

Protecting the West from its Protectors

Environmentalists like me got it wrong. Words & photos by Dan Dagget.

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.

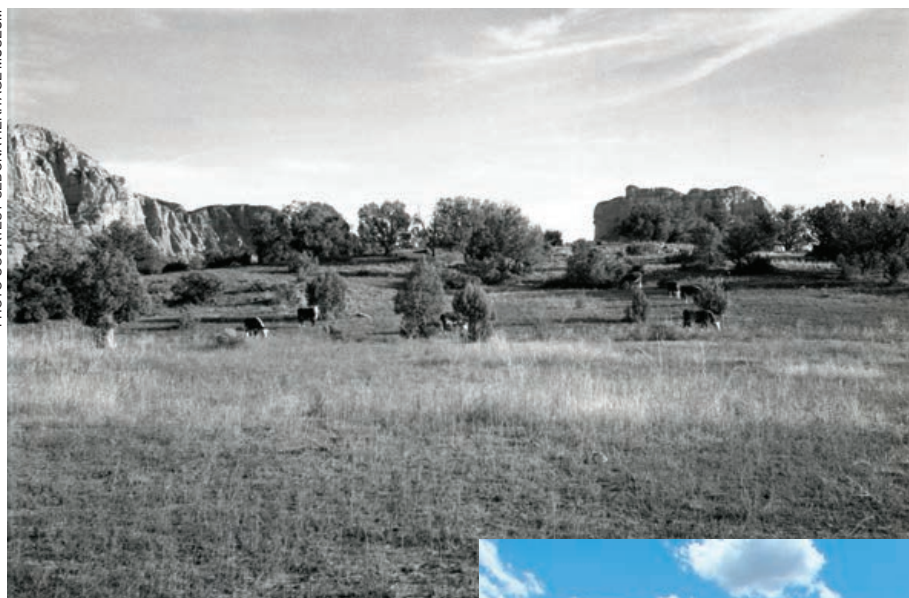
At the time I arrived, one of the hottest environmental issues was grazing private livestock on public lands. Grazing livestock on land both public and private was claimed to be the most damaging activity humans had brought to the West. As one environ-

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mental 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





ABOVE: Grazing was ended on this site near what has become a popular hiking trail near Sedona, Ariz., shortly after this photo was taken on Dec. 29, 1957. RIGHT: The exact same place in 2012 after 55 years of protection from grazing. The mountain on the upper right in the first photo doesn't show above the trees in the second photo because the trees are bigger, and the point where I took the re-photo is lower than the original photo point, according to my rough calculations, due to three to four feet of soil erosion. OPPOSITE: Dan Dagget is six foot three and can reach to eight feet. It's obvious rest isn't working.

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



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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.



LEFT: Dry Creek Allotment had been grazed for more than 50 years when this photo was taken in 1963. The inset is a photo of a three-foot-square frame, by means of which the plants in a certain part of the transect were identified, recorded, and mapped to enable the accurate reading and recording of any change that happened. In 1963 the grass was short (most likely it had recently been grazed), but you can see that plants were close together, the coverage was fairly complete, and there was little evidence of erosion.



Forty-nine years later (2012) I took a photo of that exact same site. I even relocated (and rephotographed) the frame. According to the best information I can find, grazing was removed from this area "before 1981," so, at the time of the reshoot, the area had been protected for 30-plus years.



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



After Googling the Web for photos of "public lands grazing damage," this is what I got. The question is, "Is this the best the enviros got?"



From the look of the exposed tree roots and freshly toppled trees it appears safe to say that erosion continues in this area in spite of the fact that it has been protected for more than three decades. (I would also add that it's just as obvious that protection isn't doing much to heal the area.)

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.

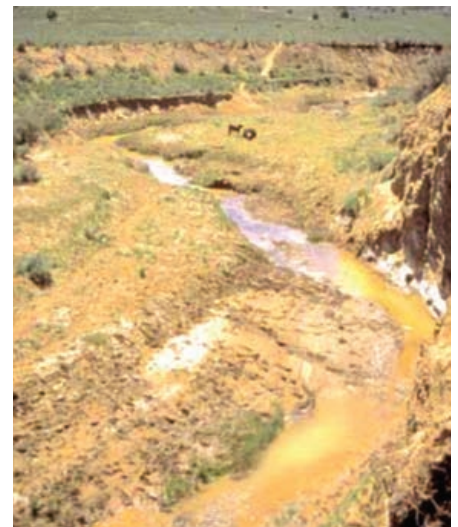
I’ve written books (and articles for this magazine) about ranchers who have healed damage greater than anything shown among the grazing-destroys-the-West photos by using their management practices and their animals as the means to perform that healing. In fact, I’ve done some of



ABOVE 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." ABOVE 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."

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE COCONINO NATIONAL FOREST



**To graze
or not to graze,
that is the question.**



Before, during and after a project that used cows and grazing to restore health to an area that would have produced a “cows destroy the West” photo similar to the one provided by Hudak. First, a few rocks were placed in the gully to slow water flow, then native plant seeds were broadcast, and hay was spread to provide mulch and attract cattle to fertilize the mix and till it in. It took a few years for the drought to break and sufficient rain to fall for the project to blossom, but the results speak for themselves.

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. ■

Dan Dagget is a writer and conservative environmentalist who lives in Sedona, Ariz. He has written two books: “Beyond the Rangeland Conflict: Toward a West That Works” was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; “Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance to Nature” (2007) is available via the University of Nevada Press and Amazon.com. In 1992, he was honored as one of the top 100 grassroots environmental activists in America by the Sierra Club. He has given talks around the West to groups including the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering and activist vegetarians. His talks have been said to be “as good as public speaking gets.” He may be contacted via dandagget@aol.com.