

Home on the Range: An Anthropological Analysis Land Use Values in Conflict Between Cattle Ranchers in Southwestern Montana who Depend on Federally Owned Range Land and Environmentalists¹

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Abstract:

From 1776 until current times federal lands in the United States have been the source of conflict. This conflict has been primarily over land-use. There are three main aspects of use conflict: 1) type of use; 2) allocation of use; and 3) management of use. Embedded in this atmosphere of conflict are differing cultural value systems which have evolved in use of this land. This paper focuses on the cultural value system of ranchers in Southwestern Montana who use federal lands for grazing. It discusses those elements which can be used to explain the historic and current conflict over public grazing policy and federal land use as well as some of the current issues which contribute to the conflict.

Introduction

The controversy over grazing cattle on public land has been simmering for years. With relatively recent government policy tilting more toward environmental protectionism than ever before, commingled with an increased interest and awareness of the public land resources in the West, ranchers have run headlong into heated debate over the fundamental principles of federal land use. In 1996 this tension came to a boiling point over proposed legislation in Congress which would have increased grazing fees and enforced stricter management policies on federal grazing leases. In addition to this legislation, which failed, several lawsuits have been filed on behalf of environmental protection groups against the ranchers and the federal agencies in charge of administering this land.

This conflict has provided an opportunity to study the cultural antecedents which are the basis for the ranchers' discontent. The opposing issues in this debate are clearer now than they have ever been. One group forwards the position that this is land owned by the general public and, therefore, should be used to profit the segment of the population which enjoys this land resource for aesthetic or recreational reasons. The others contend that the government set this land aside for economic development and that the Taylor Grazing Act along with Forest Service policies promised them its continued use for grazing purposes.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on value conflict inherent in this conflict. It attempts to articulate, through historical and empirical data, that

there is a sub-cultural value system in the ranching community that is being violated and that the other group's lack of understanding of this value system is the basis of the conflict.

Methodology

This study initially focused generally on the western half of the United States where the practice of grazing cattle on public land is common. The western half of the United States can be divided into four "agricultural techno complexes" (Lahren 1979:24). These areas represent "physiographic divisions of the western United States" in which the environment is conducive to cattle ranching and in some cases "little or no economic alternative other than beef production" is possible (Lahren 1979:24).

This research focused on the two physiographic divisions which make up the state of Montana. These two regions are known as the "Rocky Mountain System" and the "Interior Plains" (Lahren 1979:24-25).

For many reasons, not the least of which was convenience, this research selected Montana as the State in which to conduct the research. Statistical information found at the county level was used to further define the research area. This research isolated potentially high conflict areas by analyzing the following variables: 1) the number of cattle per county; 2) the amount of federally held grazing land per county; and 3) the history of conflict in the county.

In statistical research of the counties in Montana,

Beaverhead County was the most ideal location to begin the research. Historically, Beaverhead County was one of the areas representing the first cattle ranching occupation in Montana. Although there are conflicting accounts on the specific date that cattle were first driven into Beaverhead County, it is safe to say that cattle were grazing in this area from the mid nineteenth century on (Hildreth 1990:52).

Beaverhead County is the largest county in Montana with 3,549,870 acres within its boundaries (Montana State University Extension Service-Dillon Office). It is also ranked first in the State in terms of the total percent of federally owned land (Montana States Department of Commerce Statistics). Of the total acreage, 2,077,812 acres, or 59 percent, is federally owned (Montana State University Extension Service-Dillon Office). It also contains about 89,000 cattle which is the highest number in any county in the State (Montana Agriculture Statistics, 1994).

Beaverhead County also demonstrated a history of conflict over the issue of grazing cattle on public lands. In 1994 the National Wildlife Federation and the Montana Wildlife Federation filed a law suit against the National Forest Service District in charge of administering grazing leases on the Beaverhead National Forest alleging mismanagement. This law suit provides an ideal atmosphere in which to study the cultural attitude of the people toward the use of this type of land.

The second part of the research design dealt with defining the target population. Initially two criteria were used to construct a list of potential informants: 1) the individual must be at least a second-generation cattle rancher whose father used federal land for grazing; and 2) the individual must have a 50 percent or more total dependency on federal grazing land (50 percent of their total cattle herd must be in use of federal land for summer grazing.) The competence of these informants was demonstrated explicitly by their family tradition in use of the land (the two-generation requirement) and their dependence on that use (the 50 percent grazing dependence factor).

In all, this research used four ranching families from different parts of Beaverhead County as primary sources. Including all the members of the extended families, fifteen individuals were used as primary informants. One member of each of these families

served as a key informant. Additionally, secondary sources were used through the course of the research in order to verify critical elements discussed with the primary sources.

A Brief Analysis of Federal Land Policy From 1776-1960

At the core of this issue is a historical legacy of conflict. The historical pith of this debate runs deep into the heart of our country and how it acquired its land. Conflicts related to the use of the public domain have raged as long as we have been a nation (Foss 1960:9). Although the nature of the controversy has changed many times over this period, as well as the political and demographic makeup of its participants, the argument has always focused on three aspects of usage. They are: 1) type of use; 2) allocation of use; and 3) management of use.

As early as 1779, disputes over public land use were mounting in the eastern states and the fundamental elements of that debate did not change substantially over the next 150 years. These years saw the exchange of millions of acres of land from the public domain to private ownership. This transfer occurred primarily through the series of homestead acts of the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The problem with the homestead policies was that they did not grant a large enough portion of land to adequately support the activity of cattle ranching. Therefore, people began to claim areas of the public domain which had not been homesteaded for grazing purposes. These extralegal claims caused great and often bloody conflicts in the West (Foss 1960).

It was out of this conflict that the Taylor Grazing Act debates began to emerge in Washington in the early part of the twentieth century. Politicians began to scramble to undo what they had created through poor land allocation policies. The idea of grazing leases had been kicked around Washington for some time. The Forest Service had already been using the leasing concept and had set up an elaborate system of "allotments" to administrate users. The trend was to look at the "vacant, unappropriated, and unreserved lands of the public domain" in terms of the applicability of leasing them to stockman. This was land on which no one wanted to live and everyone wanted to use. However, because of a wide spectrum of opposition,

ranging from distrust of government regulation, to those who held out for State control, to protests from the sheep herders, the Taylor grazing legislation was slow in coming (Foss 1960:44&47; Calef 1960:51).

In 1934 the Taylor Grazing Act was signed into law. The Taylor Grazing Act set up grazing districts of which portions could be leased by those who already owned base property. The Act is still in effect today. The purpose of the Act, as stated in the preamble, was “. . . to stop injury to the public grazing lands by preventing over-grazing and soil deterioration, to provide for their orderly use, improvement, and development, to stabilize the livestock industry development upon the public range, and for other purposes” (Foss 1960:59).

True to form of any legislation, all the parties could not be pleased with the content or purpose of the law. Nevertheless, it has been generally successful in lessening the strife between stockmen over use of federal land.

However, in recent years, it has been less effective in addressing the emerging question of environmental preservation. The recent years have seen the political strengthening of an additional user group. This group seeks to use this publicly owned land for recreational purposes. Many in this group find the use of this land for grazing as detrimental to their use. Many would like to see, at least, the number of cattle reduced, if not eliminated. The Taylor Grazing Act, with all its success, is not equipped to deal with these new issues.

Preservation Versus Conservation: The Environmental Revolution

For thirty years after the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, the federal policy toward its grazing land did not substantially change. However, in the 1960s, federal policy began to shift to accommodate a growing populous of different natural resource users. Largely, these users did not wish to utilize the federal land for economic purposes. Rather, they exploited it for recreation and aesthetic pleasure. These users began to complain that the management policy on federal land unequally favored the ranchers and others who used this land for financial gain.

This happened in conjunction with the much larger global environmental movement of the 1960s. Human

impact on the environment was, as a whole, being questioned. In the United States this inquiry was focused on many aspects of the environment such as clean air, clean water, landfill reduction, nuclear waste disposal, depletion of the rain forest, and global warming, to name a few. In addition to addressing problems with human day-to-day impact on the environment, and suggesting ways to limit that impact, this movement also stressed the importance of preserving more tracts of land for the aesthetic enjoyment of the nation and world. Therefore, the idea of preserving land became more evident in new federal policy and law. That federal policy, in conjunction with the new environmental awareness has come into direct conflict with the historical users of the land.

The evolution of what is commonly known as the “Environmental Movement” is much more difficult to trace than the history of the acquisition and development of federal land over time. For most of the nineteenth and the first twenty years of the twentieth century, the main movement focused on the acquisition, development, and dispersal of public land. Since this was accomplished mostly through governmental action, there is a clear legislative trail to follow.

Furthermore, the semantics of what has become known as the “environmental movement” prove to be confusing and elusive. The confusion arises with the use of two words which are used synonymously but can also encompass differing meanings. These two words are “conservation” and “preservation.”

R. McGregor Cawley, in his dissertation entitled “The Sagebrush Rebellion,” states that there have been two “policy propensities” which have developed over time. They are: 1) public land resources should be developed for the material well-being of society; and 2) public land resources should be preserved for the ecological and aesthetic well-being of society (Cawley 1981:04).

These two perspectives are referred to by Cawley as the “development and preservation propensities” (Cawley 1981:04). The assumption is that one group in this debate believes federally owned land should be used by the citizens for economic purposes, while the other believes it should be used for recreational or aesthetic purposes. This research does not disagree with Cawley’s findings, however, it does recognize a

third and separate propensity -- the conservation propensity. This idea is defined as the act of setting aside land for either sustained utilitarian yield or reserves for future use. It will be referred to in this study as the conservation model.

The assumption that the environmental movement can be summarized in two separate categories is supported by Victor Ferkiss in his book, *Nature, Technology, and Society*. Ferkiss states, “. . . the American conservation movement reserved an uneasy practical alliance between two radically different philosophies about nature” (Ferkiss 1993:89). Ferkiss goes on to define these two differing philosophies by saying, “Some conservationists, originally the mainstream, were primarily concerned with the preservation of natural resources for practical use by future generations; for lack of a better term, we shall call them utilitarian conservationists. The others, the preservationists, believed that nature itself was a source of value and should be preserved-in as primitive a state as possible - for its own sake” (Ferkiss 1993:89).

During the period in which the United States acquired and settled its land, the use of nationally owned land concentrated primarily on economic development - the development model. The land was seen as a resource which was to be used for developing an economically strong nation. It is logical that a young nation, struggling for economic stability, would not be able to afford itself the luxury of setting land aside simply to protect its scenic value. By the early part of the century the development model was beginning to change into the conservation model. Instead to the government giving away the public domain to settlers, they were beginning to look at conserving it for the economic use of people like ranchers, miners, loggers, etc.

However, this is not to say that there were no early movements concerned with preservation of the natural resources for their aesthetic beauty and natural resources. From the 1830s up until today there have always been a few people such as Catlin, Thoreau, and Muir who objected to using the public domain of economic purposes. However, for the most part, these people did not substantially impact the federal policy toward federal land use.

In the years between the early 1900s and the 1930s the gap between development and conservation of the

public domain was beginning to narrow. National policy was beginning to reflect a balance between extracting, wholesale, the resources of public lands and conserving some of those resources for sustained yield.

However, in 1960, a multi-use principle was clearly formalized by giving the Forest Service the ability to enforce policy which accommodated several different types of use equally, including use for aesthetic or recreational purposes. This allowed the Forest Service and the BLM to treat the public domain more like the national parks were managed.

The period between the 1960s until present day has seen a qualitative shift in the balance between development, conservation, and preservation policies. With the passage of laws like the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, preservation has become the highest item on the federal government's agenda. The Taylor Grazing Act dispensed with the development/dispersal model. Since then, the government has only been concerned with conservation and preservation. However, this new shift is not merely concerned with conserving resources for sustained economic use while maintaining a few parks for aesthetic preservation; it is concerned with preserving all land under government ownership for the common aesthetic good.

While this new multi-use standard seems to be fair to all Americans who use the National Forest, they fail to recognize the clash they cause between the very predominant conservation institution which use the land for extractive purposes and the ever emerging preservation movement. Within the context of these two ideologies there exist major differences in group values. These value systems create perceptions on how the land should be used.

Critical Components of the Ranching Value System

Having discussed briefly the historical context which skirts this conflict, we will move on to articulating the more specific cultural tenets of the ranchers in our research area. The best way to isolate the points of contention over the issue of grazing private cattle on public land in Beaverhead County is through understanding and observation of the cultural value system which the years and environment have embedded into the ranching community.

The cattle ranchers, who are the focus of this study, represent a "subculture" among the various types of agriculturists (Lahren 1980:52). Lahren cites five reasons for this designation. In addition to defining why this group is a subculture, these reasons also provide clear clues which point to the cultural makeup of the group. They are: 1) The range livestock industry is characterized by 70 years of production specialization and ecological adaptation, based on the stock farming model. [This was written in 1971. Therefore, the actual number of years is now around 95.]; 2) Historically, these producers have had a particular type of market contract that is different from other sectors of agriculture. The producers only come into contact with the market once during the year and have had no formal support or governmental programs such as those found, for example, in the wheat industry. [The only exception being the federal grass, which they lease.]; 3) Their yearly cycle of calf production requires operator involvement in all phases and represents a constant pattern of work activity through time for all producers. Years of ranching experience are required for total operation knowledge, so range livestock production does not lend itself to classification with transient occupation forms such as construction, logging, etc.; 4) Ranch resource investment is so large that it severely limits occupational mobility and is usually a lifetime occupation; 5) Rural residence is important to this life style and promotes individual and social isolation by substantially altering the frequency of urban contacts and are two key attributes of this subculture (Lahren 1980:53).

To eliminate any confusion it should be pointed out that when this research refers to "ranchers" it is specifically referring to the informants interviewed for this study. It is also safe to say that due to the qualification of these informants in the community, many of their values can be related to or at least should be looked for when dealing with the larger ranching community. However, this study does not try to generalize the cultural perspectives of these ranchers as consistent with all ranchers in the United States or even in the West. This broad generalization would obviously go way beyond the scope of the methodology designed for this research.

The Value of Space

During one interview, I was visiting with a rancher

whose family had been ranching for four generations. He himself was the third generation. As the interview progressed he began to tell stories about the "old times" when his dad and grandfather would ride off for days looking for or driving cattle to pasture or market. He spoke about their vast range which extended from wherever to wherever.

The conversation moved onto all the people who were moving in from "out of state" and how they were trying to "Aspenize" the area. ("Aspenize" is a reference to the Colorado town of Aspen which has become known throughout the United States for its famous downhill skiing. It also has come to symbolize, for many native Westerners, the change caused by national attention. Over the last few years, Aspen has changed from a small ranching town to a major tourist center.) "Aspenization" was characterized by this informant as negative because it does not give the locals enough "elbow room."

One of the values heard by all the informants interviewed was the perception that space is important. There are many issues which fall within the boundary of space and the value is manifested in many different ways. There are several unique characteristics of these ranchers which display the value of space. For example, social isolation, individualism, fierce independence, rural residence, etc. are all manifestations of these informant's basic space value. The concept of space also effects ideas about land ownership, privacy, solidarity, peace, quiet, etc.

Commonly these themes are explained by saying that ranchers enjoy the aesthetic quality of space. They find it visually appealing be isolated. Their message is that the range, absent of people, is good to look at, and that ranchers do not want to be crowded or "fenced in." However, this research disagrees with any assertion which would explain this love of space as rooted in aesthetic enjoyment. The roots of love for space are much deeper than simple affection for its beauty.

This is an issue of proxemics and personal space. There is definitely a certain amount of distance that these informants need to have between them and others in order to feel comfortable. The informants explain this by articulating that they like space because it is aesthetically beautiful. They like to be able to look in any direction and not see people. However, but this

cannot totally explain the almost violent feeling of discomfort that they encounter when feeling intruded upon by strangers.

This is dramatically exemplified in the situation where a rancher finds someone trespassing without permission. Often I have witnessed the ranchers become almost violently angry and will promptly kick the intruder off the land. In no uncertain terms the rancher will tell the intruder to expect worse if they show up again. The intensity with which ranchers address this situation is not derived from a violation of aesthetics. This is an issue of a violation of space which goes way beyond the rancher's own explanation of it.

However, there is evidence that the first ranchers in the area were not concerned with the aesthetic qualities of space. In fact, most discussion on the subject suggests that the first settlers encouraged settlement by others. For many reasons, not the least of which was protection, numbers were necessary. The major focus of the government policy for westward expansion was to populate and settle the wild areas of the nation before competing countries such as England or France had the opportunity to lay claim to the areas. Interestingly, however, the value of space and isolation became a central theme in the ranching community and a dynamic element of the culture. Therefore, there must have been a reason that ranchers in the area developed an appreciation for space and found it to be necessary beyond the aesthetics explanation of today.

Through historical research, two clear reasons for this behavior have been isolated. They effectively answer the questions about the evolution of this value on the range. Both reasons are tied to ranching economics. The first, and probably the most obvious, is the rancher's need of literal space to feed cattle. Secondly, competition for that space caused historic range feuding.

It takes a large land base to operate a successful cattle ranch. Although most of the grazing in the research area today takes place on leased land, off the base ranch, it still requires many acres of land to raise the hay needed for the winter. Therefore, it is easy to see that from the perspective of economic benefit, it is valuable for ranchers to have enough land around them to support a healthy sized operation. It is logical that if the presence of space is a sign of economic stability,

it would mentally become perceived as something positive. This positive image would transform into an intuition about what is "good" and "bad" to literally see. And thus, if you were a member of this group, you would eventually come to view the actual landscape and the absence of other people on it as aesthetically pleasing. However, this explanation, alone cannot be enough to totally satisfy the question of why ranchers are so threatened by the idea of being invaded or intruded upon by outsiders.

The theory of historic feuding served as a much better explanation for this phenomenon. A detailed analysis of history indicates that even before people began, on a grand scale, to move out to the west, they were fighting over the land. Ranchers in the area began as nomadic herders. As the techno-structural development of the ranching industry evolved it became more advantageous to stay in one place and use it as a base while allowing the cattle to range on the land surrounding it. This development became the modern day ranch as opposed to the nomadic type herding characteristic of many bovine pastoralist societies.

The homestead laws created, or at least complemented, this development. Ranchers could homestead a piece of property and use the federal land surrounding it to supplement his homestead. The problem with the homestead acts, however, is that they did not grant adequate amounts of land needed to support enough cattle to make a living.(Foss 1960) Therefore, the homesteaders relied on surrounding unclaimed land and land still owned by the government to support their cattle herds. This naturally created a situation which was indicative of competition for the same land between the homesteaders. In addition cattlemen did not only have to compete with other cattlemen but also sheepmen, miners, and a continual rush of new homesteaders. Under the Homestead Act of 1862 alone, some 1.5 million people acquired about 200 million acres of land in the west. (Foss 1960) These numbers would suggest a massive increase in population and thus a constantly increasing demand for access to resources.

Therefore, much importance was placed on finding means to surround oneself with a strong base of deeded land as well as means to control the federally owned land. It was important in order to support the cattle. The cattle had to be relatively close to home

because of the lack of fast and efficient transportation. In order for a rancher to take good care of his cattle and protect them from being stolen they had to be in a relatively close proximity to him.

There were several methods by which ranchers gained additional deeded land. A common practice was to have hired men take out homestead claims and after a certain period the ranchers would buy them out. They would also have other members of the family (such as brothers and sons) homestead pieces of land. However, the source of some greatest conflict was over outright "squatting" on land and claiming it. A rancher would simply claim a piece of public property as his own. In many cases, this type of squatting was done by force. In some cases, men were hired to protect the interests of the rancher. But most homesteaders could not afford this luxury and were forced to desperately hang onto whatever land they could control. These extralegal claims were vigorously protected from intruders and trespassers. This was the cause of many range wars and much bloodshed (Foss 1960).

This struggle in the West provided the atmosphere for the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. It was intended to do away with much of the bloodshed and provide a system by which the government could administrate the land. In this regard the act was successful. However, although the need to forcefully defend this land is no longer necessary, the idea of separation and space was already so ingrained into the ranching way of life that it continued to thrive in the ranching situation and does to this day.

As time has gone by, the importance of space in the minds of the ranchers has changed from critical to the economic security of the ranch to a perception of aesthetic beauty. Informants now enjoy space or "elbow room" for aesthetic reasons. But, that perception did not originate as a concept of adoration for natural beauty but rather economic survival on the range. The first pioneers did not think that this great amount of space and isolation was beautiful. Most stories relate that the first families out on the range were lonely. However, as those people began to move westward, along with them came the necessary competition for survival and resources. People whose parents had wished for a neighbor began to realize that if a neighbor could be visibly seen from the porch of the house, then he was a threat to the economic security of the ranch because the two ranchers shared

the same resource or grass base. If he was a threat to the economic security of the ranch, he was also a very real threat to the physical security of the rancher.

Thus, the appreciation for space has evolved into a cultural value in the ranching community. It has been said that if a plane flies over a rancher's property he is irritated because he perceives it to be "a violation of his air space." This, of course, is an exaggeration but it does allude to the rancher's cultural value of space and seclusion. The rancher's cultural value of space could not be summed up better than with this quote from pro-rancher *Range Magazine*: "In many respects, the Sun Ranch symbolisms all that once was in Wyoming—the wide-open spaces, the cowboys, and the pioneer—and embodies all that must be if the western ranchers are to stay in business in the future" (Grant 1995:9).

The Value of Family

This study focused on family ranchers who were at least the second generation on the family ranch. Any discussion about the culture of these ranchers would be remiss to not include the value of the family theme and its implications on how these informants view their world.

One day a rancher was telling me about all the problems and hardships associated with the ranching business. I asked him why he didn't simply sell the very valuable land he owned, invest the money in the stock market, and live off the interest in Hawaii. The question initially drew a blank expression. Finally, the rancher stated that this option was not even close to being on the spectrum of possibility to him. Upon being asked "why" he said, "Because I have to keep the family name on the barn."

Many ranches in Beaverhead County are not unlike the "family farms" mentioned so often in the news over the past few years. They are completely family owned and operated. They are passed down to the children and it is expected that the children will pass the ranch onto their children. In this manner they build a ranching "legacy" or heritage from which they draw a great deal of pride. This pride centers around the development, nourishment, and protection of the family unit.

Probably one of the most dynamic attitudes I witnessed while spending time in the field with

informants was the importance of family. All the informants interviewed demonstrated this the importance of this value. One of the primary reasons for being involved in the business of ranching is predicated on the idea that, "Someday I will pass all this onto my children and they will take care of me when I am old; then they will pass it onto their children; and the family name will be preserved and carried on."

When the informants were asked about how they view the future of their business, they describe how it should and should not be through the eyes of their children. For example, "I want my boy to have or be able to . . ." When they talk about the past, they refer to how their parents viewed their situation. For example, "My dad used to say . . ." When they talk about the issues of the present, whether positive or threatening, they speak of it in terms of the effects on their families. For example, "If I cannot afford to feed my cattle, how will I be able to feed my family?"

There is no doubt, by the number of times it is referred to and the extent of emotion associated with it, that the concept of family survival is a cultural value in the ranching society. The question is "why?" While it cannot be said that no other American cultural group displays this type of family ethic, it is interesting that all the informants interviewed for this research did. The explanation for the existence of this strong family value lies in the utility of the family in the ranching business. During the time of the expanse to the west, the evaluation of the extended family which occurred in many of the industrial sectors of the nation, was not, generally, a phenomenon indicative of the frontier family. The families who pioneered the west were completely subsistence based and required large families with many children to survive.

Ranching, especially during the time that the West was being settled, was an extremely labor intensive occupation. There, of course, was no infrastructure on which these ranchers could rely. They were responsible for building their own houses, barns, corrals, and fences. In addition they had to harvest the hay and tend the cattle. As there were few people in the area and these ranchers typically did not have a lot of capital at their disposal, hiring extra employees was problematic. Therefore, these early homesteaders were forced to depend on their family unit to provide the basic necessities for survival. The family members worked to help provide food, shelter, and protection for

its members.

Because the family unit mitigated very critical economic problems faced by early ranchers, protection and cultivation of the family concept became deeply ingrained in the ranching families. In order to protect this significant element used to adapt to their environment, ranchers incorporated the family value into their cultural identity.

Ranchers no longer need the family for physical protection. There is little likelihood that armed neighbors are going to threaten the ranching operations. Additionally, new technology has reduced the need to use the family as a workforce. However, the modern ranchers still worry about outside aggressive elements harming the family. Therefore, in many respects the utilitarian need for a family is as strong as it once was.

However, one very important aspect of this family value ethic still remains. The cultural survival of the ranchers is wholly dependent on the existence of the family. In the absence of the family and the values associated with it, the ranchers would slowly be diminished. The effects of this on the broader ranching community would be dramatic. Therefore, much pride is placed on the family name and much attention is paid to protecting the traditional family values which are indicative of keeping a family together.

This is what "Keeping the name on the barn," means.

The Value of Feeding Cattle

One of the greatest compliments you could give a rancher is to tell him that his cattle look fat and in good health. If you listen to ranchers talk you will notice a common saying given back and forth; "Boy, your cattle sure look good." By saying this the rancher is being told that he is a good manager and tender of his cattle. By contrast, saying that a rancher's cattle are thin and look poor is a great insult. People from inside the ranching community would never think of saying this to another rancher even if it were true. However, if it is true, you will hear people saying it behind the rancher's back. These ranchers do not want to have it said of them that they don't take good care of their cattle. In fact, in some cases, it is all right to be a disagreeable person if you are a good manager. It would be common

to hear the statement, "Boy that John Doe is a SOB, but he is a good operator." This statement conveys the impression that John is not popular on the social scene; nevertheless, he is respected because of how he manages his cattle operation.

Because the entire economic system of the ranch is based on the weight of calves, and the most important determinate of calf weight is the food the cattle and the calf ingest, feeding cattle is an extremely important activity a rancher undertakes. It may be the most important ranching activity. Feeding lasts 365 days per year and is constantly in the mind of the rancher.

A rancher's cattle are like members of his family. He places just as much importance on taking good care of them as taking care of his children. A statement indicative of this attitude was made to me by an informant; He said, "The cattle don't work for us. We work for the cattle." Most ranchers have a very good idea about the individual characteristic of every cow they own. They would most likely be able to tell you what kind of a calf she raises and what her disposition is like. After all, it is because of the cattle that the family is able to exist. Without the cattle the rancher has nothing.

Cattle must be fed well in order to be healthy and productive. Therefore, feeding the cattle is of great importance. Activities associated with feeding is the single highest operating expense the rancher undertakes. From the purchasing of expensive haying equipment to the leasing of summer pasture, feeding cattle consumes an enormous part of the rancher's budget. Therefore, much attention is placed on feeding the cattle efficiently. It is never a question of feeding the cattle less. It is a question of feeding the cattle at a rate compatible to their good health while being able to generate a living.

There are two methods of feeding cattle. First, they are fed with hay or any other substance which the rancher has prepared and stored. This is usually actively done by the rancher or his employees by hand or with machinery and commonly takes place in the winter. The second method involves allowing the cattle to graze on range land.

This research has concluded that properly feeding cattle on the ranches is a cultural value. A well-fed cow means a well-fed family; and a well-fed family

means a healthy ranch; and a healthy ranch means healthy communities; and a vigorous community provides the base of continuing the way of life that is culturally demanded. At the core of this continuum is the need to have well-fed cattle and the values formerly discussed in this chapter are to some degree related and a by-product of this value. The value of space evolved around the need to have enough grass resources to feed the cattle. The reason the ranching family exists on the ranch is because of the cattle, as they provide the basic tool of survival for the family. Therefore, properly feeding the cattle is very important to maintaining the family.

It is not surprising then that the current climate of grazing reform on publicly owned lands is viewed by the informants interviewed in this research as a direct attack on their livelihood and very existence. Publicly owned grass is one of the main ways these informants feed their cattle. The informants believe that if the federal grass is taken away or the price substantially increased they would experience irreversible economic loss. This deprivation threatens not only a "job" in the classical sense, but a way of survival for which there is no replacement.

The Value Clash

The most lucid example of values in conflict, in terms of grazing, is the value of feeding cattle. The informants feel that if preservationists and pro-environment congresspersons had their way, they would do away with the practice all together. It is not surprising then, that this perception led to intense opposition the instant of its introduction. There probably could be no more of a direct assault on how the rancher makes his living than to threaten his use of the federal grazing lands.

Most of the informants feel that if the price of the grazing leases is increased they will not be able to economically adapt. They say that even if they could afford to pay the current market prices for private grass, the closure of public grazing lands would increase demand and the market value would surge. In addition, they do not believe there is enough private grass to feed all the displaced cattle. Therefore, not only would they be forced to pay exorbitant prices, but there may not even be enough land for their herds.

Therefore, the grazing issue presents the informants

with a direct assault on their economic structure. Ranching is the way they survive. The cultural implications of this cannot be overstated. These people are generational in this occupation. They know no other way to live. This may seem ludicrous. It is easy to surmise that these ranchers could sell their ranches and live like kings off of the interest. What must be understood, however, is that this idea insults the deepest of cultural values. Anytime someone perceives that their entire livelihood is being threatened, then a serious defense to this assault must be expected.

The issue of space factors is not only because the informants are uncomfortable with having new faces around, but these newcomers are blamed for wanting the grass taken away. To a large degree this does not seem completely untrue. If there were no outside interests concerned over having to share their recreational use of federal land with cattle, this issue would not be so advanced. Therefore, for the same reasons space originally became a value of the range, it is reappearing today. Initially, space was a tool of protection from competition for resources and it is no different today. The three or four generations of ranchers in this area have all used the value of space for the same reason, that reason being that anyone else, or at least anyone new, is a threat to the economic security of the ranchers because of their impact on the resource.

These informants worry, in this atmosphere of threat over their very existence, that they will not be able to hand down a worthwhile ranch to their children. As was pointed out in the discussion of the ranching value of family, much importance is placed on handing the ranches down. These ranchers worry that they will not be able to keep the family legacy going and their children will not get a chance to use the land as they did, and that they will not be able to maintain the family's ranching heritage. Since the family is the catalyst which keeps the whole ranching cultural system alive and thriving, the cultural implications of this threat cannot be minimized.

Informant Perception of Federal Intent

Within the context of these cultural values, we can begin to analyze some specific problems which arise between the ranchers, environmentalist and the government agencies. It is important to note that every informant interviewed believes the end goal of environmentalists, many of whom are congresspersons

and members of the government, is to eliminate altogether the practice of grazing cattle on public land. Of course, some environmental groups do not disguise their desires to see the cattle gone, and thereby fuel the fire of this controversy.

Government policy makers and administrators disavow the assertion that their intent is to eliminate cattle. They tell the ranchers that they are only interested in managing the land for the best use of all its users. However, according to the informants, this is mouth talk and "policy speaks louder than words" in terms of federal intent on the grazing issue. There are many management policies of the federal government which simply do not make sense from the ranchers point of view.

It is clear that the ranchers see evidence they are being kicked off the federal range by way of policy which not only minimizes the importance of their presence but also restricts their ability to effectively graze cattle.

The Conservation/Preservation Problem

As previously discussed, there have been two main policy propensities which have developed over time in regard to the management of federal lands.

The informants in this area are, by definition, conservationists. They use the resources on the public lands and manage these resources in a manner consistent with optimal gain, sustained yield, and economic principles. This interprets ideally and technically into a healthy crop of grass year after year.

The problem of this perception is that while it may be argued that ranchers manage the federal grazing land in the best way for the specific purpose of cattle grazing, this use is not what most preservationists define as proper application of the land's resources. The ranchers are still operating both physically and philosophically under the principles of the Taylor Grazing Act. They believe that if they manage the land in a way which feeds the most cattle without overgrazing, they are operating within the letter and intent of the law. In addition, they believe that this type of use is the healthiest for the land.

The dilemma is that the federal interpretation of the Taylor Grazing Act has shifted from a pure

conservation model to a prototype which embodies preservation. This is supplemented by a series of relatively recent pro-preservationist laws which have dramatically changed policy without specifically changing the Taylor Grazing Act. Within the parameters of preservation then, the land is managed in a way which provides for the least human impact.

The issue is not that there has been a quantitative shift between the conservation model and the preservation movement which demands less cattle in order to accommodate other resource extraction. The problem is that there has been a qualitative shift in how this land is managed which is antithetical to its former use and administration. This change leaves the presumption, in the minds of these ranchers, that the government has as an end goal the elimination of cattle altogether. The informants see the priority of the federal government as no longer to protect the grass from overuse (enabling continuation of cattle grazing). Rather, protection of the grass from that type of use (cattle grazing) altogether while allowing its use for aesthetic enjoyment, seems to now be the pervasive intent. Herein lies the core of the bitter struggle between the informants, preservationists, and government administrators.

This conflict becomes most apparent in debate over the actual management policies and practices of the BLM and Forest Service. This is a case where the preservationists and the conservationists view the same activity or its actual outcome very differently. Nowhere is this conflict more pronounced than over the concept of over-grazing. There is no consensus between the informants and the agencies on what over-grazing is. The rancher and the agency can look at the same piece of property and present totally different views on the state of the grass on that land. What the government and environmentalist might view as over-grazing the rancher often sees as a piece of land that has been grazed to its yearly potential and not necessarily harmed

The Question of "Natural State"

All the informants related that they believe policy makers and preservationists wish to see the land managed in more of a "natural state." The informants believe this means no visual sight of human economic activity. The problem is that there are dramatically contrasting views on what the term "natural" means.

The informants believe that the practice of grazing cattle on this land is probably the most natural activity that this land could be engaged in. They say that the preservationist view of "natural" is one which does not include cattle. However, these ranchers argue that for thousands of years bison, elk, and deer used this grass in much larger numbers than the domestic cattle currently using this land.

Therefore, when a preservationist makes a statement which indicates that the land is being abused, the informants wonder by what standard this statement is being made. The standard of "natural" is too subjective to be used since no one can agree on what the term means. These ranchers argue that the preservationists have unrealistic perceptions on what is natural and that they have created a fictional utopia where a "natural state" is defined by rules that they themselves develop and manipulate for their own political purposes.

Representation and Communication Issues

Another problem presents itself in the way of representation. The BLM and the Forest Service have advisory panels which are set up to consider public comment and glean public input on administration of the lands. Ranchers are a represented entity on these panels. However, the informants claim that it is not a fair representation because while several groups are represented, they are the only groups representing the overriding concept of conservation and sustained yield use. The other groups represent preservation philosophies. Therefore, although all groups enjoy equal representation, the ranching interests are outnumbered by the preservation groups.

Related to this problem is the chronic difficulty of poor communication between the ranchers and the administering agencies. The informants claim that they try to cooperate with these people but that this action is often not reciprocated. The informants say that they wish to work in a collaborative manner with these managers. However, they feel that the managers do not meet them half way.

The Implications of the Nuclear Age on Ranching Value Structures

From a much broader perspective it is important to note that the grazing issue is not, by itself, the only problem ranchers face. It is symptomatic of a much

larger impasse. In many ways this issue is indicative of the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back."

The grazing dilemma is simply a point on the spectrum of problems faced by modern ranchers. However, because grazing happens to be the most visible, it has become the one nail on which every hat is hung. The real predicament, in the West, is the unrelenting advance of technology and the incredible pressure it puts on traditional, conservative value systems.

Consider the fact that less than 100 years ago the most reliable mode of transportation was a horse. Fifty incredible years from that date humans walked on the moon. Presently, we find our selves in a world which is readily accessible to anyone who can manipulate a computer key. Our human environment has changed and not by traditional natural forces but by the very tools we invent to adapt to the environment.

Very little is known about how this affects cultural landscapes other than there is little doubt that it is, and will continue to be, dramatic. Cultures are being asked to adapt to this new technological atmosphere at a faster rate than they ever have before. This is not an uncertain or uninteresting fact given the stagnancy of change up to the mid 1900s and the explosion of technology over the past 50 years.

Therefore, for many in the ranching community, grazing has become one issue that bears the burden for many of the other problems and pressures the ranching community is facing. It is logical that the grazing issue would become the mouthpiece for the rest. The grazing issue is the only problem faced by the ranchers which is also a public issue. Other issues effect only the ranchers. This effectively provides a forum enabling the ranchers to forward all their complaints.

Problems such as population growth associated with the new westward exodus and advancing technology which gobbles up old ways of thinking and doing things, are currently challenging old ranching value systems. Economic hardship and sluggishness to compete, in a new global industry which demands new levels of education and skills the ranchers never needed to have, threatens the economic structure of the ranching community. In addition, mounting health questions over the consumption of beef, animal rights pressure over certain ranch practices, and economic

suffocation by the introduction of NAFTA, which clearly hurts the ranching economy, are all examples of problems which weigh on the minds of ranchers and make them seek an outlet for their frustration. All of these issues are coupled with distrust of and alienation from a government which seems inept to address any problem without taking too much time, too much money, and creating too much hassle.

These are the problems for which public grass has become the voice. There is little left to wonder then as to the stridency of that voice.

Conclusion

The issues involved in the use of public lands are very complex. Further research, in many areas, must be conducted in order to completely understand the ideological realities of all the issues. From this vantage point it might appear that we are at an impasse between the environmentalists and the ranchers. At first glance it might appear that the values of these two communities are so dramatically opposed that resolution of any type seems unlikely, perhaps impossible.

I, however, tend to disagree. So much about this issue is the result of misunderstanding. For example, there is no real proof that mainstream government policy makers wish to stop the practice of grazing cattle on public lands. On the other hand, it is not true that most ranchers, if left to their own devices, would allow the wholesale ecological destruction of the public domain. I truly do not believe that the views of both the ranchers and the environmentalists are as divergent as the members of either of these groups suspect. Indeed, some of the core issues for both groups are remarkably similar.

The issue of development or subdivision is a good example of this. Both the ranchers and the environmentalists are seeking to impede increased subdivision currently taking place on private land in close proximity to public lands. Even though they have different reasons, both sides feel that expanding numbers of people living in these areas is a negative development

The point is that these two opponents could find that they agree on something. If there is going to be any type of successful reconciliation on the issues

between ranchers and environmentalists, these commonalities must be exploited for their collaborative value. The problem is that there is a critical misunderstanding of the cultural makeup of the ranchers. The federal government, through its representatives, continually and innocently says and does things which needlessly irritate the ranchers. These ranchers constitute a group which is highly suspect of people who are not their family members or do not have close ties to the community. They are especially suspect of government agents.

Often a government agent will speak to a rancher with the best intent in mind, but because he or she used the wrong terminology, the rancher will reject everything they say from then on. This research discovered that once a rancher confirms his already negative opinion of a government agent, it is very difficult to create a good relationship again. In working with a cultural group which is this sensitive, incredible care must be exercised in not stepping on these cultural land mines which the ranchers use to warn themselves of potential intruders or threats.

The federal government is, or should be, the arbitrator in this issue. As such, the government must become more aggressive in exploring better avenues for resolution. Additionally, the government policy makers must increase their sensitivity to the cultural attitudes of the ranchers. Anthropologists must also play a critical role as the brokers of important cultural information which must be clearly understood by both sides. In the absence of this critical understanding, there will continue to be a painful and destructive range war in the West.

Notes

1. This article was first presented at the Society of Applied Anthropology annual conference, 1997.
2. Justin B. Lee is a graduate student in cultural anthropology and a first year law student at the University of Montana - Gonzaga. He can be reached at: 314 E. Nora, Apt. #2, Spokane, WA 99202, (509) 484-4265

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