

# Bless the Beasts and the Children

*Is “nothing” sacred? Story and photos by Steven H. Rich*

There is something magical about the healing power of grazing animals. Many organisms and natural processes depend on grazers. For thousands of years before the first domestic livestock set foot in America grazing and overgrazing by wildlife were extremely common, so

using arbitrary notions of “naturalness” to guide policy is destructive and foolish.

Mountain plovers, and some other plains birdlife, nest only on severely grazed grassland. Modern ranchers’ “proper grazing” ethic actually made it too grassy for these birds to find nesting opportunities. Even The Nature Conservancy found it necessary to overgraze areas of their reserves to conserve the birds.

William Clayton’s wagon train crossing western Nebraska in 1847 barely survived a vast area reduced to dusty, gnawed stubble by tens of thousands of bison. Oxen and horses almost died of starvation. The train’s hunters trailed thousands of gaunt, bony buffalo without finding one with enough flesh to be worth shooting.

Grasses develop defensive adaptations to overgrazing. A common one is leaves and seed heads that grow flat on the ground so grazers risk breaking their teeth (a fatal injury) trying to eat the stressed plants. Forbs and woody plants also have evolved effective strategies to survive repeated overgrazing like resprouting, growing thorns, and producing toxins.

Everything from mastodons to locusts and prairie dogs have been overgrazing plant communities since before humans existed. Plants and animals have adapted, moved or died. Raw nature is a tough neighborhood. Nevertheless, many “environmentalists” fear and misunderstand livestock grazing in nature. They see fire as natural (fire effects are far more severe than grazing effects), even when lit by humans, though fire didn’t often happen in nature without grazing.

A long-term study of fire and grazing relationships on grassland plots and watersheds showed total species richness, biodiversity, was highest on the grazed watersheds and lowest on burned watersheds.

Researchers Scott Collins, Allan Knapp and colleagues published their findings in the journal *Science*. Their burned-plus-grazing simulated plots had greater biodiversity than the rested control plots, and more than five

times greater productivity. Productivity decreased on the rested plots. Cool season species richness on the grazed and burned watersheds was nearly double that of watersheds that were only burned. “Forb [flower] richness was highest on grazed watersheds regardless of burning treatment...grazed grasslands have higher nitrogen availability than ungrazed grasslands.”

Politically correct “naturalness” is, in practice, whatever its advocates can get away with

ranchers, no bison is safe from that slander.

Local ranchers like the bison, 250 of which were lured to the park by grass growing in forest burned in May of 2000. The fire escaped from park personnel (influenced by the fire-is-always-natural-equals-good doctrine) who started it amidst a terrific wind-storm in severe drought conditions. That fire roared through Point Imperial on the North Rim’s east side and burned 13,350 acres until it hit the desert. The same day, another catastrophic fire was set by rangers in New Mexico’s Bandolier National Monument, during the same storm and drought. The Bandolier fire raged across the forested San Ildefonso and Santa Clara Pueblo reservations and through part of the town of Los Alamos, con-



*This miles-long view is only part of a very hot wildfire in Mesa Verde National Park. Millions of native plants and animals died. Only animals able to live on cheatgrass and thistle can use much of the burn.*

calling it to achieve political and fund-raising goals. The convenient naturalness doctrine is being used to push the removal of the bison from Grand Canyon National Park. These native animals are somehow not “natural enough” even though no serious biologist believes that bison were never there. In a park where feral nonnative burros still roam, the Park Service claims the bison may have 1 to 2 percent cattle genes. Since almost all genetic strains of bison were saved from extinction by

suming 200 homes and 45,000 acres. Two-hundred-and-fifty bison would have to work really hard for 20,000 years to accomplish the death and destruction of those two fires.

When it became clear that Arizona’s game commissioners and locals wouldn’t fall for the two-percent solution, the park folks said they feared the bison “would muddy ponds and step on salamanders.” This historic herd of big shaggies is just doing what comes naturally: increasing native land health and diversity.





*Mesa Verde. To protect campers from wildfire, this buffer was created using chainsaws. Biodiverse grassland/shrubland can knock a forest inferno into a manageable ground fire. Strategically placed buffers like this could greatly limit damaging wildfire.*

Their numbers can be controlled by hunting on the state's winter range and adjacent national forest. Now they're dying or being evicted. No environmentalist has uttered a peep. It's being done, allegedly, to defend "naturalness."

There are decidedly nonnative feral horses in Mesa Verde National Park. During the recent (possibly ongoing) drought, two very hot, catastrophic wildfires swept much of the park, deeply searing soils, killing most of the firs, spruces, and pines and greatly damaging its structural and biological diversity. Resprouting trees, primarily Gambel oaks, are now at shrub height on the older burn. Mountain birdlife will have to wait 70 to 100 years for nesting habitat in tall trees. The more recent burn is covered with nonnative cheatgrass and thistles. Fire may still repeatedly race through the explosive cheatgrass, taking biological potentials away in the smoke and following floods.

Consider the long defense by environmentalists in and out of government of the terrible but allegedly natural overgrazing damage performed by uncontrolled elk, bison, and other ungulate wildlife in Yellowstone National Park. Many thousands of acres of ancient aspens and their associated grass, flowers and wildlife diversity disappeared as desperate, starving elk and other large grazers and browsers gnawed off the aspen's nutritious bark in winter, then chewed the resprouts to the ground the next winter till they died. Riparian willows and associated vegetation were also devastated, as was sagebrush, key survival forage for pronghorns, deer and

sage grouse. If ranchers' cattle did a thousandth of the overgrazing the Yellowstone wildlife did, their grazing permits would be canceled.

In a letter responding to a National Research Council (NRC) report, Dr. Rod Heitschmit, president of the Society for Range Management firmly stated that the society considered conditions in Yellowstone's northern range, with its "braided, entrenched and eroded streams" and altered plant communities an "ecological disaster." He said the park "compares unfavorably to nearby ranches." (The ranches are much better.) Inaccurate reports of these consequences "contribute to a public perception of 'naturalness' that can be used to substitute...abusive, unsustainable, unmanaged wildlife grazing for conservation-driven, sustainable, managed livestock or wildlife grazing tactics." SRM is a prestigious group made up of about 3,500 members, mostly academics and government scientists and officials.

Dr. Heitschmit's letter vigorously accuses an NRC committee of ignoring and/or suppressing critical evidence about the park's health; distorting public perception of appro-

priate wildlife population levels; and creating a dysfunctional model for "Core Biosphere Reserves" which could be used to hurt nature all over the planet.

It further states "unfortunately, Yellowstone National Park has a long history of attempting to sway public opinion with biased or egregiously incorrect information."

The NRC committee co-conspires with all this and much more, outlined in Heitschmit's eight-page reproof. SRM's president strongly suggests that the park's northern range "has already crossed an irreversible ecological threshold [due to the presence of] soil and hydrological conditions that are irreversible except in geologic time."

He further regretted the NRC committee's defense of the park and park allies' policies saying, "The opinion reached by the committee is clearly based on member 'values' rather than science."

Environmental theorists who are unwilling to acknowledge the role of native hunters cooked up the nonsense that "starvation is the natural population control mechanism for elk...in the Yellowstone ecosystem." This cruel myth is false. Aspens and willows were in Yellowstone for thousands of years. They only began to disappear shortly after the park quit managing elk numbers, caving in to public pressure for visible wildlife and "natural regulation"-theorists' demands.



*Wildfire killed most ponderosa pines, firs and spruces in Mesa Verde National Park. Resprouting shrubs, grasses and oaks form an "alternate state," without habitat for mountain species like blue grouse. Management could have limited the fire.*

Beavers became "ecologically extinct" (meaning that there are so few they no longer play their "keystone species" ecological roles of increasing biodiversity and stability in riparian areas) in Yellowstone's northern range due to "elk- and bison-induced starvation."

Yellowstone's primarily plant-eating griz-



zly bears and other wildlife found few berries or other high-value plant foods in the park. One of Utah State University professor Charles Kay's many studies revealed average park plants produced 13 serviceberries and 33 chokecherries compared to normal productions of 1,300 and 1,500 per plant. Most sampled park areas had no berries at all. Desperate bears left Yellowstone, caused trouble and got killed. Dr. Kay reported to Congress that "the National Park Service has routinely fabricated data to support natural regulation, as have various environmental groups."

Evolutionary integrity (ultimately the worship of randomness) excuses any horrendous policy consequences as long as they are "natural." If rural people suffer and native grasses, wildflowers and associated wildlife die off when livestock are removed, that's fine—the populations were "unnaturally high." If woody species move in, dry up streams, exterminate whole classes of vegetation and wildlife, that's fine too. Wildfires can rage, resulting floods can rip up soils and watersheds, wildlife can die of homelessness or incineration. Conifers can displace aspens and all their grass and flowers. Wild horses and burros can wreak havoc on ecosystems, outcompete to death all other herbivores, then starve and choke on dust in drought. It's "natural."

The manager of a large private-land cattle ranch once gave a tour of that beautiful, healthy, wildlife-rich place to the famously loud and rude head of a well-funded western "environmental" group from Idaho who vows to get ranchers off the land. On viewing the denuded, muddied, broken-banked



*Bare ground in dense pinion/juniper woodland excludes most grass and flowers and allows erosion. Here, erosion has reached bedrock. Mesa Verde National Park.*

destruction of long reaches of an elk-ravaged stream, the "great man" waxed angrily eloquent about the "worst livestock damage" he had ever witnessed. He was soon embarrassed by the utter lack of cow droppings and the abundant elk sign. The drainage had not hosted a single bovine in 10 years.

"It was like the guy suddenly got a sub-space message from the mother ship," the manager related. His whole face glazed over in an oddly calm expression and he went silent, then muttered, "This is natural, then," and said nothing more about it.

This uncritically obedient "yes, master" approach to their self-created concept of

nature, unconnected to experience, has bred a cold, narrowly focused and pitiless logic of breathtaking irrationality. Ranch families have had this remorseless monomania used to hurt them for decades. It has chilling implications. Ask the 14 million Africans who Charles Geisler of Cornell University has identified as "conservation refugees," displaced by the creation of parks and reserves into grinding poverty, landlessness, and early death. Read Mark Dowie's article in the November 2005

*Orion* magazine which states that millions from every continent have been evicted from native homelands to please urban dilettantes' taste for imaginary "virgin wilderness." Dowie quotes the International Forum on Indigenous Mapping's 200 delegates' statement: "Activities of conservation organizations now represent the single biggest threat to indigenous lands." A Web search for references to conservation refugees will turn up dozens of heartbreaking hits. Talk to anyone with a Hispanic surname from northern New Mexico if you don't think it's happening here. Ask the family of a "willing seller" harassed off their ranch.

All these millions are suffering far from their homes to facilitate brilliantly "natural" schemes. Some years ago, the highly educated manager of The Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Grizzly Bear Preserve, who considered humans' hunting of deer, elk, and moose unnatural, blithely proposed letting the big deer multiply on the preserve unchecked by hunting until they starved to death (more natural regulation). The grizzlies could then, he deftly reasoned, scavenge the emaciated carcasses, leading to higher bear survival.

No environmentalist could see a thing wrong with the plan. Only desperate pleading by Professor Kay to his friend, the Conservancy's state director, averted this insanity, which would have devastated not only the native grazers and browsers, but every forage plant species on the reserve and adjacent areas. The



*Indian Ricegrass mingles with muttongrass (bluegrass), bottlebrush squirreltail grass, western wheat and flowers along with valuable bitterbrush, yucca, Mormon tea and other shrubs in the managed fire buffer. Seeds cover the soil. Near Mesa Verde campground.*



obvious end result: starving grizzlies. Remember, the reserve was once some family's ranch. The evolutionary logic of biological cleansing echoes the Vietnam era's "we destroyed the village in order to protect it" ideas. Whole populations and communities of organisms are mystically surrendered to "purifying" rigors like starvation or water deprivation. If any survive, they are thought to be more fit and able to survive the next random onslaught.

Lessons learned from Mt. St. Helens's eruption and other disasters refute this thinking. The rich biological and organic matter legacy of the pre-eruption forest contained the seeds and soil of rebirth. Our focus should be on increasing health and functioning, working with natural forces to enrich soils and preserving biological and genetic diversity against the day violent randomness does its work. That's what good ranchers do, and it's the key to nature's survival. The evolutionary theorists do have a lot of randomness in their notions. They do nothing for evolutionary fitness. Management has recovered endangered species. Phony "naturalness" never will.

Those who see "pristine nature" as sacred have been victimized as have the NRC scientists. Pristine nature is self-delusional nonsense (see "Pristine Nature: The Founding Falsehood," *RANGE*, Spring 2005) concocted 100-plus years ago by nature-ignorant romantic writers and painters. Their fantasy has since been stuffed down the public's throat via impressionable children. The doctrine was force-fed until the seductive humbug formed an article of faith decreed by the whole educational establishment. It flies wildly, blindly but freely in the face of the evidence. It is mystifying as to why this silly myth has given its adherents an unchallengeable right to rule the natural world.

What is *sacred* about starvation, drought, flood, erosion, overgrazing, disease outbreaks, insect plagues and survival of the meanest and most toxic mixed in with random tectonic forces and devastating asteroid strikes at wide intervals?

*Life* is sacred. Our survival is a sign of grace.

There is a terrible grandeur in the way entropy and what scientists call abiotic (non-living) forces grind away species, mountains and continents. This is nature's cycle of renewal. We scurry around trying various valiant strategies until it catches us and grinds us up too.

There are plenty of evolutionary stressors. We think life should prevail. It is OK to help each other out and to partner up with the rest

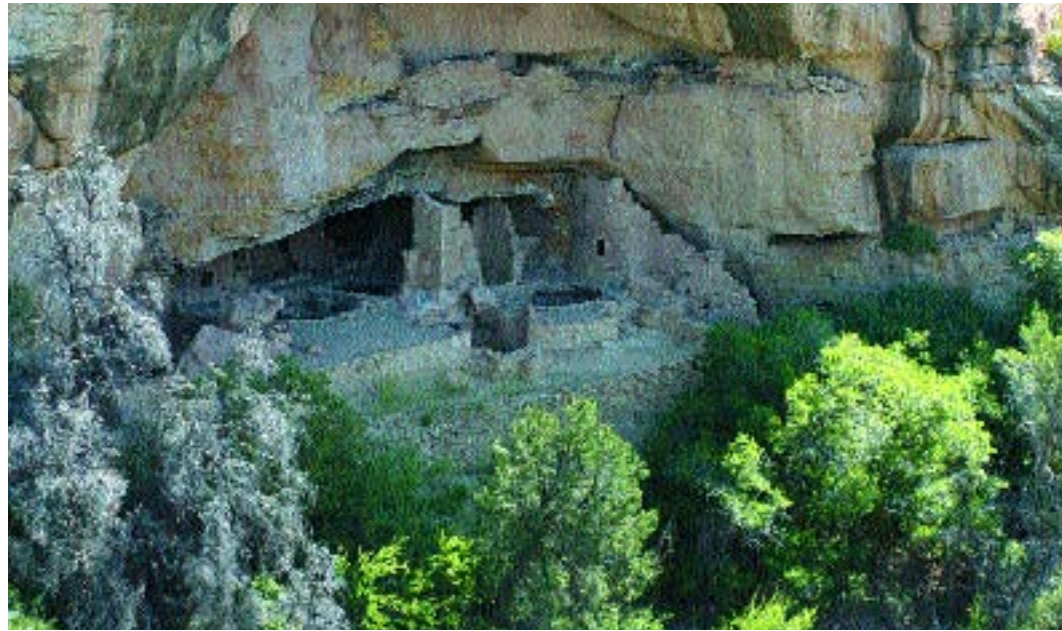
of life. We rural management advocate types have spent years outside in the elements and we love rich soil, healthy wildlife populations, rich biodiverse pastures and water. You can bet your asteroid we'd love to build a reservoir to catch floodwaters off those rocks so we can give water to animals. We figure if beavers can do it, so can we. In cold, dry weather it's a safe bet we'll chop a hole in the ice too, and let the birds, sheep, cows, rabbits, coyotes, cougars, bobcats, pronghorns, and deer get a drink, even if that "fouls up evolutionary integrity."

This seems a good time to quote Galileo, one of the fathers of experimental science: "The pronouncements of these Grand Per-

dling skills that remove the need for most fences and deliver those outstanding results by controlling the timing, frequency and severity of grazing.

Researchers Christopher Helzer and Allen Steuter also study fire and grazing on grasslands. They've witnessed restoration of diversity through bison and cattle grazing in several locations. "Cattle...follow[ed] much the same pattern as bison...cattle may be one of the best and most flexible tools for maintaining diversity."

For years my friends and I have formed and facilitated collaborative teams including environmentalists, ranchers, and government



*Fire came very close to this Anasazi cliff dwelling. The very hot fire probably destroyed many buried artifacts, now lost to science.*

sonages give me a pain," he wrote. "They cannot find the truth because they always look in the wrong place."

The truth is out in nature itself. Listen to Steve Cote, who spent a lifetime outdoors as a Natural Resource Conservation Service range conservationist: "There is now incontrovertible evidence that long rest [turning things over to nature] creates rangeland desertification [loss of health and biodiversity] much the same as does severe repeated overgrazing.... Under sound management with animals that are well handled, the effects of [livestock] grazing on the health of rangelands can be outstanding, well beyond the realm of what was formerly considered possible. The results that planned [and monitored] grazing can achieve cannot be duplicated by rest, fire or technology." This scientist works to teach, improve, and restore livestock han-

workers. Almost all the environmentalists were thrilled, as any normal human would be, with the terrific results these teams always get, using livestock as a major restoration tool.

I'm always thrilled by the team goal-formation process when the group finds out they all love the same things—their families, friends, liberty, homes, horses, wild animals and nature. They love wide open spaces, clean water, fish and birds. They love their pets. Much of the mutual goal can always be summed up in the phrase "bless the beasts and the children." But nobody in all these years has ever said anything about loving evolutionary integrity. ■

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