

## EAT MEAT, SAVE THE PLANET

REVERSING ECOLOGICAL DAMAGE.

BY DAN DAGGET

Every time some overinflated Hollywood celeb or irrelevant British royal says we all have to become vegetarians to save the planet, I think about how rarely I've seen wildlife in a vegetable field. No elk, no pronghorns, certainly no mountain lions. And if I do happen to see a rabbit or a prairie dog, I know whoever planted that field is doing everything they can to get those uninvited guests out of there to keep them from eating the produce or polluting it with *E. coli*.

And wildflowers? In a field of vegetables, wildflowers are considered "weeds" and treated as such.

On the other hand, visit a cattle ranch here in the West and you have a good chance of seeing deer, elk, pronghorns, coyotes, black bears, rattlesnakes, gila monsters, roadrunners, Gambels quail...the list is too long to print here. Get lucky and you might see a mountain lion. I know a rancher who has seen a couple of jaguars on ranch land here in Arizona.

As for wildflowers, as I write this, I'm looking at a ranch out the window of my camper, and I can see giant saguaros, cholla cactus, paloverde and creosote bush. The Arizona poppies, brittlebush and desert marigolds were spectacular this spring, and the native grasses are providing plenty of forage for wild and domesticated animals alike.

An activist vegetarian responding to what I just wrote would point out that growing vegetables requires a lot less land than raising meat. This enables us to protect more land and allow it to return to nature so it can be home to even more wildlife and wildflowers. That would be an effective counterargument if it weren't true that raising meat on the land can benefit it ecologically even more than protecting it. How's that?

Scientists who've studied the matter tell us that grasslands and grazing animals evolved together and developed an interdependence similar to so many other mutually beneficial relationships in nature: bees and flowers, beavers and meadows, reef fish and coral. When cattle are managed so they act like natural grazers—for instance, when they

are kept in herds and moved across the landscape in response to moisture, seasons, and other natural factors—they create this same kind of interdependence.

That's why cattle have been successfully used to restore ecological health to land that has been damaged—by mining, by raising crops in ways that exhaust the land's fertility, and even by ill-advised "protection." For instance, in Arizona and Nevada, cattle have been used to return native vegetation to denuded mine sites and piles of mine waste on which other forms of reclamation had failed. How do they do it? By stomping in seeds and mulch and nourishing the mixture

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with their own natural fertilizer. Sheep and goats have been used to create firebreaks and remove nonnative plants at various locations from East to West, and sheep, goats, and cows have been used to revegetate land damaged by catastrophic wildfire.

I haven't heard of a single case of soybeans or broccoli being used to achieve any of that.

As for all that cow flatulence and belching the anti-meat folks tout as a cause of global warming, properly grazed grasslands have been shown to be so effective at sequestering carbon in green and growing grass that some ranchers have been able to supplement their income by marketing carbon offsets created by their naturally managed cattle. For me, green and growing is good, even if you don't believe in global warming.

Affirming the value of ranching to the environment, the state of Florida has come up with a plan to contract with ranchers to improve that state's rangelands' ability to absorb, clean, and sequester water. One of the aims of this program is to raise the water

level in the Everglades. That's right. Florida has contracted with cattle ranchers to "rewater" the Everglades.

On the other hand, when grazers are removed from the land, the ecological results can be harmful, even disastrous. In central California, when cattle grazing was removed from seasonal wetlands called vernal pools, the native plants and animals that live there, some of which are endangered, were displaced by nonnative weeds in as few as three years. When grazing was resumed, the rare plants and animals returned. Also in California, the threatened bay checkerspot butterfly has disappeared from lands where cattle grazing was eliminated—to protect the butterfly. On lands that continue to be grazed, the butterfly has managed to persist.

Because of this and similar instances, "cessation of grazing" has been recognized as one of the main threats to some of California's most sensitive ecosystems by the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition.

That organization includes The Nature Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, and Audubon, among others.

And, for those of you who have been reading my material in *RANGE* over the years, remember the native fish in Arizona (the spikedace) that was sustained by grazing for more than a century and exterminated in less than a decade by eliminating grazing? Or the Drake enclosure that's been protected for more than 60 years and is as bare as a parking lot while the grazed land right next to it is covered with native grasses?

So, the next time you chow down on a big juicy steak or leg of lamb, remember that you are enjoying the only food that can be raised within a diverse, native, open-space ecosystem in such a way that it restores, sustains, and even enhances that ecosystem. On second thought, maybe you ought to order two steaks. It's going to take a lot of cows to remedy all the ecological damage perpetrated by vegetarian environmentalists.

Don't forget to pat yourself on the back for doing your part to save the planet. And don't forget to tell all your environmentalist friends, too.

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