Founding of upstate Farm Sanctuary makes an encouraging story

Farm Sanctuary: changing hearts and minds about animals and food.


by Erin Riddle

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he story of founding and managing Farm Sanctuary is the journey of a fellow activist, told through his eyes, that provides solace and inspiration when your own challenges and tribulations seem too overwhelming. As environmental activists and concerned citizens, we are continuously forced to reevaluate the ethical foundation on which we stand to face the world and confront circumstances that make our work seem dauntingly endless.

Gene Baur’s book, Farm Sanctuary, is a source of encouragement and hope for anyone who wonders whether perseverance and determination will bear fruit. He tells his story about founding and managing Farm Sanctuary, an education and advocacy center as well as a haven for abused, neglected and abandoned farm animals. The sanctuary currently operates two sites, in Watkins Glen and northern California.

Above all, Gene’s highest priority is to educate the public and lawmakers about the way factory farming abuses, exploits, mutilates and exacts a toll from farm animals, regarding them as nothing more than food machines and ignoring their capacity for suffering and misery. His thoughtful reflections on how the industrialized model has turned the tradition of growing food and providing for the local community (an honorable tradition that required skill and knowledge and generated pride) into a systemic trap of greed, disregard and despiration.

In the process, Gene points out how farmers have become serfs to the factory farm. The most important environmental allies are themselves in the agencies that environmentalists love to hate. One BLM director is actually delighted when environmental groups decide to sue her agency, ‘forcing’ her to do the job she desperately wants to do.

Other stories are also striking; the rancher who shoots his own cows from a helicopter to avoid being fined for overgrazing; the teacher who helps his class raise money to send an alligator back from Arizona to Florida; the classics scholar who graduated from Harvard and Oxford only to become an anti-grazing activist in Utah.

Nor is this a story of one bitter defeat after another; though there is plenty here to bring us to outrage, there are also some surprising victories.

There’s no other book like Western Turf Wars. What Hudak has done is to document, not just that public lands grazing is inherently wrong (which everyone knew that already), but why it happens this way, what the forces of resistance are, and what happens when people with a conscience take action against the political corruption rampant throughout the West.

Hudak’s book has an extensive bibliography, guide to acronyms, a glossary, and a really comprehensive index. This is an important and unique contribution to contemporary western history, and it is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what is happening to public lands in the western United States.


Mike Hudak, PhD, is a member of the Susquehanna Group. Keith Akers is the author of A Vegetarian Sourcebook as well as The Last Religion of Jesus. His website is http://compassionatopirit.com.

Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching.


by Keith Akers

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ublic lands grazing, built around the image of the ‘all-American cowboy’, is perhaps the single most conspicuously harmful manifestation of livestock agriculture in the West. Ranchers are being subsidized to overgraze their cattle on public lands. Political influences often negate even the most basic restraints on overgrazing. And it doesn’t stop there, that mindset extends to our food. Efforts to point out the obvious are often met by indifference, denial, or active cover-up.

The first question I had when looking at Mike Hudak’s book Western Turf Wars is, why do we need another book on public lands ranching? I was first alerted to this issue by Denzel and Nancy Ferguson’s well-written book Sacred Cows at the Public Trough (1983). After that, came Lynn Jacobs’ book Waste of the West (1991) with its innovative use of extensive photographs, and then the spectacular coffee-table book Western Welfare Ranching by George Wuerthner and Mollie Matteson (2002) which added even more detail, scientific information, and color photographs. Why do we need yet another book telling us in graphic photographs why we have to be concerned on public lands? The answer is pretty simple: to educate the public and lawmakers about the way factory farming abuses, exploits, mutilates and exacts a toll from farm animals, regarding them as nothing more than food machines and ignoring their capacity for suffering and misery. His thoughtful reflections on how the industrialized model has turned the tradition of growing food and providing for the local community (an honorable tradition that required skill and knowledge and generated pride) into a systemic trap of greed, disregard and despiration.

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