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Livestock on Federal Public Lands

by Mike Hudak, author of
Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

In 1997, after several summers of encountering livestock while hiking on western public lands, I decided to study the matter of public lands ranching in depth. That summer and fall I traveled almost 22,000 miles throughout the West (west of the Rocky Mountain front range) photographing livestock impacts on these lands. Upon my return to Binghamton I assembled a slide show based on my experiences and began taking it around to Sierra Club Groups, the Iroquois Group among them.

The show focuses on the environmental impacts that livestock have inflicted on western ecosystems over the past four centuries. For example, cattle have destroyed the vast majority of riparian forests simply by trampling and eating tree seedlings over several decades. Once the mature trees succumb to old age there are none to replace them. Bird habitat is thus lost. The stream banks, once stabilized by the trees, erode causing loss of fish habitat as well.

In the uplands, cattle have overgrazed perennial grasses resulting in their roots no longer holding the soil against hooves or rain. Topsoil is thus lost, and soil fertility declines. The depleted soil can then support only annual grasses which provide a much poorer habitat for wildlife. Consequently, their numbers decline. In many places species have been extirpated.

In upland conifer forests, cattle graze grass that would otherwise outcompete tree seedlings. The result: extremely dense forests of spindly trees left to compete with one another for soil nutrients and moisture. Over time, the forests exhibit characteristics of poor health—less resistance to attack by fungi and insects, as well as greater susceptibility to fire.

Since the summer of 1998, when I again visited the West and spoke with many more Sierra Club members, I have been urging eastern Sierra Groups to advocate that the Sierra Club adopt a national policy opposed to the grazing of domestic livestock on federal public lands. On May 10th the Iroquois Group adopted such a resolution to the Atlantic Chapter.

If you'd like more information about public lands ranching or about how individuals can help advance the campaign to abolish the institution, contact Mike Hudak [at my email address, currently mikehudak@mikehudak.com].