

THE GARDENERS OF EDEN

Rediscovering our importance to nature. By Dan Dagget

The assumption that the only way we can really heal the land is to protect it from impacts created by humans—to “leave it alone”—is so ingrained in our society’s awareness that most of us don’t even think of it as an assumption. We think of it as a matter of fact, like gravity. That’s why articles that deal with land issues treat the word “protecting” as having the same meaning as “healing” or “restoring.” It is why those articles never explain how protecting the land will heal it, because those two concepts are considered by so many to be identical. It is why we never hear about the ill effects of protection. Protection can’t have any ill effects if it is the same thing as restoring and healing.

Within our most widely accepted way of



thinking about the environment, the health of a piece of land or a collection of ecosystems is not a matter of its condition. It is purely a matter of how that land is managed. More specifically, it is purely a matter of the extent to which it is being left alone. What that means is, the Leave-It-Alone assumption has brought us to the absurdity that the actual condition of a piece of land is irrelevant to determining if it is healthy or not.

The environmental literature has been telling us as much for more than a century. In his book, "Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community," environmental philosopher Eric Katz calls the idea that humans can restore natural environments to a degree of health and function equal to

unmanaged habitat "the big lie." Katz describes it as arrogance.

Another environmental philosopher, Peter Elliot, writes that no matter how effective a human-created restoration is, it is a failure. That even if someone restores an area to exactly what it was before humans disturbed it, it is of less value than an otherwise identical area that has not been disturbed.

You don't need to look at the area in question in order to make that judgment. What could you see that would make it false?

Nothing.

The U Bar Ranch is a working cattle ranch in southwestern New Mexico managed by David Ogilvie. On the U Bar, Ogilvie has managed a riparian area along the Gila River

flycatcher population of the U Bar's riparian habitat to two nearby preserves that make up a comparable amount of similar habitat. In 2002, scientists counted 156 pairs of southwestern willow flycatchers on the U Bar. The two preserves had a combined total of zero.

When I mentioned this to a well-known environmental activist and author, he said he didn't view this as a success at all. He viewed it as equivalent to creating a garbage dump that attracted grizzly bears and calling that dump good bear habitat. (I assure you that the U Bar is no garbage dump.) In other words, to proponents of the Leave-It-Alone assumption, an area in which no endangered flycatchers choose to live is better habitat for that species, if that land is managed according



ABOVE: A boled oak in California. This is the landscape European settlers found, but the "natural" countryside of boled trees and clear, parklike understory is a human creation.

LEFT: New Mexico's U-Bar Ranch hosts the highest density of nesting songbirds in North America. They flourish in the riparian areas shared with grazing cattle.

to such a state of health that it is home to the largest known population of one endangered species, the southwestern willow flycatcher, and two threatened species, the common black hawk and the spike dace (a fish). It is inhabited by the highest density of nesting songbirds known to exist anywhere in North America.

As impressive as that is, the real measure of the environmental value of Ogilvie's management is best revealed by comparing the

to their prejudice, than an area that hosts the largest population anywhere.

From this it became laser clear that, in order to bring about the paradigm shift necessary to change the way most of us define land health from a matter of how the land is managed to a matter of land condition, it was going to take more than exceptional results, no matter how striking or how hopeful.

It was going to take something that would shake the Leave-It-Alone assumption to its



LEFT: Joe and Valer Austin recreate ancient rock dams to water their Arizona ranch. ABOVE: Cow pie, a sustainer of life. BELOW: Navajo goats reduce fire danger near Prescott, Ariz.

very core, something that would call into question the very bedrock on which it is based.

I wrote “The Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance to Nature” to expose at least some of what is wrong, mistaken, contradictory, falsely assumed, phony,

based on false information, etc., in the Leave-It-Alone assumption, which is the basis for modern environmentalism. The U Bar example is one of those contradictions—the idea that the health of an environment is not a matter of its condition (actual physical health), but of whether or not it is being pro-

tected. Ultimately, this is another matter of political correctness.

In “Gardeners” I show that the assumption that humans only do harm to the environment (which is why so many believe leaving the land alone always heals it) is just flat wrong. Humans do as much good for nature as species we consider keystones of nature—wolves, beavers, and bees. We serve as predators, as do wolves. In fact, we have been the most important predator worldwide for several thousand years. We slow and spread water creating meadows and wetlands, as do beavers. We help pollinate plants, spread their seeds, and fertilize them when they grow, as do bees and many other animals. Removing humans from the environment harms it rather than helps. Why is no one studying how and how much our removal from the land harms it?

With the help of a number of scientists and an article by Charles Mann, “1491” (now a book), I point out that before Columbus stumbled onto the Western Hemisphere, it wasn’t a pristine wilderness; it was a garden managed by humans. One scientist went so far as to call the Amazon rainforest the flagship of the “pristine wilderness” theory, a “cultural artifact” like a ruined city. This exposes as phony the most important evidence offered to prove that the Leave-It-Alone approach works—all wilderness that supposedly existed before there were enough humans to mess it up. Seems it was a garden, not a wilderness.

Mann writes, “According to Peter Stahl, an



Testing soil's ability to hold water on Gene Goven's North Dakota ranch are (left to right) author Dan Dagget, Goven, Dr. Jim Richardson of North Dakota State University and Jeff Printz of Natural Resources Conservation Service. Moving across the rangeland, Goven's cattle increase soil's water absorption, reduce greenhouse gases and reinvigorate the soil.

anthropologist at the State University of New York at Binghamton, 'lots' of botanists believe that 'what the eco-imagery would like to picture as a pristine, untouched Urwelt [primeval world] in fact has been managed by people for millennia.' What does that include in addition to the Amazon? The bison prairies of the Great Plains, the caribou tundra of the far north, the everglades of Florida, the steppes of Mongolia—all managed by humans hunting, herding, and burning.

These practices continue today. In North America, they are being applied to large areas of land by ranchers. For instance, Gene Goven in North Dakota started moving cattle across his rangeland the way bison once moved to evade Indian hunters. He discovered that by mimicking those ancient gardeners he enabled his land to absorb six times as much water as it did under his old management. With the help of Dr. Jim Richardson, a soil scientist from North Dakota State University, Goven discovered that, via this pulsed grazing, his cows were also literally pumping carbon out of the air and into the soil countering global warming and recreating the rich black soils that made the Great Plains one of the wonders of the world.

In Utah and Nevada, ranch-managing consultant Gregg Simonds is using satellites and sophisticated computer technology to facilitate the use of animals to create these benefits.

In southeastern Arizona, Joe and Valer Austin are creating tens of thousands of loosely piled rock dams in the gullies and creek beds of their ranch in the Chiricahua Mountains. The wetlands created by these primitive water slowers are providing homes for rare mud turtles, topminnows, and frogs, and keeping the Austin's ranch green longer each year.

The aim of putting these stories and many more like them in a book is to create an easy-to-use way of contradicting the widely held assumption that getting humans off the land automatically makes it better. "Gardeners of Eden" is made to be bookmarked, dog-eared, and highlighted so that when someone says, "This land is too fragile to use; we have to protect it so it will heal," you can turn to the appropriate page and say, "Read this." ■



After Dan Dagget completed his book about ranchers and environmentalists working together ("Beyond the Rangeland Conflict, Toward a West That Works"), he was so impressed by the achievements of some of the ranchers he had written about that he continued to follow their efforts—visiting, photographing, and monitoring. He began to travel around the West showing a collection of photos of the most notable of those ranchers' successes in healing the land and keeping it healthy to anybody who would take the time to look.

"In the great majority of cases the response to my presentation was positive," Dagget says. "Members of an activist vegetarian group wondered how they could support these good stewards without buying the steaks they produced. A member of another group, who saw my slide show and then visited some of those same projects firsthand, wrote back to the conference organizer: 'You not only changed my mind, you changed my life.'"

Dagget has done nearly 200 presentations of this sort, from Fargo, N.D., to Santa Bar-

bara, Calif., with overwhelmingly positive response.

"However, in the cases where my presentation could really have changed things, when my audience was the people who work for the groups that receive most of the billions we spend on environmental issues, I have been treated as if I were talking about something that they really didn't want to hear about. It was as if I was a relic—a member of some lost tribe that they wished would stay lost."

In one instance, Dagget knew that the person he was talking to had seen some of the same successes Dagget had seen, but it didn't seem to matter. "I'd like

to help," the man said, "but lately I've become more interested in what the land can become if we leave it alone. I believe that's the only way we can truly heal the damage we've caused." ■

You can buy a copy of Dan Dagget's "Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance to Nature" from RANGE for \$30 (\$24.95 plus \$5.05 shipping). Call 1-800-RANGE-4-U.

