In 1980, when I first moved from Ohio to Flagstaff, Ariz., one of the first things I did was join the Sierra Club and, shortly thereafter, EarthFirst!. I was excited about my new home, about the mountains, canyons, rivers, and wide open spaces, and wanted to keep those things as spectacular, healthy, open and free as possible.

At the time I arrived, one of the hottest environmental issues was grazing private livestock on public lands. Grazing livestock on land both public and private was claimed to be the most damaging activity humans had brought to the West. As one environmental group put it: “The ecological costs of livestock grazing exceed that of any other western land use.”

Livestock grazing was blamed for endangering species, destroying vegetation, damaging wildlife habitats, disrupting natural processes, and wreaking ecological havoc on riparian areas, rivers, deserts, grasslands and forests alike. What most caught my attention about this campaign against public-lands grazing were the photos of denuded, eroded, cow-turd-littered landscapes. Those photos served as one of the most effective tools for communicating...
the damage described above to those, like me, who were most likely to be concerned and recruited. And to make a long story short, I got involved, wrote a couple of books about the topic (actually about environmentalists and ranchers working together), and ended up enjoying a fairly rewarding speaking career about the issue.

Over time, the furor over public-lands grazing has lost much of its intensity. Although grazing continues on public lands, it is highly regulated and significantly reduced. In fact, it has been totally removed from many areas where it had been standard operating procedure for more than a century. Also, global warming/climate change has replaced it (as well as a number of other issues) at the top of the eco-issues hit parade.

Living in Arizona, and remaining just as concerned about the mountains, canyons, rivers, and wide open spaces that have been my home now for 34 years, I have continued to keep track of the areas I made such a big deal about as a wilderness advocate and crusader for “healthy ecosystems.” As a result, I have something to report that may surprise you. It certainly surprised me.

The surprise is that problems purportedly caused by grazing haven’t gone away even where grazing has. In fact, they have become worse, so much worse that a significant portion of western rangelands may be in worse shape today than they were when the campaign to protect them was at its hottest. What is different, however, is that the responsibility for the deteriorated condition of the western range has shifted—reversed, in fact. Now it is protection and regulation and the advocates of those policies that are wreaking havoc on our natural heritage.

This is something you have to see to understand—and to believe.

Having noticed the poor and deteriorating condition of the rangelands near my home in Sedona, and on trips as far afield as Big Bend National Park in Texas and Jasper National Park in Canada, I started taking photographs to confirm my concern. First, I recorded the most eye-catching (and mind-blowing) examples of degradation on lands that are now “protected” but were grazed in the past. That ignited my curiosity and inspired me to start ferreting out old photos of those exact same places while they were being grazed. I found some old photos via local U.S. Forest Service offices, museums, books, and the Internet. I even copied some from old movies (an Elvis movie, “Stay Away Joe,” was one of my sources).

One of the first “before and after” comparisons that caught my eye is illustrated by the pair of photos on this page from a favorite hiking trail near Sedona. The first photo was taken on Dec. 29, 1957. Grazing was ended on this site shortly after this photo was taken.

Interestingly, a forest ranger upon visiting this site with me in 2013 and comparing what she saw with the 1963 photographs said, “Well, the grass looks healthier now than it did back then, except where there isn’t any.” Where there isn’t any is just about everywhere.
To give a bigger picture of what’s happening here I’ve included two photos on the page 69 from nearby on the same grazing allotment. From the look of the exposed tree roots and freshly toppled trees it appears safe to say that erosion continues in spite of the fact that it is being protected and has been for 30-plus years. (I would also add that it’s just as obvious protection isn’t doing much to heal the area.)

Seeing devastation of this degree I couldn’t help but wonder if the effects of overgrazing were anywhere near as bad as the effects of protection? To answer that question, I started searching the Web for those denuded, eroded, cow-turd-littered images that were used to make the case against public-lands grazing. I wanted to compare the effects of the activity that “ecological costs exceed that of any other western land use” with the impacts of the remedy that was supposed to return the West to conditions the protectionists described as “pristine nature.”

This is where things really got surprising. The great majority of those “cows destroy the West” photos were mild, ho-hum, no big deal in comparison. Some even looked like positive-impact photos. When a large collection of small images that resulted from one of those Google searches showed up on my computer screen, I couldn’t help but wonder if this is what so outraged me and recruited me 30 years ago...is this the best they’ve got? (Twelve of those images are shown below.)

It must be, I concluded. These are the
images that were published in books like “Welfare Ranching” and “Waste of the West.” These are the photos that are on the websites of the groups still making the case to remove grazing from public lands.

So, if environmental groups were (and still are) so concerned about the effects of grazing on public lands, consider the three comparisons on page 71. Well, one thing they seem to make clear is that for those of us who are truly concerned about restoring and sustaining the ecological health of the rangelands of the American West, we’re spending our money and our energy in the wrong place. Instead of campaigning to protect the public lands of the West from grazing, we ought to be protecting them from, well, protection, which may qualify as the real most damaging activity humans have brought to the West.

One thing that qualifies protection for this distinction is that the damage it causes is not only more severe, it is also more permanent because it is a one-way street. Ask protectionist groups what they can or will do to heal the damage shown in the photo of me looking up through those protected tree roots or that fellow peering out from that huge eroded gully in the White Hills Study Plot on page 70, and the great majority of them will say, “Protect it longer.” One activist told me, “It might take more than a lifetime.” The White Hills Study Plot has been protected for 78 years. That sounds like a lifetime to me.

I’ve written books (and articles for this magazine) about ranchers who have healed damage greater than anything shown among the grazing-destroys-the-West photos by using their management practices and their animals as the means to perform that healing. In fact, I’ve done some of
A BOVE LEFT: This is from Mike Hudak’s “Photo Gallery of Ranching on Western Public Lands.” He writes, “This drainage in a heavily grazed field has eroded to a width of five feet.” A BOVE RIGHT: Why do we not hear a peep from the enviros about the apparently much more damaging effects of protection on public lands in, for instance, where I am looking up through the roots? This drainage, in an area that has been protected from grazing for more than 30 years, has eroded to a depth of more than 10 feet. BELOW LEFT: What about these effects of “protection”? This is the Coconino National Forest White Hills Erosion Control Study Plot near Cottonwood, Ariz. It’s been protected since 1935 (78 years and counting). Talk about entrenched! BELOW RIGHT: In George Wuerthner’s “Welfare Ranching: The Subsidized Destruction of the American West,” J. Boone Kauffman, Ph.D., writes: “This stream in northern New Mexico has become ‘entrenched.’ Over time, grazing and trampling of the soils and banks by livestock have caused the stream to widen and cut downward.”

To graze or not to graze, that is the question.
those restorations myself (I have some dynamite photos). Those restorations took days instead of lifetimes.

To their credit, a few environmental groups and collaborative associations are using those grazing-to-heal techniques today. I suspect that, in some cases, they're even using them to heal the effects of protection. But to heal damage, you have to be able to see it, be aware that it is there, and you have to want to heal it.

Environmentalists use the word “protect” in its vague general sense: “to protect from hurt, injury, overuse, or whatever may cause or inflict harm.” The idea that protecting in this sense could cause harm doesn’t make any sense. How could saving something from harm cause it harm? If you peel away this blindfold of righteous semantics, however, and consider the comparisons included in this article, it becomes apparent that the ecological impacts of protection may actually exceed that of any other western land use, including grazing.

The implications of this are clear. If elements of the protection industry (environmental groups and government agencies) want to truly achieve their stated mission—to protect the environment from whatever may cause or inflict harm—they will have to protect it from themselves.

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