

Review Section

Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching By Mike Hudak

Review by Nancy M. Williams

Western Turf Wars is a compilation of 27 edited interview transcripts from 2003-2004 with persons who have firsthand knowledge of the problems associated with livestock grazing on public lands throughout the West. While many books on this subject rely on scientific studies, the narratives and personal anecdotes in Hudak's work offer a unique perspective on the environmental, economic, and animal welfare costs of maintaining this American tradition. The book is divided into two parts. The first part consists of 15 interviews with (mostly retired) government personnel; the second consists of 12 interviews with past and present citizen advocates. Although the book is long—343 pages—it is an accessible read. Every interview begins with a short, relevant biography and is organized by chapters, so one can easily look for a topic of interest and go right to it. The interviews themselves range from 4 to 20 pages in length.

Through these stories, we learn about the countless times the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management—pressured by politicians (e.g., the Bush administration) as well as the timber, ranching, and mining industries—chose to ignore (by downplaying or manipulating) vital (and expensive) field research that clearly showed how extensive livestock grazing reduces plant productivity, increases soil erosion, threatens our watersheds, and endangers certain animals. Consider, for instance, how overgrazing threatens to drive the Gunnison sage-grouse species in Colorado toward extinction (8), depresses Mearns' quail populations in Arizona (66), and has a devastating impact on the prey of the Mexican spotted owl in the Lincoln National Forest (159).

In other cases, we learn about the recovery of plant, wildlife, and fish habitats when ranches are sold and cattle are removed. Robert W. Phillips, regional fisheries biologist in Oregon, tells us that, after the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation bought out a ranch in northeast Nevada, he saw a sixfold increase in the number of trout within 10 years (129).

Western Turf Wars also reveals how ranchers often use elk, bison, prairie dogs, wolves, and coyotes as scapegoats for poor livestock management. Doug Troutman, a former wilderness ranger and specialist in Oregon, explains:

There's always been an anti-coyote regimen within most of the ranching community. They claim that they always have a huge problem with predators. But I've never seen

it... One of the things that always got to me was that because of the winter grazing, you've got cattle out there that are calving in the dead of winter. It's thirty below zero. You've got a calf that dies in delivering, and then there are ranchers that say, "Oh, I've seen coyotes actually rip the calves right out of the cows"... When you have the cattle calving in those conditions, you're going to lose some of your calves... In fact, most "coyote" predation is actually caused by feral dog packs in most areas near human population (Hudak, pp. 150-151).

Nevertheless, ranchers continue to expect Animal Damage Control to poison, trap, and shoot (sometimes via aerial assault) these "pests," all at taxpayers' expense, despite studies showing that when dominant coyotes are killed, more coyotes come in, and they reproduce even faster. Sanctioned killing of coyotes is not a solution, but, as the interviewees testify, research is generally ignored by local, state, and federal officials when it runs counter to prevailing attitudes and established practices.

Ralph Maughan, professor of political science at Idaho State University and president of the Wolf Recovery Foundation, explains that, in his view, the wolf's reintroduction in the West was met with a lot of resistance from ranchers not so much for economic, as for cultural or lifestyle reasons. Such resistance is about power, privilege, and (perceived) entitlements. Ranchers insist that wolves kill large numbers of livestock. "They raise an economic issue," Maughan declares, "but it's not really significant because their losses are largely compensated by Defenders of Wildlife or by other funds in some other states. The actual amount of predation on livestock by wolves has been very low. Something like... four hundred cows [since 1987]... and most of the cows are actually calves. Not very many full-grown cows have been attacked" (Hudak, 2007, p. 284).

Western Turf Wars is an important book for anyone who wants to know more about the mismanagement of public lands and how it negatively impacts our environment and our precious wildlife. I recommend it to all those interested in the tales of these courageous women and men and how they fought against the livestock industry for the betterment of all those affected by failed social and political policies.