

## Comments on Livestock Articles in Sierra Magazine, March/April 2000

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

The March/April 2000 issue of *Sierra* magazine contains several articles about livestock grazing on public lands relevant to the current discussion within the Sierra Club about its policy on livestock grazing. Herewith my comments on these articles.

I found the feature article by T. H. Watkins “High Noon in Cattle Country” pp. 52–57, an excellent treatment of the environmental problems caused by livestock production on public lands. I am saddened to report that Professor Watkins passed away at his home in Bozeman, MT, on Wednesday morning, February 23rd.

The Watkins article is followed by short essays collectively titled “Three Ways to Heal the West” pp. 58–59. These require some comment.

George Wuerthner’s essay, p. 58, makes an excellent case for ending livestock grazing on public lands.

The title of Wuerthner’s piece, “Just Say No To Livestock Grazing on Lands Owned by the Public,” has, in sentiment, been used by opponents of the Sierra Club having a policy opposing livestock grazing on public lands to claim that the notion is “simplistic” or “politically unrealistic.” It also conjures up memories of the ill-fated anti-drug campaign of Nancy Reagan (“Just Say No To Drugs”) which was derided in the news media in the 1980s. George tells me that he did not supply the title for his essay. We have an editor at *Sierra* magazine to thank for that.

The section “Reward the Good Ranchers and Banish the Bad Ones,” pp. 58–59, by Rose Strickland alleges several disadvantages of a “no grazing” policy by the Sierra Club. These claims are largely unfounded or at least misleading unless understood within a context unfamiliar to most readers.

**Strickland:** “But there is no scientific basis for banning grazing where it is not environmentally harmful.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** Take a look at the lengthy Appendix for the Draft Grazing Policy #3 (Livestock Grazing: Public Lands, i.e., the policy opposing commercial livestock grazing on public lands) now circulating for comment within the Sierra Club. There is abundant evidence that livestock grazing and, more generally, livestock production is inherently environmentally harmful everywhere. Why should we tolerate this on public lands?

**Strickland:** “Grassroots activists try to improve grazing management where problems are occurring. We support good range managers wherever we find them. We work on restoration of watersheds and wildlife habitat.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** A policy opposing livestock on public land would not prevent any of this. Take a look at the Club’s Policy on Policies: “Entities may ... take positions which involve the incremental realization of the Club’s long-term policy goals.”

**Strickland:** “And we form alliances with progressive ranchers.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** I’ve discussed collaborative groups (a.k.a. Resource Advisory Councils) at length in my critique of the Club’s grazing policy which has been circulating for the past year. The meager accomplishments of these groups are no reason to hold hostage the Sierra Club from adopting a policy opposing livestock on public lands.

**Strickland:** “Activists all across the country are exploring grazing-permit ‘buyout’ proposals on all public lands, in areas of high biodiversity, or in popular wilderness areas.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** Neither individual activists, nor private foundations possess the money needed to protect very much of public lands through permit buyouts. Only the federal government has resources sufficient for this purpose, and that money will be allocated only through legislation.

**Strickland:** “We are working on other issues, too—restricting predator-control activities, commenting on grazing-management plans, making sure native plants are used to rehabilitate burned rangelands, participating in watershed planning groups, fighting noxious weed invasions, and preserving wildlife habitat and open space through conservation easements near rapidly growing western communities, to mention a few.

A simple no-grazing ‘solution’ would undercut these efforts. What ranchers or federal manager would listen to the management suggestions of a conservationist who advocated no grazing?”

**Mike Hudak comments:** For the most part, the federal agencies don’t listen now, even without the Sierra Club having a “no grazing” policy.

Federal agencies are required by law to accept comments on grazing management from “affected interests.” That won’t change if the Club opposes livestock grazing on public lands. What also won’t change is the response of activists when the agencies fail to heed their comments. They’ll continue to seek redress in the courts.

**Strickland:** “Instead of being able to form alliances and support good grazing managers, no-grazing advocates would become isolated purists—too inflexible to get their hands dusty solving urgent rangeland problems.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** In view of my remarks above regarding the Club’s Policy on Policies and activist comments on grazing management, Strickland’s claim is seen to have little merit. Additional evidence against Strickland’s fears comes from Sierra Club forest

activists. Since 1996 the Club has had a policy of opposing commercial logging on federal lands. That hasn't hindered Club members from commenting on timber sales, and a 'no commercial livestock policy' won't hinder Club members from commenting on grazing management plans.

**Strickland:** "An attempt to ban grazing on public lands would also open landmark public-land laws such as the Wilderness Act to debate and amendment by what is now a hostile Congress."

**Mike Hudak comments:** Should we refrain from doing what we believe is right out of fear of what our opponents might do? Legislation that would end the federal grazing program will take several years to pass, but we need to start working toward that goal or it will never be achieved.

**Strickland:** "What is needed to achieve real grazing reform? Enthusiasm and hard work. Like nearly every other environmental issue important to Sierra Club members, the job of restoring western rangelands requires more activists, more creative approaches, and endless pressure endlessly applied."

**Mike Hudak comments:** Grazing reform on public lands is an insufficient long-term goal for the Sierra Club, nor will it motivate many to work for its achievement. On the other hand, there is nothing that will inspire activists to work harder than a vision of public lands free from the ravages of livestock production.

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The section "Big Reserves," p. 59, by Reed Noss, for the most part, makes a good case for ending commercial livestock grazing on public lands. I will comment on a few of Noss's statements that may appear otherwise.

**Noss:** "No one knows how to restore rangelands after they become dominated by alien species. Recovery does not occur, at least on a human time scale, when highly degraded areas are simply left alone."

**Mike Hudak comments:** Noss is painting with too broad a brush. What he says can be true or false depending on details: Which alien species? Which environmental conditions? How severely degraded? For example, there are restoration methods that significantly reduce cheatgrass in regions at the higher end of its precipitation range, but not at its lower range.

It is true that highly degraded areas will take a long time to recover. Belnap (1993), looking at cryptobiotic crusts damaged by livestock in the Great Basin, estimates that it will take between 45 and 85 years for all components of the crust to again function properly. And a properly functioning crust is essential for many other components of the ecosystem

to function properly. But compare this to the situation of old-growth forests. Although it will take centuries for their re-establishment on logged-over public lands, that hasn't stopped us from seeking to end commercial logging so that those conditions will eventually again prevail.

**Noss:** "Some experiments suggests that intensive grazing by cattle during this period of vulnerability, followed by removal of the cattle before the native grasses become palatable, can help control cheatgrass. It is too early to say for certain what will work, but for a problem this severe, all options for restoration must be left open."

**Mike Hudak comments:** It was for this reason that the Draft Grazing Policy #3 speaks about opposing "commercial" livestock grazing on public lands. If there are instances where livestock grazing is shown to be the most effective treatment for the eradication of exotic plants the federal agencies should lease livestock for that purpose, just as they might establish a contract with a service company for the repair of facilities.

In general though, research showing that livestock are an effective management tool should be viewed skeptically. Often such research is performed by researchers from agricultural schools which have a pro-livestock-industry bias. Consequently, although the narrowly perceived benefits of livestock grazing may be true, perhaps not all of the disadvantages of using livestock will have been taken into account.

**Noss:** "Those of us who love the American West should do more than call for an end to subsidized livestock grazing. We should demand full ecological recovery of these marvelous ecosystems."

**Mike Hudak comments:** I agree. Note that the 2nd sentence of the Draft Grazing Policy #3 states: "Subsequent to the removal of livestock, the Sierra Club supports the restoration of natural processes and the restoration of native plants and wildlife."

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The "Lastwords" feature on p. 92 of *Sierra* magazine is devoted to comments from several people supportive of livestock grazing on public lands. They each replied to the question: "Should livestock graze on public lands?"

**Meredith Taylor, Wyoming representative, Greater Yellowstone Coalition:** "Livestock grazing on public lands should only be permitted if it does not take precedence over clean water, habitat for wildlife, and the right of citizens to enjoy solitude and pristine beauty on their public lands."

**Mike Hudak comments:** This is what's known as "Having your cake and eating it too." It won't happen.

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**Howard Johnson, rancher and chair, Utah Grazing Lands Conservation Institute:** “Without public land grazing, many ranches would lose their economic viability. The rancher would have to sell land to survive and critical habitat and open space would be replaced by condos.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** The 3rd sentence of the Draft Grazing Policy #3 states: “The Sierra Club further supports the preservation, as open space, of the private land portions of ranches holding public land grazing leases.” Implementation of this sentiment in legislation would most likely take the form of federal subsidies to the livestock industry being transferred into a fund for the offering of conservation easements on, or outright purchase of, private ranches vulnerable to development.

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**Martin A. Massengale, director, University of Nebraska Center for Grassland Studies:** “More than 50 percent of commercial beef operations graze their cattle on federal lands.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** This statement appears a gross exaggeration. The U.S. Government publication Rangeland Reform '94, Draft EIS, p. 3-65 contains the sentence: “Beef cattle producers with federal permits make up about 3 percent of the 907,000 producers in the 48 contiguous states.”

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**Mark Gordon, rancher and former Sierra Club Board member:** “We forget that when we aim at expunging ranching, rather than reforming grazing practices, we alter ecology, disfigure economies, and promote our exodus from the land.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** The ecology has already been altered for ill by more than a century of livestock production.

Gordon speaks as if rural economies are highly dependent on public lands ranching. Recent research by economist Thomas Power shows that in most counties where public lands ranching occurs it is the public lands rancher who is dependent on the viability of the non-ranch economy rather than vice versa. Power’s essay, “The Economic Importance of Livestock Grazing on Federal Lands” will be published as a book chapter later this year. I’ll email the essay to anyone who requests it.

**Allan Savory, founding director, The Allan Savory Center for Holistic Management:** “Soils, plants, and animals co-evolved and are dependent on each other for their health. The relatively few free-ranging grazing animals on public lands today cannot compensate for the millions of bison and elk that have been lost.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** Savory’s amusing statement reminds me of the joke about the boy, who upon being convicted of killing his parents, pleaded to the judge for leniency because he was an orphan. Livestock production is the primary reason that native ungulate populations have been devastated. Get rid of the livestock and those native populations will increase.

**Allan Savory:** “Experimental plots on western rangelands from which livestock have been excluded show a serious loss of biodiversity.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** There are several factors to consider when areas within livestock exclosures fail to recover. Most such exclosures are so small they lack important ecological components such as a full component of soil bacteria or some other critical element, such as rodents which disperse soil mycorrhizal fungi. Other factors affecting recovery:

Distance of the exclosure from potential seed sources.

- The absence of animals that may be essential for site development, such as seed eating rodents who also “plant” seeds not consumed.
- The absence of natural evolutionary processes like fire.
- The exceeding of ecological thresholds due to previous overgrazing.
- Soil compaction from hooves or erosive loss of topsoil that has forever altered the site.
- These are only a few of the explanations for a lack of positive change reported in some comparisons between grazed lands and exclosures. Nevertheless, there are many exclosures that do show pronounced improvement in ecological condition after the removal of livestock.

**Allan Savory:** “If we want public lands to be rich in biological diversity, their riparian areas lush and productive, their rivers flowing clear, we’re going to need livestock to help simulate what once occurred naturally.”

**Mike Hudak comments:** There’s no need to “simulate” natural processes with livestock. Eliminate livestock and native wildlife populations will rebound, which will “naturally” contribute to the functioning of natural processes.

Incidentally, a recent article by Holechek et al. (2000) suggests that the livestock management methods advocated by Allan Savory have produced less than satisfactory results in arid regions.

### References

Belnap, Jayne. 1993 (31 March). Recovery Rates of Cryptobiotic Crusts: Inoculant Use and Assessment Methods. *Great Basin Naturalist*, 53(1): 89–95.

Holechek, Jerry L., Hilton Gomes, Francisco Molinar, Dee Galt & Raul Valdez. 2000 (February). Short-duration Grazing: The Facts in 1999. *Rangelands*, 22(1): 18–22.