

Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Book Review by Gary Macfarlane

There have been some very fine and important books written from a scientific perspective about the ecological impacts from livestock grazing on public lands and the failure of federal agencies to live up to their stewardship responsibilities. Hudak's *Western Turf Wars* takes a refreshingly different approach. It is even more compelling as it tells stories—the personal histories—of twenty-five people intimately involved in issues surrounding public land livestock grazing policy.

Western Turf Wars honors people whose stories and experiences have been ignored by the media. Hudak's compilation is the first of which I am aware that tells several stories of former and current public agency employees and ordinary citizens who have struggled to reduce the impacts of grazing on land owned by all Americans. While no single book could encompass the vast range of experiences of citizen conservationists who watchdog livestock grazing and livestock grazing policy on public lands, *Western Turf Wars* covers a good deal of them. There are mountains of books, articles, movies, and documentaries from the perspective of cowboys and public land ranchers. We don't need another hagiography of this American icon, but we do need to hear the stories of citizens and public servants.

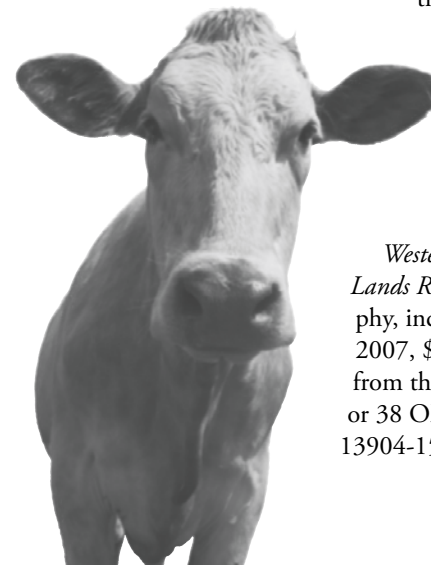
The book shines precisely because it is written down as an oral history. Much like the great American author Studs Terkel, an influence Hudak credits in the preface, he lets the people tell their stories in their own words. And getting those stories took Hudak two summers of travel throughout the West—from Montana to New Mexico, and from California to South Dakota.

There are some very powerful stories, to be sure. The decisions by agency people to quit in the face of illegal intimidation, corruption or both, knowing that nothing can be done, are telling. So are the stories of political pressure, harassment, or death threats against those exercising their constitutional rights.

Even if you don't know any of the people whose stories are told, you become caught up in their lives. You feel how they feel (and felt) and experience the contradictions of American life. I enjoyed getting into the heads of the story tellers, comparing their experiences, beliefs, and solutions with those of my own. It made me think not only about new ways to look at environmental issues surrounding livestock grazing on public land, but bigger questions of public trust, citizen responsibility, and the role of government in the face of the realities of human nature.

Of the many contributions of *Western Turf Wars*, perhaps the most important is its personal, emotional wallop. This book effectively counters the media demonization of environmentalists, conservationists, and agency people and shows them to be real people and citizens concerned about the fate of our public lands and our country. For that alone, it is worth reading.

Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching, 396 pp., includes bibliography, index, by Mike Hudak, Biome Books 2007, \$26.95 + \$4.25 shipping. Available from the publisher at www.biomebooks.com or 38 Oliver St., Binghamton, NY 13904-1516.



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