

Western Turf Wars

BOOK REVIEW BY ANDY CAFFERY

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, stupid" 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 protect got wasted and what's left stands at the precipice of climate crisis mega-disasters. All by themselves, the postage stamp wilderness areas don't stand a chance. Is there even a future for evolution itself?

Oh, and by the way, what about all the cows?

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

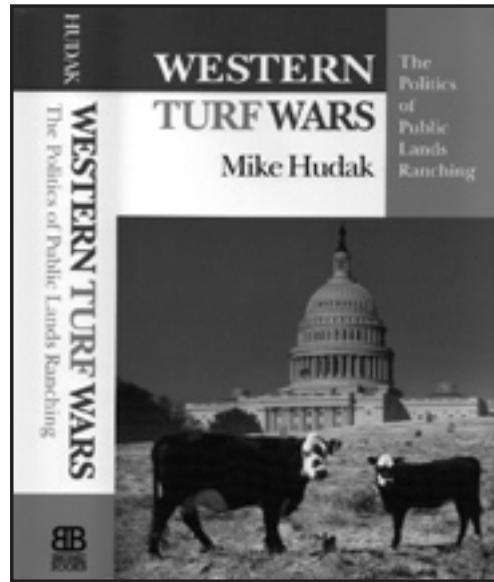
He's talking about the cows and other livestock that 24,548 operators are grazing on 230,000,000 acres of public wildlands managed by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in the 17 western states. One hundred and forty years of impact that by the late 1980s eliminated more than half of the plant species on 64% of Forest Service and 78% of BLM rangelands. Taxpayer-subsidized extinction as a way of life.

In his new book of interviews with land managers and activists, "Western Turf Wars," Hudak discusses an evolution-crushing cowboy mythology and culture of corruption run rampant, still winking at us from our most powerful politicians. Think of Reagan and Bush when they strut around in boots and cowboy hats showing off their so-called "ranches."

The real problem is our collective support of the myth itself that undercuts efforts to protect public lands. So far 114 species of fish, 82 species of mammals, 58 species of birds, 35 species of amphibians and reptiles, 23 mollusks, and 12 species of insects have been adversely affected by a used-car-lot system of scamming and management. As BLM Resource Area Manager Dave Koehler saw it, "Every time there's a Republican administration, it seems like there's a rush to rape and pillage our natural resources."

The tales of terror that Hudak has assembled run through the mind like a wilderness snuff film. The story is a familiar one. Resource extractors bully the land managers and buddy up with the legislators to acquire privileged access to public lands. They keep below cost fees so low they are in effect welfare for ranchers, and they feign bogus compliance with paltry environmental regulations.

Some district rangers, according to retired Forest Service Regional Director Bill Worf, have no "understanding of watershed and range ecology at all," and



don't want to know about it, ignoring or burying photographic range studies going back to the 1930s.

Take Edie Asrow, the district ranger for the Warner Mountain Ranger District in California, who refuses to compare current range conditions with those documented in studies from 1934 and 1960, instead proclaiming that, "The Forest Service is thinking from here forward, not going back."

Retired Forest Service District Ranger Don Oman insists that such studies near Goose Creek confirmed that 317 acre-feet of soil had been lost from a mile-long gully over 30 years from grazing. Oman calcu-

lated the massive soil loss as "4.5 dump truck loads a day for 30 years."

Conscientious rangers who strive to enforce environmental laws sometimes find themselves and their careers attacked in their own communities and from corrupt superiors within the agencies. When Dave Koehler 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 BLM deputy state director investigated Koehler for "illegal and inappropriate" activities and audited his program for over a month, going through all of his files and interviewing all of his employees.

This is all compounded by the fact that we are paying big bucks for all this devastation. The 2004 shortfall of Forest Service and BLM grazing receipts cost taxpayers \$115,000,000.

Now the evidence is in, and 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 Forest Service Fire Management Officer Jim Prunty put it, "The worst possible use for this western country is livestock grazing."

Despite all of this, public awareness remains low. Mike Hudak and the National Grazing Committee are revising legislative proposals for a voluntary buy-out of grazing permits to permanently remove the livestock from our public lands and then restore the lands. Your informed input and eagerness can make this issue a priority for the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org/grazing).

Mike's interview videos are online at www.mikehudak.com/videos. You can buy the book (hardcover, 396 pages, includes bibliography and index) for \$26.95 plus \$4 shipping at www.westernturfwars.com or from Mike Hudak, PhD at c/o Biome Books, 38 Oliver St., Binghamton, NY 13904-1516.