

From the Forest to the Feedlot

BY ANDY CAFFREY

Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching, by Mike Hudak, Biome Books, 2008.

Have you ever stopped to think seriously about what it means to "protect" wildlands? In 1964, the passage of the Wilderness Act promised a just-leave-it-be revolution in protection and management of the wild. Now, almost a half-century later, with half the biomass of the planet harnessed for human use, the results are in—and we're scratching our heads, staring at what is now only a tattered blanket of evolutionary potential, wondering what the hell happened.

What happened is that everything we didn't pay attention to got wasted. What's left stands at the precipice of a climate mega-disaster. All by themselves, the postage stamp wilderness areas—where we've historically put most of our emphasis—don't stand a chance. Is there even a future for evolution itself?

Oh, and by the way, what about the cows? In the midst of war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, AIDS and the sixth extinction, Sierra Club Grazing Committee Vice Chair Mike Hudak is scampering around, jumping up-and-down and waving his arms over his head, yelling, "Look at the freakin' cows, man!"

He's talking about the cows and other livestock that nearly 25,000 operators are grazing on 230 million acres of public wildlands managed by the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 17 western states. He's talking about 140 years of impact that, by the late 1980s, had eliminated more than half of the plant species on 64 percent of USFS and 78 percent of BLM rangelands. This is taxpayer-subsidized extinction.

Back in the early days of Earth First!, welfare ranching was one of our top concerns—thanks

to people like Lynn Jacobs, who produced the definitive creed and documentary resource, *Waste of the West*. As Mike Hudak makes clear in his new book, *Western Turf Wars*, it's way overdue for this direct action campaign to come back.

In this book of interviews with land managers and activists, Hudak writes about an evolution-crushing cowboy mythology and its accompanying culture of corruption. It's our unconditional support of this myth that undercuts our efforts to protect public lands. So far, 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 have been adversely affected by a used-car-lot system of scamming and management.

The story is a familiar one. Resource extractors bully the land managers and buddy up with the legislators to scam privileged access to public lands, keep below-cost fees so low that they are, in effect, welfare for ranchers and get bogus compliance with paltry environmental regulations.

Conscientious ranchers who strive to enforce environmental laws sometimes find themselves and their careers attacked in their own communities and by corrupt superiors within the agencies. When Dave Koehler, a BLM resource manager, tried to shut down a New Mexico operation in which 28 individuals were running 880 cows on a BLM single-use permit allotted for 208 cows, the

deputy state director investigated Koehler for "illegal and inappropriate" activities and audited his program for 37 days, going through all of his files and interviewing all of his employees.

According to Hudak, "endless meetings and meaningless exercises" have "consumed hundreds of careers" in massive bureaucratic projects that are intended to further reduce enforcement activities by keeping agency officials out of the field. This is all compounded by the fact that we are paying big bucks for all of this devastation. The 2004 shortfall of USFS and BLM grazing receipts cost taxpayers \$115 million.

Now, the evidence is in. Mike Hudak has collected the verdict straight from the mouths of the jurors for us to read in this fine collection. The judgment is unequivocal. As USFS fire management officer Jim Prunty says, "The worst possible use for this western country is livestock grazing." Despite all of this, public awareness remains low. Hudak and the Sierra Club's national grazing committee are revising legislative proposals for a voluntary buy-out of grazing permits to finally and permanently remove the livestock from our public lands and repair these areas before it's too late.

To buy *Western Turf Wars* for \$26.95 (plus \$4 shipping), contact Mike Hudak, PhD, c/o Biome Books, 38 Oliver Street, Binghamton, NY, 13904.

For more information, visit www.mikehudak.com; www.westernturf wars.com.

