



**Mike Hudak**  
**Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching**  
**Reviewed by**  
**Mike Jaynes**

For better or worse, it's safe to assume the Green movement is now widespread in the United States and former underground justice concerns such as the animal advocacy movement has moved from peripheral fringe concern to mainstream focus. The intersection of the animal and earth defense movements is broad and more common than some assume. Moreover, both camps often feel overwhelmed at the overwhelming number of causes one could adopt and champion. Mike Hudak is sincere about his environmental concern: public lands ranching. Previous significant literature has been produced examining cattle ranching on public land including Denzel and Ferguson's Sacred Cows at the Public Trough (1983), Lynn Jacobs' canonical Waste of the West (1991) and Wuerthner and Matteson's Welfare Ranching (2002). Hudak's Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching (WTW) goes beyond the previous efforts in style and scope. As others have pointed out, we the educated biocentric public knows ranching on public lands is a very dumb idea, but Hudak uses an intriguing system to bring this often overlooked environmental concern to the forefront of the mind.

Recently, Audubonmagazine.org featured a review of Courtney White's pro-ranching book as hard to come by good news on the environmental forefront. The fact remains that western ranching on public lands is destructive and counterproductive to nature and actual animal concerns. After all, the reviewer states, "Oddly, though, cattle make only occasional appearances" in White's book. Mike Hudak's WTW, on the other hand, cogently makes the argument for the land's sake. Bottom line: large-scale cattle ranching on western public lands is a stupid idea. Period.

In Hudak's book (a collection of interviews with key players), the author interviews Mike Sauber (cofounder of Gila Watch) who has dealt with Courtney White and a broad sampling of other pro ranching types including bankers, law enforcement, news media, and the U.S. Forest Service. Sauber presented Courtney White (and others) pictures of

the destroyed public land "that is supposed to be managed for watershed values, wildlife, recreation, hunting and fishing, as well as grazing. Multiple use does not mean grazing multiple cows" (319). At the June 8th and 9th 2001 Quivira Coalition meeting in Silver City, Sauber was not impressed with White. In short, he says, "What I know is that the Quivira Coalition probably won't be going to areas where knowledgeable grazing critics are likely to attend anymore. It makes them look bad" (320). Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching is a much-needed counterpoint to pro-ranching books such as White's.

The major activist efforts to quell livestock on public lands have been met with ridicule, dis-acknowledgement, lies, and cover-ups. If one is into government conspiracies and shady agreements to ignore currently established peer reviewed scientific research, WTW should be on one's shelf. Expert after expert has warned the powers that be in the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS) against the environmentally destructive practices of ranching the thousands of cattle on the 230 million acres of public wildlands by almost 25,000 operators. Overgrazing has inflicted (and continues to inflict) great damage by destroying scarce water systems and highly balanced ecosystems. This problem is highly documented in numerous scientific journals and other media and is ultimately ignored by the western powers that be. Much like many other earth and animal advocacy issues, the public is barely aware of the issue and tends to support the age old myths and inaccuracies that keep the damage flourishing. The myth in this case? The Cowboy Myth.

One of the more intriguing aspects of Mike Hudak's work has been his efforts to dispel the notion of the American cowboy that American pop culture has bought lock, stock, and barrel, pardon the poor pun. Hudak explains despite the American cowboy today serving as a heroic icon of national identity, his beginnings in the early 1880s were not so auspicious. These transient hired hand cowboys were generally seen as unsavory and uncivil and did not command respect. Often ruffians and less than desirable citizens, it was Theodore Roosevelt who helped solidify the now centuries old fascination with the American cowboy. Unlike the original cowboys, ranching became a symbol of manifest destiny and upward mobility. To verify this, one only has to look at the

proliferation of current multi-thousand acre non-working "ranches" owned by the wealthy elite in the western states. As if a sprawling complex on two thousand acres is not enough of a status symbol, these infrequently inhabited palatial estates must be assigned the social rank solidifying moniker of "ranch" to truly engender oohs and ahhs at the prerequisite black tie affairs. After President Roosevelt's influence, the cowboy was effectively marketed directly to the American subconscious and any potential adverse consequences regarding the country's natural environment could promptly be damned.

Western livestock ranching poses serious environmental threats, and Hudak is clear on the severity of these threats. As reported in the introduction of Hudak's book, livestock overgrazing degrades the land and destroys native vegetation. Being an animal advocacy writer, it is very disconcerting to read that affected by overgrazing of public lands includes 82 species of mammals, 58 species of birds, 114 species of fish, 35 species of amphibians and reptiles, 23 species of mollusks, and 12 species of insects. Challenging western ranching on public lands is challenging this long-held tradition of the cowboy as well as a sprawling network of very connected and very influential people, some of them the wealthiest in the country. I understand the difficulties in challenging long held American traditions, and America's misguided fascination with the cowboy is no small fight to undertake even if the large governmental agencies charged with the protection of the lands were not rife with corruption and perhaps the world's biggest "good old boy network." The ignorant public is on the side of the mythical cowboy; of this there is little doubt. Consider the controversy in certain religious and social circles the film *Brokeback Mountain* engendered. Would there have been as much public vitriol if the homosexual cowboy characters were anything other than the iconic characters of the American West? To present a non-dominant view of the uber-masculine cowboy is to challenge androcentric, patriarchal, heterosexist America itself.

All interesting topics, but before I recommend a book I ask myself what it does differently and better than existing books on the topic. With Hudak's WTW, this is easily and warmly answered. In the oral history tradition of Stan Steiner and Studs Terkel, Hudak presents verbatim interviews with 27 members of

various government agencies and activist agendas. Instead of culling the author's chosen facts and figures out of these interviews, presenting the transcribed interviews in their entirety preserves the unique voice and tone of each interviewee. As Hudak says, "Western Turf Wars directly confront[s] the cowboy myth on its own terms, not through the presentation of scientific studies, but through entertaining narrative and personal anecdote." I feel the decision to leave the interviews complete and to present the book as a collection of them is a truly unique departure from the existing canon regarding public ranching. These experts give shocking testimony and recount experiences which clearly demonstrate environmental laws are either ignored or subverted with governmental sophistry. Regarding western ranching on public lands, environmental studies are completely ignored by bureaucrats with more concern for the bottom dollar than the Earth and its ecosystems. Governmental employees who do speak out are persecuted and quietly hushed and all the while the Earth bears the brunt of the ignorant onslaught, as always. And the public happily munches itself into oblivion in complete ignorance of the topic at hand. Hudak has taken it upon himself to expose these higher echelons of the western public grazing operators to the light of public scrutiny. He has done the work in a new manner; now it is up to us to read it and to act.

And who is Mike Hudak? Mike Hudak, Ph.D., founded the nonprofit project Public Lands Without Livestock to increase awareness of the environmental damage caused by livestock production in the American West. From 1998 until mid 2000 his presentations throughout twenty states brought the issue to the attention of the Sierra Club. Subsequently, Dr. Hudak participated in negotiations that resulted in significantly strengthening that organization's livestock grazing policy. Since that time, he has continued speaking throughout the United States at a variety of organizations, universities, and national conferences. His site now brings his articles, photo essays, and videos about public lands ranching to an even broader audience. Please visit his websites, [mikehudak.com](http://mikehudak.com) and [westernturf wars.com](http://westernturf wars.com), for more information about the author.

The list of governmental employees Hudak has amassed for this book is most impressive. Dividing the book into governmental personnel and nongovernmental conservationists

and activists, Hudak has created a unique approach to the problem of public lands ranching. The original voice and tone of the interviewees is refreshingly preserved and the book is described by Hudak as "a collection of short independent books—each book being the edited transcript of an interview." In short, scientists, citizen advocates, governmental employees, and activists know that using public lands for cattle ranching is most likely the absolute worst use to which those lands could be put to. As Patrick Diehl, a highly erudite citizen advocate interviewee, states: "If the environmental movement doesn't pay more attention to the public lands issue in the West and starts taking some political risks the land's productive capacity [will be] destroyed in forty, maybe fifty years."

Public lands grazing is unfortunately one of the less prominent issues of the animal rights and environmental movements. Perhaps it is difficult to gain widespread activist attention in opposition to such a longstanding heroic myth as the cowboy. Regardless of the animal and earth justice social movements' hesitancy to fully get behind the issue,

Hudak's Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching is paramount to those concerned with the grandeur and the intrinsic right of the western lands to exist and to flourish.

Another key difference of Hudak's approach is the wealth of extracanonical materials he has released via his websites since the publication of the book in 2007. He has produced six web-based texts of extracanonical books to further support Western Turf Wars. In addition, there are videos of some of the various contributors available for free download as well as a video library and podcasts available on the book's website, [www.westernturf wars.com](http://www.westernturf wars.com) Mike Hudak has taken an all-inclusive, multimedia approach to his topic and his passion, and his book is an important addition to anyone concerned with public lands ranching or the Earth.