under a cooperative agreement with the Forest Service, Fred Wagstaff and I conducted an economic evaluation of a relatively major range improvement project called the Oak Creek Range Management Project.

Millions of public dollars had been spent on various range improvement practices almost exclusively designed to improve forage for livestock production. In 1985, coordinators of the project were awarded the Secretary of Agriculture's Distinguished Service Award for the most notable conservation action in the nation. The problem was that for every dollar spent, only about 25 cents worth of private and public benefits could be identified. For every dollar of government funds spent, less than 7 cents are returned to the public through grazing fees.

Even so, many people continue to advocate these types of range improvement projects. Benefits to local ranchers and ranching communities are identified as overriding considerations, even though the economic benefits to these people are less than 20 cents for each dollar spent.

An implicit goal of these kinds of projects may be to maintain "ranching families" or "ranching lifestyles." Just as it may be a public goal to save the grizzly bear in Yellowstone National Park, it may be a goal to save the Oak City Area rancher. Direct cash subsidies would be an efficient way to do this.

But to save the Oak City rancher through direct cash subsidies would be like saving the Yellowstone grizzly by caging and hand feeding him. The politically palatable means of supporting both the grizzly and the rancher is to preserve their habitat. Ranchers, however, unlike grizzly bears, cannot be shot or removed when they do not behave as required.

Ranching families cannot be expected to maintain, or even obtain for a short time, the mythical lifestyle of popular romanticism. For example,

many of the ranchers in the Oak Creek project area farm, teach school, or have some other primary occupation. Only a few are full-time ranchers. Most have only a relatively small number of cattle that they "run on the mountain." Romance, recreation, the achievement of a desired social status, or simply the maintenance of a family tradition are primary motives for many operations.

The willingness of the public to carry the costs of supporting public lands cattle production is tied to the public's perception of the rancher. This perception seems to be shifting from ranchers being rugged independent noblemen to ranchers being greedy caretakers of "Sacred Cows at the Public Trough." They are seen as exploiters of public range for raising cattle to the exclusion of other uses.

Public perceptions, of course, may be inaccurate. However, subsidizing the public land beef industry may be doing more harm to ranchers' image—and the viability of their lifestyle—than allowing them to deal directly with prevailing economic conditions.

Remember that only about 27,000 livestock producers, or 7 percent of cattle producers in the 16 Western States, and 2 percent of all cattle producers in the United States now use any public rangeland. Only about 2 percent of feed consumed by cattle in the U.S. comes from public forage.

The total annual value of the forage, on public rangeland, based on \$1.35 per animal unit month, is less than \$25 million. Federal cost of administering livestock grazing on these lands alone equals approximately \$50 million, leaving the net value of livestock grazing to the public negative. Livestock grazing on public lands, as currently administered, is not a source of public revenue but is a drain on public funds, although a relatively small one. Even this ignores other opportunity costs of livestock grazing on public lands.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly clear that domestic livestock is beginning to compete more heavily with other growing uses of rangeland, such as recreation, watershed, wilderness preservation, and wildlife habitats. If livestock producers were required to pay all the costs of public forage, the amount and relative importance of forage on BLM and Forest Service land for domestic livestock production would decrease.

Cattlemen and their supporters often ignore the findings of economic studies. Economists and their studies have been increasingly ridiculed by

livestock-oriented publications and cattlemen and their supporters.

For example, cattlemen support high estimates of forage value when they are used to justify the costs if publicly funded projects that increase forage for domestic livestock use. However, they have ridiculed recent studies that estimate the value of grazing privileges on public lands. I have reviewed these studies. I have even done one of my own. They are clear. The average market value of forage on public lands is often much larger than the \$1.35 per animal unit month currently being charged ranchers by the Forest Service and BLM.

Saying this makes cattlemen and their supporters livid. It implies that they are being subsidized. Worse yet, they fear policymakers might accept such economic findings. The Utah Cattlemen's Association, as part of their official resolution in December 1985, stated that, "the current grazing fee formula has a proven and scientific history for being a fair and equitable" method.

I'd like to meet the economist or anyone else who can give scientific proof for what is fair and equitable. Economists can find market value of an AUM with reasonable accuracy. They cannot, however, determine with any accuracy if that market value or any other is fair or equitable.

Thus, those who conduct economic research dealing with public rangeland and policy makers who use the findings must be aware that romances and related emotions are important forces in the allocation of rangeland resources. Economics is unable to say what is fair. Neither can romance say what is economically efficient. However, changing romantic views of rangelands is dramatically influencing values placed on their different uses. Economists and policymakers must take the influences of both, the traditional romance and the new romance into account in determining policies for the use of these lands. **C**

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