BOOK REVIEW: WESTERN TURF WARS

BY KEITH AKERS

Public lands ranching, built around the image of the "all-American cow- boy" is perhaps the most single most controversial manifestation of modern agriculture in the West. Ranchers are being subdi- zized to overgraze their cattle on public lands. This influences the environment even more than the most basic restraints on overgrazing. And it doesn't even produce that much meat. Efforts to point out the obvi- ous 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 Cow: The War in Texas (Gal.). After that, came Lynn Jacob's book Waste of the West (1993) with its innovative use of extensive pho- tographs to illustrate the spectacular coffee-table book Welfare Ranching by George Wurthner and Mollie Matteson (1992) which added even more detail, scientific information, and color photographs. Why do we need yet another book telling us in graphic detail that public lands ranching is really not stupid?

Well, surprise, surprise -- Mike Hudak proves that there is some- thing new to say about public lands ranching. Hudak's book is substan- tially more detailed, scientifically informed, and more colorful. He goes beyond the facts of the physical damage of overgrazing, and shown why things are happen- ing this way. Hudak, besides being an activist, is a photographer in his own right; several of his photos were pub- lished in Welfare Ranching, and he has his own website with extensive photographic documentation, http:// www.mikehudak.com/. But this is not another book of photographs; it is a well-written account of the contemporary history, a history that most environmental activists do not even realize exists.

Hudak's book is in the tradition of "oral history," the stories of those who have participated in public lands politics as told by - them- selves. He went around the country interviewing people on both sides of the governmental fence, includ- ing government employees in such agencies as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Forest Service as well as activists in such groups as the Sierra Club and the Wild Horse Spirit Sanctuary. The resultant interviews are what makes up the book.

What emerges is a graphic, infor- mative, and illuminating story about public lands grazing told by the people who are directly acquainted with realities of Western poli- cies. Above all, it is a story of politi- cal corruption. Countless times, the same scenario comes out: some enterprising government employee actually tries to do their job, only to feel the political pressure from Congress or from the local ranching community to do something else.

As Hudak shows, some of the most important environmental allies are themselves in the agriculture 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 having his land overgrazed; the teacher who helps her class raise money to send an alligator back from Arizona (l) to Florida; the clas- sicians 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; there is plen- ty of time to bring to joy, 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 ranching is bad (we probably knew that already), but why it hap- pens this way, what the forces of resistance are, and what happens when people with a conscience take action against the political corrup- tion in Washington.

Hudak's book has an extensive bibliography, guide to acronyms, glossary, and a really comprehen- sive index. This is important and unique contribution to contempo- rary western history, and it is essen- tial reading for anyone who wants to understand what is happening to public lands in the western United States.