
Western History Rediscovered

***Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching.* By Mike Hudak. Binghamton, New York: Biome Books, 2007. \$26.95. 396 pages. Includes guide to acronyms, glossary, bibliography, and index. Order through <http://www.westernurfwar.com> or 38 Oliver Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1516, phone (607) 330-0351.**

Public lands ranching, 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 even produce that much meat. Efforts to point out the obvious are often met by indifference, denial, or active coverup.

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 *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 detail that public lands grazing is really, really stupid?

Well, surprise, surprise -- Mike Hudak proves that there is something new to say about public lands ranching. Hudak’s book is substantially different from any previous effort. He goes beyond the facts of the physical damage of overgrazing, and shown why things are happening this way.

Hudak, besides being an activist, is a photographer in his own right; several of his photos were published in *Welfare Ranching*, and he has his own web site with extensive photographic documentation, <http://www.mikehudak.com/>. But this is not another book of photographs; it is an innovative work of 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 -- themselves. He went around the country interviewing people on both sides of the governmental fence, including 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, informative, and illuminating story about public lands grazing told by the people who are directly acquainted with the realities of Western politics. Above all, it is a story of political 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 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 ranching is bad (we probably 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, 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.

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Big Changes in the Clair Tappaan Lodge Committee

July 2006 marked the beginning of Ernie Malamud’s term as Chair of the CTL Com. He assumed direction of the Committee at a time when the Clair Tappaan Lodge (CTL) was under threat of being sold by the Sierra Club because of continuing large annual deficits. At the end of his first half year, the deficit was \$106,000.

Ernie aggressively built the CTL Committee from its previous small membership to its present membership of thirty-eight. The focus moved from CTL’s traditional role simply as a “snow lodge” to a year-round lodge with opportunities for educational programming for school children. The new members of the CTL Committee have been marketing and pursuing all possibilities they could to increase occupancy, including making small improvements to make moving around the lodge easier, and making Hutchinson Lodge safe and warmer with a more appealing and functional kitchen.

After a year and a half of Ernie’s leadership, the 2007 budget was \$60,000 short, the lowest deficit in over 10 years

Three bold initiatives in the direction of the paradigm shift of “snow lodge to all-year lodge” are bearing fruit in the drive to make CTL break even by the Board of Directors’ deadline of September 30, 2008. The appeal to schools to bring their students for environmental education, recreation and science programs continues to grow. A new relationship was established with Elder Hostel and while the initial offerings faltered, the three 2008 summer inter-generational programs are filling up. We entered into a contract with the Global Distribution system (GDS) to get CTL mentioned on hundreds of web sites that offer lodging in the Lake Tahoe area. Bookings from that source are promising.

The Lodge has announced an Outings program and is recruiting Outings Leaders to become

certified CTL Outings Leaders to supplement CTL staff’s weekly outings. Staff is currently leading snow outings - snowshoe, cross country and backcountry ski tours. A full moon snowshoe trek is scheduled on March 21. For details, see the web site at www.ctl.sierraclub.org/outings/lodges/ctl/contact.asp. With the series of huge winter storms hitting the Sierra, our CTL Lodge is showing that, while it is beautiful all year long and has other uses, it still is a great place to experience the snow.

Last year Ernie spearheaded the Committee to produce a comprehensive and professionally produced Five-Year Strategic Plan, which was published in August 2007. A few copies are still available at \$22.50. At its November 10 quarterly meeting, the CTL Committee started to implement the steps outlined in the Strategic Plan by setting priorities. They agreed that the highest priority for increasing occupancy was to improve the path to the South entrance. A group of committee members has been researching various possibilities that would make the approach less intimidating to guests. Each possibility must be researched for financial data to help us decide the next step. The committee could use help in this phase and also later when we begin to make the changes to improve the pathway. We will need general and construction volunteers, donated supplies and loaned equipment. Will you help us?

At the end of that meeting, Ernie announced his resignation as the Chair effective at the end of 2007 to turn his attention to other professional commitments. The CTL Committee proposed three long-time supporters Diane Boyer, Olivia Diaz and Liz Wise, acting together, to take over the functions of leading the committee. Please see the article introducing the three new members of the Troika.

—OLIVIA DIAZ