

# FOREWORD

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*Shortly before he died in the Spring of 1989,  
naturalist author Edward Abbey offered to write a foreword for this book.*

*Like many of us who are close to the Western wild,  
Cactus Ed had come to understand that ranching is not natural to the wild West  
but is instead its most deadly enemy.*

*This space is dedicated to his vision of a West free from ranching.*



# PREFACE



*Is Jacobs just another harmless crackpot? Maybe . . . maybe not. . . Let's just hope [his book] is not a bestseller!*  
--Lee Pitts, Executive Editor, *Livestock Market Digest*  
("America's Most Popular Livestock Weekly")

**P**lanet Earth suffers from many devastating human impacts. Why, then, a book about the impact of Western public lands ranching, an obscure and seemingly minor issue?

The answer is simple and probably surprising: **Ranching has wasted and is wasting the Western United States more than any other human endeavor.** Ranching is by far the West's most environmentally destructive land use, and one of the rural West's most economically, politically, and socially harmful influences as well.

Bold claims, admittedly. To most readers, probably outrageous claims. Keep reading, and then judge them.

This volume never pretends to be a 2-sided presentation of the public lands ranching issue. It needn't be. In our cowboy-crazed culture all of us are from the day we are born relentlessly indoctrinated with the pro-ranching side -- ideas, misinformation, images, illusions, and, perhaps most of all, romanticism (see Chapter XI). By the time we reach adolescence we are conditioned to automatically reject anything even remotely anti-ranching. Ya-hoo, buckaroos!

This book, therefore, takes a much-needed look at the other side -- the neglected, hidden, nonfictional world of Western ranching that few people know. It scrapes off the bullshit and burns off the romantic fog. What's left is Western ranching in stark reality.

Why focus on Western public land? First, because the West is my native home and the region of the globe I am most familiar with. Second, because most of the West is *public* land -- about 3/4 of this used for ranching -- and it is easier to change public land policy than private. In other words, from my perspective ending public lands ranching is the simplest way to do the most good.

This book covers the environmental, economic, political, and social ramifications of ranching -- livestock grazing and related activities -- on Western public land particularly. To put ranching into perspective and help the reader understand the huge web of issues and interrelationships connected with it, the book branches off into several important tangential issues such as Western range history, world livestock production, animal welfare, and human diet.

Likewise, to give the reader a basis for understanding how ranching affects the West, the book explores range

ecology and, to a lesser extent, rural Western politics, economics, and culture. For this reason the reader will also learn about ranching fundamentals, management, and administration.

In short, **Waste of the West** comprises a thorough and detailed explanation of what public lands ranching is, why we must end it, and how we may do so.



Most of the contents, however, also apply to ranching on private Western land, on public and private land in the East, and on rangelands around the world. Indeed, ranching is conducted in nearly all regions of the globe, and everywhere it causes a strikingly similar set of problems. Ranching, in turn, is a major component of world livestock production, which is Earth's most environmentally harmful land use (see Chapter VI).

Though this book's foremost purpose is to end public lands ranching in the United States, this effort is only a part of a much broader movement. We are in the midst of a life-or-death struggle to halt the deterioration of this planet's 5-billion-year-old natural evolution. We strive to reverse our progressive separation from Nature, not only for personal contentment and to protect ourselves and the environment, but now even to survive as a species. We seek to end the social and political injustice that is both a cause and a result of this situation.

So, while this book is specifically about public lands ranching, it is generally about environmental decay, fiscal and natural resource waste, social and political injustice, culturalization, and the dominant paradigm and alienation from Nature underlying it all.

The main purpose of this book is to *inform* so people will *act*. Because so few understand ranching and its influence, there is much latent energy and potential involvement.

I therefore write to reach as many people as possible. Because public lands ranching has such far-reaching consequences, I address the issue from the perspective of many different special interests. Ending public lands ranching is one goal they may all agree on: from hunters to animal welfare advocates, social workers to tax reform proponents, conservationists to recreationists, back-to-the-landers to average citizens. Accordingly, there should be something here to interest (and offend) nearly everyone.

*In a time when we are rapidly destroying the planet's basic life-support functions, anyone who becomes well-informed and remains coolly intellectual about it must be either numb or emotionally handicapped.*

--Dale Turner, Assistant Editor, *Earth First! Journal*

Why, I am frequently asked, did I undertake this project? Why the personal involvement in this issue?

As often happens, it all started innocently enough during childhood: traveling with my family, camping in the Sierra Nevada, hiking the brushy Southern California canyons and hills, playing in the backyard weeds and dirt . . . a few feeble roots in Nature that took hold.

I took natural science courses in college and sought out Nature while interned in the Army. In 1974 my partner and I homesteaded in a rural ranching area of Northern California and, later, with 2 children, in New Mexico and Arizona, until my children and I moved to Tucson in 1987. Before, during, and since that period, I/we traveled extensively and spent much time on public land throughout the West. During my early 20s I began to notice that land damage of many kinds was occurring nearly everywhere I went, and in most places most of it was caused by . . . yes, *ranching*. This expanding awareness, in combination with my growing relationship with Nature, gradually led me to get involved.



Along the way I began collecting information on public lands ranching and in 1986 published a 48-page tabloid on the issue entitled *Free Our Public Lands!* The 100,000 copies distributed around the US garnered thousands of letters of support, query, advice, and contribution. Thus began a more or less full-time, many-faceted personal effort to end public lands ranching called, appropriately, *Free Our Public Lands!*

It soon became apparent that the immensity and complexity of the issue could easily cause the project to expand far beyond the capabilities of any one person, or even several people. Even before starting this book I felt like an overworked Ann Landers for ranching victims.

Then in mid-1987, in a response to a letter, I asked a California publisher if he might want to publish my tabloid as a book.

Why a book? At first, merely to lend the tabloid's contents "more legitimacy" and reach a wider audience, as some people had suggested. Later, other reasons arose: The tabloid only summarized public lands ranching; the media habitually ignored, trivialized, or misrepresented the issue; and it seemed that only a lengthy, heavily illustrated book

could sufficiently convey how the West was being ravaged and what could be done to stop it.

When the publisher answered my letter with "Sure, let's publish," I had no idea that it was the start of a writing marathon that would dominate my life for the next 3 years.

A simple re-edit of the tabloid soon mutated into a vast rewrite and expansion. I found that to explain the issue in sufficient detail I had to greatly lengthen the text. Many people provided suggestions, information, literature, photos, artwork, and moral support. It seemed that most periodicals I read contained something pertinent to public lands ranching, and libraries yielded dozens of source materials. I returned from trips to the Western range laden with scribbled notes and exposed film.

To make a very long story short, for 3 years "The Book" became an insatiable monster, consuming my time, resources, energy, health, family -- my life. Many unforeseen problems added to the burden. But the importance of the issue compelled.

Eventually I came to accept that a book on public lands ranching could expand indefinitely just as surely as the *Free Our Public Lands!* project had. I began incorporating new material only when essential, cut and condensed text, wrapped up loose ends, and called it a book.

Some people suggested cutting the length much further or watering down the content -- to make the book more palatable to the general reader. As expressed recently by the editors of *Sierra* magazine, "Journalists who ruminate in print about rangelands risk losing their readers." The book remains thorough, however; public lands ranching is too complex and widely misunderstood for a superficial summary to suffice. Relative to the dimensions of the issue, even this book is small. And the content remains true-to-life because I consider reality more important than the negative flavor it sometimes imparts. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "Truth is never pure, and rarely simple."



*A few suggestions on using this book:*

- Cultural conditioning provides each of us an overwhelming, unwitting, pro-ranching bias. So while reading if you find yourself involuntarily denying the evidence or having a compulsive emotional reaction, just remember the sagacious words of Firesign Theatre: "Your brain may no longer be the boss."
- It is not necessary to absorb everything in this book. If you get bogged down, set the book aside and come back to it later. Or skip ahead. If you think range soil ecology, for example, is dull, skim to the next section, taking in only graphics and the most obviously important points along the way.
- Due to the nature of the issue, some points may seem insignificant or exaggerated. This is illusory, however. For example, dead cattle may not seem an important source of water pollution -- unless you realize that each year *many thousands* of cattle carcasses rot in lakes, streams, and rivers around the 41% of the West that is public rangeland.
- To those who have tried, it is notoriously difficult to portray the environmental effects of ranching on film. Please bear in mind that what you see in the photos is usually subtle, partial, and/or relative.
- Originally, I had intended not to cite references in this book. I believed, perhaps naively, that readers would judge the content on its own merits, not on how many citations I could dig up to bolster my position.

After finishing about half of the text, however, I was finally convinced by well-meaning friends that many people find it hard to take a nonfiction work seriously, regardless of the content, unless it is extensively documented. Belatedly, I began documenting.

Due to size limitations and readability, it would have been impractical to document every piece of or even most information in the book. The bibliography reflects source materials that seem particularly relevant to public lands ranching but does not include hundreds of other references used. As is, the bibliography contains about 500 sources.

- A name and date in parentheses, such as (Oppenheimer 1987), indicate reference to a source listed in the bibliography. Authors are listed there in alphabetical order by last name, followed by the date of publication.

If text information is not followed by a citation, it means: (1) the information, though taken from a reliable source, was deemed not worth citing; (2) the source, though reliable, was judged not worth listing in the bibliography; (3) the information was entered before I began documenting, and the source was subsequently unavailable; or (4) the information is based on personal knowledge.

- This book derives information from a wide variety of sources and recognizes traditional science as only one of many perspectives. As you read, try to accept the validity of these various perspectives.

Much of the content -- perhaps 1/3 or more altogether -- is drawn from personal experience. Some of this information is neglected or "undocumented" by the scientific com-

munity, but this makes it no less valid and numerous eyewitnesses support it. Those who require authoritative scientific documentation or official government seals of approval for everything they think may be reading the wrong book.

Ranching is so widespread, dispersed, obscure, and *misunderstood* that many of its effects have not been or cannot be scientifically documented in the usual manner. Specifics may be studied if they are recognized, but many are overlooked, and generalities may be difficult or impossible to document.

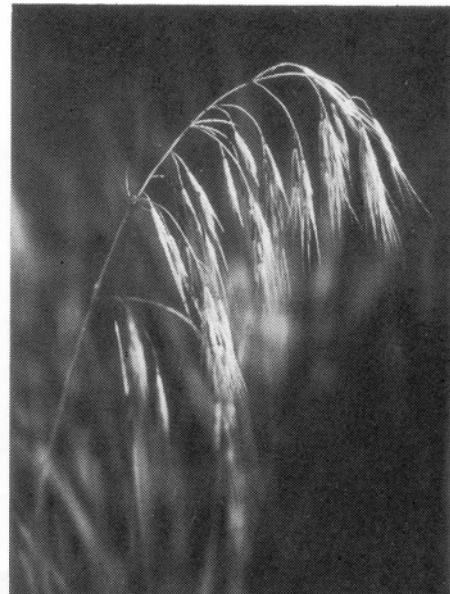
- A last word on science and documentation:

Science is not truth, but an *approach* to the truth -- a malleable cultural tool. Depending on how it is used, science may be a method of fact finding, distortion, or concealment. Accordingly, you can "prove" nearly anything with science, even the "need" for tens of thousands of nuclear weapons

Thus, within the obscure, basically self-governing business of public lands ranching, scientific documentation has become largely a game of justification. Ranching establishment professionals are by far the most numerous and skillful players in the game. Over the decades, they have conducted thousands of studies and cranked out thousands of reports, which they then interpret to promote ranching (see Understanding Livestock Grazing in Chapter III).

Yet most of their reports and conclusions contradict one another! In short, though scientific documentation can be a useful educational tool, the prudent reader will recognize its limitations.

- This book is more or less "timeless" in that by far most of the information it contains remains consistent, with relatively minor fluctuations from year to year; specifics may change periodically, generalities rarely. The ranching establishment has been firmly entrenched in the rural American West for more than a century. Changes there occur very slowly. (We're hoping to remedy that.)



### *And finally:*

*Muy muchas gracias* to the many humans who helped this book happen.

I am obliged to the hundreds of caring individuals and groups who provided source literature, photos, graphics, money, information, suggestions, encouragement, and other assistance.

To the several dozen people who made promises that went unfulfilled: a reassessment of your priorities might be in order. And to all those who carry on as if what's natural doesn't matter: *come on people; Earth needs your help!*

Thanks to those scores of talented writers from whose works I so liberally quote.

My appreciation to Ann Carr for her generous computer assistance, and to computer wizard Ron Schilling, who more than once saved me from the evil, text-eating computer monster.

Steve Johnson and Denzel & Nancy Ferguson deserve much praise for sharing their abundant knowledge and for courageously leading the way. So does George Wuerthner, whose insight and dedication are a major part of the effort. As do those exceptional others who have the vision and concern to question and confront the ranching imperative.

Thank-yous to the various specialists who reviewed portions of the text, including Bob Stack. To Paul Hirt and Susan Eirich-Dehne for helpful suggestions. And particularly to Denis Jones and Mark MacAllister for their excellent copy editing.

Without the invaluable editing, advice, and friendship of John Davis, this book might not exist. John's wholehearted dedication to a natural Earth is an inspiration to myself and many others.

Considering the circumstances, my children, Sky and Dusty, have been remarkably understanding and supportive (as well they are personally involved in the issue). Overall, they were of more help than hindrance. Thanks for putting up with an often-grouchy, over-burdened, home-schooling single parent.

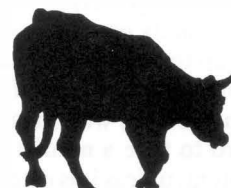
And thanks most of all to the Spirit of the Wild, which makes it all happen.

This book evolved into a mammoth undertaking. My apologies to those with whom I failed to maintain correspondence or whose friendships I neglected, and to myself for assuming a decreasingly natural lifestyle and compromising my health in order to complete the project. It has been a willing sacrifice, however, for every time I spend time on the Western range I re-learn the importance of the effort.

A grass roots movement to end public lands ranching is growing on many fronts, but needs your help. So please, **USE THIS BOOK!**

*Who made you such an authority when so many of the facts are slanted to your advantage?*

--A Montana public lands rancher, in response to the tabloid *Free Our Public Lands!*



# INTRODUCTION



Public land in southwest Wyoming. (Kelly Cranston)

*The world we are told was made for man. A presumption that is totally unsupported by facts. There is a very numerous class of men who are cast into painful fits of astonishment whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves . . .*

--John Muir

**Y**ou and I and all Americans are joint land owners. Together as "the public" we own almost half of the land in the 11 Western states (Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico), which hold 90% of all federal land in the United States outside Alaska. If state, county, and city-owned land is included, 56% of the West is public land.

This public land encompasses an incredible amount and variety of country -- some of the most diverse and beautiful in the world, including the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Death Valley, the slickrock country of southern Utah . . . Few other countries have so much land open to all people.

Each year by the millions they come from throughout the United States and around the world to visit these public lands, pursuing various experiences. Millions of hunters and fishers, hikers and backpackers, picnickers and sightseers enjoy the public lands. For scientists and researchers they are invaluable, huge, open-air laboratories. To naturalists, they are the largest remaining wild areas in this country -- strongholds of natural diversity. They contain many natural resources and provide for a great variety of personal and commercial uses. They expand our physical, emotional, and spiritual horizons and help maximize personal freedom. Public lands are many things to many people.

Public lands are much more than all this, however. They are . . . exactly what they are: soil, water, and air; plants and animals; climatic, geologic, hydrologic, and biologic processes; ecosystems; interrelationships; evolution; life -- *existence*. Western public land encompasses 418 million acres of Nature, of largely untransformed natural being. It is a continuing, progressive creation -- the current, cumulative result of the 5-billion-year evolvement of this planet.

All native entities of public land, from microscopic soil bacteria to grizzly bears, from desert globemallow to giant sequoias, from hot springs to lava flows, whether they occur individually or as communities, whether organic or inorganic, all share one thing: the right to exist. And though continued existence is not guaranteed to all on this Earth, the opportunity to pursue natural existence without undue human interference should be. The environment itself has



National Forest in Oregon. (USFS)

the right to exist in a healthy, natural state, for its own sake, regardless of any human considerations.

For many people, the intrinsic value of Nature is something intuitively sensed yet rarely discussed. Standing amidst a sea of waving grass or engulfed in the roar and mist of a waterfall can fill one with awe and humility, and inspire a feeling of protectiveness. Unfortunately, we tend to bury these sentiments as we go about our daily lives.

Although we humans have developed extraordinary powers to manipulate our surroundings for our purposes, we always will remain a part of Nature -- a creation of our natural environment, a component of the whole. As such, we need to protect the whole to protect ourselves. Ironically, by unnaturally exploiting the environment for short-term gain, in the long run we hurt ourselves, and our descendants.

Therefore, we should not only be "owners" of public land but defenders of this land. We have the responsibility to use it wisely, if indeed we use it at all. Because we have developed the power to control the land, we must also protect and in some cases restore it, for both our sake and the planet's.

As collective public land owners, we have relied largely on various government agencies to implement our wishes for wise use and protection of the land. But our governments have not done, are not doing, and even refuse to do their job. In fact, with our governments' help, a small sector of the business community has continuously manipulated and exploited public land for personal gain for more than 100 years. Ultimately, we are all responsible. We should have stopped it long ago.

Unfortunately, the most harmful land use in all history is also one of the most subtle and least recognized -- livestock production. The seemingly benign act of raising livestock has caused more environmental damage than any other land use, not only in the western US, but throughout the world (see Chapter VI).

On Western public land this commercial exploitation is the product of a well-organized, powerful, private ranching business allied with an entrenched government bureaucracy. Through the years, the public lands grazing industry has been quietly receiving billions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies, corrupting our political system, defiling the social fabric of the rural West, and, perhaps worst of all, devastating the Western environment -- all to produce a tiny fraction of US meat.

At this point, you may again suspect me of exaggeration or even fabrication. This is understandable. Few of us are exposed to ranching other than through the usual fictional renderings of the romantic "Old West," as on TV and in Western literature. And as a people we have always idolized the legendary, independent, honest, tough, hard-working, resourceful, and in all ways virtuous

Western rancher and endorsed the products of his\* endeavors. Mom, apple pie, the cowboy and his cows. Americans love a good Western!

Nevertheless, this nostalgic, idealistic image we have all been reared with is a vast falsehood, a monumental myth preserved by baseless tradition, our own yearning for romanticism, and the ranching establishment's efforts to capitalize on our yearnings. Therefore, the *real* story of Western ranching may come as a shock.

\* In this book I purposefully use the male rather than neuter form in reference to the stock raiser in recognition that ranching is so completely male-dominated.

*So now we come to the business which created the West's most powerful illusion about itself and, though this is not immediately apparent, has done more damage to the West than any other. The stock business.*

--Bernard DeVoto, *The Easy Chair* (DeVoto 1955)

