

BOOK REVIEW: WESTERN TURF WARS

BY KEITH AKERS

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 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 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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