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## The Western Range Revisited: Removing Livestock from Public Lands to Conserve Native Biodiversity, by Debra L. Donahue

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# BOOK REVIEW

## THE WESTERN RANGE REVISITED: REMOVING LIVESTOCK FROM PUBLIC LANDS TO CONSERVE NATIVE BIODIVERSITY

DEBRA L. DONAHUE

Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

Pp. 388, \$47.95

The purpose for Donahue's book is clearly stated in the subtitle: to urge removal of livestock from public lands (receiving twelve inches or less of annual rainfall) to conserve native biodiversity. She argues that elimination of grazing is necessary for ecological rehabilitation of a seriously degraded resource, that it makes economic sense, and that it can be achieved under existing law. She also recognizes that there is a stout political resistance to her proposal.

Donahue has excellent credentials in the subject, having a law degree as well as an MS in Wildlife Biology and having worked in three federal land management agencies. She has produced a well-written, well-organized volume with a prodigious amount of documentation—85 pages of notes and bibliography.

Thad Box, a nationally known range scientist,<sup>1</sup> has characterized *The Western Range Revisited* as a "disturbingly good book." The first three chapters set the historical background and the physical setting of western grazing. Chapters four thru eight develop in turn the political and cultural landscape, the ecological landscape, the current legal landscape, and the socioeconomic landscape. Donahue explains a number of technical concepts so clearly that any reader can understand them: for example, her discussions of the edge effect (pp. 163-169) and the threshold principle (pp. 146-147). While she does mention conflicting theories and data she clearly emphasizes evidence that supports her argument. She writes like the lawyer she is.

Even its practitioners agree with the impression that range science is still a rather inexact one when it comes to range quality. There does seem to be general agreement that conditions have changed substantially since European settlers arrived with domestic livestock and that grass has been replaced by woody plants in many areas, which does reduce usable livestock forage. However, there seems to be substantial disagreement among scientists over what constitutes quality and how quality should be measured. Those scientists close to the livestock industry tend to judge quality in terms of the ability to produce nutritious forage suitable for cattle

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1. See Thad Box, *Public Rangelands without Cows?* RANGELANDS, August 2000 at 27.

or sheep. Other scientists tend to favor diversity of native plant and wildlife species as the appropriate measure of quality. Donahue is clearly in the latter camp.

For all of the scholarly excellence of this book, there are several shortcomings. First of all, Donahue seems to subscribe to the assumption that it is not possible to rehabilitate at least some lands with controlled grazing. "By intimating that grazing might be used to achieve desired vegetative conditions I do not intend to open up the subject of available management tools and methods for managing degraded rangelands to restore natural biodiversity. The focus herein is on the utility of removing livestock as a biodiversity conservation tool" (p. 181). In other words, the only acceptable action is to attempt to return the land to its primeval state? Many range scientists argue persuasively that it is not possible to know what that state was and that it is probably not possible to return to that state in any event.

Secondly, she implies that livestock producers have little or no interest in conservation of rangelands. While they may have little interest in the kind of biodiversity Donahue extols, stockmen do have a direct interest in maintaining the land in a productive condition (albeit using a different definition of productivity). No producer who wants to continue in business will knowingly deplete his land base through practices that encourage soil erosion or takeover by unproductive plant species. The great majority of stockmen are far more conscientious and effective stewards than she seems to give them credit for being.

To make the argument more persuasive to non-ecologists, the benefits of biodiversity need to be restated throughout the book. Biodiversity for what? The benefits of livestock grazing—meat and wool—are obvious to everyone. The "religion" of biodiversity as a universal good does not persuade universally. The "fundamental value assumption that bio-diversity is good and ought to be preserved" (p. 162) that underpins this book would be more persuasive to non-biologists if the tangible benefits were succinctly summarized and reiterated throughout the book. With the world population at six billion and generally expected to double before growth levels off, pressure to use all lands beneficially for human beings will only continue to intensify. Benefits are discussed in chapter six, but the reader needs a briefer summary to hold on to.

Donahue seems not to recognize that there are indeed private property rights/interests in grazing leases. On page 284 she states, "There are no private property interests at stake . . ." then goes on to argue that ranchers have no ethical right to claims that conflict with the larger public interest. Western ranches with grazing permits regularly sell for much more than the deeded portion is worth and, for that matter, more than the

earning potential of the livestock enterprise.<sup>2</sup> While the grazing permits are revocable and in theory there may not be a property right, in practice they have a substantial private value. That accounts, in part, for the western stockmen's tenacity when faced with the loss or reduction of their permits. Ranch selling prices further reflect the value placed on amenities or ranching lifestyles. This is the western variation of the agrarian ideal that still runs deep in this country. Jeffersonian agrarianism still finds sympathy and support even in urban America. Many Americans cling to the romantic dream of the virtues of rural living and owning land. Clean air, open spaces away from pollution and congestion, and proximity to nature are some of the reasons people cite for rural living. Donahue documents the disproportionate political influence of the livestock industry in the western states but it seems to baffle her. "The only essential ingredient yet lacking is the political will to oppose a narrow, but powerful interest group—the deeply entrenched western livestock's industry" (p. 288). She completely misses the extant property interests and the depth, pervasiveness, and endurance of the Jeffersonian agrarianism even among urban Americans. These interests must be recognized and countered in some fashion if effective "political will" is ever to be mobilized.

On balance Donahue makes a very persuasive argument that semiarid public lands merit conservation and that livestock grazing needs to be curtailed. The question she leaves us with is how to summon the political will, but she offers no clue as to how this might be accomplished. Coming to the end of a book that persuasively identifies a problem and suggests a remedy but offers no clue as to how to implement that remedy in the real world leaves the reader somewhat disappointed. Perhaps one or more readers will take up that challenge and produce a sequel suggesting a pragmatic implementation strategy. At the bottom line the shortcomings are substantially outweighed by the merits of this book. It should be read by everyone interested in Western public land management.

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2. See L. Allen Torell & Marc E. Kincaid, *Public Land Policy and the Market Value of New Mexico Ranches, 1979-1994*, 49 *JOURNAL OF RANGE MANAGEMENT* 270 (1996).