

FOLLOW THE MONEY

*The price of preservation.
Words & photos by Dan Dagget.*

For more years than I like to remember, I've been trying to make the point to audiences around the West that grazing benefits the land, in many cases more than preservation. I've probably put together a thousand slide shows displaying "befores" and "afters" and fence-line contrasts. I've shown how grazing has succeeded in restoring ecological function to land that was essentially dead, and how preservation has taken land that was functioning effectively and made it essentially dead.

Recently, I've come up with a way of getting people out of their standard "grazing bad, protection good" way of thinking. I present the audience with side-by-side photos of two pieces of rangeland that are similar in all respects except management. In each of the cases, the condition of the pieces of land I have selected for these comparisons couldn't be more different. On one side, the land is painfully barren. What plants do exist are obviously unhealthy. On the other side, the land is green and growing and diverse.

I show the audience several of these comparisons, giving them a brief description of the situation in each case. With each comparison I ask them a simple question: "Which side do you want?"

Of course, everyone—enviros, ranchers, government staffers, just ordinary people like me—picks the green and growing land. Who wouldn't? And, after we've gone through the whole list—grasslands, deserts, endangered-species habitat, lands that have been mined, parks, riparian areas, vernal pools, etc.—I tell them that in every case they have chosen land that is grazed over land that is protected.

At this point, the audience is generally pretty quiet. I'm sure some of them, especially the enviros, feel they are being sold a bill of goods. But I've got them all thinking, "Hmm, that grazed land looks better than I thought grazed land ever could look. And that protected land really looks sick. Maybe this guy is



What do you want? ABOVE LEFT: Landfill, now a private park in Santa Barbara, Calif., restored by conventional means. ABOVE RIGHT: Mine site in central Nevada restored by cattle. RIGHT: Tony Tipton looks at the land he has restored with cows in the very dry high desert.

onto something."

Some of the ranchers, on the other hand, have probably become a little more comfortable than they deserve, resting on someone else's laurels. I can almost hear them thinking, "See, I always knew what we're doing is best for the land. Maybe my land doesn't look as good as some of those ranch photos, but it sure as hell looks better than any of those preserves."

The next question is the one that takes everyone, ranchers and enviros alike, out of their comfort zone. It does so because the answer is exactly the opposite of what every-



What do you want? LEFT: Riparian habitat along the Verde River in central Arizona protected from grazing. RIGHT: Riparian habitat along the Verde River in central Arizona, managed with grazing.



one expects it to be.

The photo comparison I use for this question is dramatic. I don't think you could take two more different rangeland photos in the western United States.

This comparison shows, on one side, a large barren floodplain with drip irrigation hoses stretching futilely into the distance.



Except for a few tumbleweed seedlings at a couple of drip ports, there is not a plant to be seen. An insert in the barren-land picture shows a close-up of one of the ports where water oozes out of the hose. Water stains the barren soil around the port, but even here there is not a wisp of green.

I tell the audience this piece of land has been irrigated for two years as part of a restoration project devised by the best minds modern range science and ecosystem restoration consulting can muster. I tell them that this is floodplain land that once raised crops, but has been exhausted. The farmer went bankrupt and abandoned it.

In contrast, on the other side, also a floodplain, the land is covered with grasses that are iridescently green. A number of cows graze in the knee-deep grasses. And then there is the rainbow. I love that rainbow. Photographer Tom Bean and I were fortunate enough to get to this site on the U Bar Ranch in western New Mexico when that rainbow was there as we shot photos for my book, "Gardeners of Eden."

This land, too, has been cropland, I say, and it, too, has seen rough times. It, however, has been successfully restored and is sustained by the management of a rancher, David Ogilvie, who uses cows as part of his toolbox.

As the audience looks at the world's-apart contrast on the screen, I ask which of these two pieces of land is most valuable. The response is instant and emphatic. "The green land. The one with the cows!" Some of them even shout. Everyone likes to be right, and everyone knows you would have to be an absolute fool to believe the barren land on the left is more valuable.

That's why they're all so surprised when I tell them they're wrong.

I ask, "What's the green piece of land worth? It produces a few burgers and maybe a few bales of hay every year. No big deal. And it doesn't even pay its full share of taxes—it gets an ag tax break.

"Now, consider the wasteland. Think of all the bureaucrats who are being paid five- and six-figure salaries year after year to manage that land and, supposedly, to restore it. And as it has become obvious that they are failing, think of all the consultants who have been hired via six-figure contracts to come up with a method that would work. Think of all the grants secured by major universities to research the dilemma presented here because this problem is being repeated all across the West. And then think of all the lawyers who are suing the agency that is failing to restore



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What do you want? LEFT: Desertified floodplain, Owens Valley, Calif., two years into a "restoration" aided by drip irrigation. RIGHT: Cliff-Gila Valley, N.M., restored with irrigation and grazing.

this land to 'natural conditions,' as the law requires, and all the lawyers the agency has hired to defend itself. To cap it all off, think of all the environmental groups which are using this dilemma, or one like it, as a poster child to raise money."

In other words, the wasteland is worth thousands of times more than the healthy, green, and growing land, at least in terms of the amount of economic activity it creates.

From this we can learn a lot. First of all, by "following the money," we can learn that we're going to end up with a lot more land that looks like the land on the left and a lot less that looks like the land with the rainbow.

We can also conclude that managers like Dave Ogilvie, who can give us land like that on the right, are going to be in less demand than managers who can give us the land on the left.

Considering the above, ranchers can be fairly certain that making their land look like that on the right in the photo comparisons is most likely not going to get them rewarded by

environmentalists or approved by or accepted by environmentalists. It isn't even going to cause environmentalists to stop opposing them so vehemently.

How sure can we be of this?

In every case illustrated, the owners of the land on the left were approached with a credible proposal to make their land look like that on the right. In every case, the proposal included a management team that had succeeded several times in doing just that. And in every case, those entities chose to keep their land in the condition illustrated on the left rather than to have it healed or made healthy and productive.

Follow the money and that's where it will take you. ■

Dan Dagget, longtime environmentalist and fifth-wheel cowboy, is traveling the West taking photos, writing articles, and making presentations. He can be contacted regarding the latter at www.dandagget.com. "Gardeners of Eden" is available from RANGE.



What do you want? LEFT: The Drake Exclosure near Paulden, Ariz., protected from grazing since 1946. RIGHT: Outside the Drake Exclosure, grazed every year.