

Don't Point the Finger, Point the Way

Opportunity for Grand Canyon Trust. Words and photos by Steven H. Rich.



ABOVE: Miles of ravaged forest, fierce floods, and erosion are the consequences of an “environmental rescue” which focuses on nonnative “green” folklore about fire effects. The reintroduction of fire into the ecosystem was supposed to reduce the risk of the catastrophic fire it caused. The reintroduction was carried out in severe drought under a Forest Service fire closure prohibiting public fire use. Only very deep-rooted resprouter plants survived. Millions of small animals and nestlings were killed. **BELOW:** A combination of select-cut logging and proper grazing have preserved the open, grassy character of this Kaibab Forest grazing allotment. Native American management created wildlife-filled ponderosa-pine savannahs at this altitude. This land does not require rescue from scientific grazing or timber harvest. Photo taken 30 yards from stockwater.



The political controversy about grazing should be over. Evidence already on the record shows that livestock managed with skill and care enhance the environment. Millions of well-managed acres at landscape scales prove that good ranches protect and improve plant and animal biodiversity, recover threatened and endangered species, produce more and cleaner water, and safeguard wildlife by defending their habitat.

The Grand Canyon Trust (GCT) now faces a historic choice. It is the grazing permittee on the 850,000 acres of the Arizona Strip’s Kaibab and Paria plateaus and House-rock Valley called the North Rim Ranch (ranging in rainfall from 5” to 30” and from desert to 9,300 feet mixed conifer mountain country). It’s put a lot of money into gathering baseline data. It’s hired an experienced, professional manager.

It can now choose to “play it safe” and run “as few livestock as possible,” as many of its PR announcements have stated. Taking this course of action would be defending a long-disproven “succession” theory that environmental groups continue to promote, but no serious scientist now respects. That’s the easy one where we “leave nature alone” and, magically and courteously, native organisms self-organize into the “potential natural community.” It would be biodiverse, healthy, resilient and beautiful. It’s the short-term “safe” choice politically and for fund-raising because it’s what almost everyone in this country has been taught to believe.

The trouble is, it’s not true.

The theory may seem to work at first. If you’re a green P.R. ecosystem rescuer, you start by claiming the ungrazed, drought-ravaged ranch has been “grazed down to nothing.” You just wait until you have a good moisture year or several—the grass and flowers will surely grow. You claim all the effects of cyclically increased precipitation as effects of your new order. Then the seedlings emerge and things look beautiful just like they did in wet years pre-“rescue.” You get the credit. Years pass, the brush and trees get thicker, fire areas and failing grasslands fill with cheat-grass, Russian thistle, etc. Soils crust, grow cryptogams, seal and become anaerobic. There are few seedlings now. Herbaceous plants lose vigor and palatability or die. Wildlife and biodiversity decrease.

No problem.

You send out pictures of mountain country flowers (which also grew just fine before you rescued them). Then you tell your donors and the public that the pinion/juniper zone

and rangeland down into the valleys were so badly damaged by livestock that they can never recover. That's the standard environmental-rescue playbook. The Park Service perfected it. Just project "naturalness." The trouble is, no matter how you spin it, it's really a dismal failure by any scientific standard. The failure could easily have been predicted by looking at national parks. Real scientists won't let you get away with it any more.

I've met several folks from Grand Canyon Trust, and I believe they genuinely care about nature. There are many reasons to hope they'll choose the more disciplined option and show humanity the powerful healing principled people can create by using livestock and their earning potential as a restoration tool for nature.

I'd like them to call Tommie Martin.

Tommie Martin (now a Gila County supervisor in Arizona) and her colleagues pioneered the idea of ranchers and environmentalists working with governments to heal federal, state and private lands. Some of her best successes were created in Somalia with Resource International consultant Eric Schwennesen. The land and people were devastated by war and an influx of refugees. She wept when she saw them. Tommie and Eric dodged factional AK-47 fire and the murderous wrath of Somali international aid contractors in order to facilitate tribal Somalis who modified ancient grazing practices to heal the land on an exponential curve. Together they soon reestablished enormous vistas of productive native plants unseen for generations, literally saving the lives of many starving children. Within a year, the entire native biome was represented and increasing.

These Somalis seized the chance to protect and care for their own resources. Groups of native herders drove out foreign charcoal burners who were destroying their forests. They grounded the helicopter of an Arab potentate who was stealing endangered wild asses and other wildlife for his private collection. They forced fish-stealing factory ships out of Somali waters. They did it on their own—no government involvement (there was no government). Not bad for a bunch of cow, goat, sheep, and camel raisers.

Rural people love their homelands. GCT leaders could tap this unused dynamism. They could hire locals and prove to rural people that GCT can help save their way of life for their kids if they'll share it with the rest of the public. They can prove they will listen and learn and quit trying to impose failed theories on ranchers and locals.



ABOVE: *Ungrazed since 1947, shrubs and toxic snakeweed predominate. Grasses and flowers are missing. The far side of the fence is 30 yards from the oldest stockwater in the area. Tall edible shrubs and dense young grassland were created by proper timing and frequency of grazing on the grazed side. BELOW:* *Grazed and ungrazed mountain meadow. The landowner on the right has "rescued" wet meadow by excluding livestock. Wildlife prefer the unrescued and flourishing grazed side where critical nutrient levels are five times higher.*



I'd like to have them call Dr. Sheldon Atwood of the B.E.H.A.V.E. program founded by Dr. Fred Provenza and sponsored by Utah State and several other western universities. Sheldon and Fred could help design livestock enterprises that would succeed financially and ecologically by restoring, among other things, "native" livestock's learned ability to utilize less palatable and

even semitoxic plants as part of their diets. That alone can make a huge difference.

In addition to Martin and Atwood, GCT should spend time with Dr. Jim Richardson, Dr. Paul Nyren (North Dakota State), master grazer Gene Goven, and Dr. Roy Roath (Colorado State) to talk about grazing, soil and hydrology and restoring springs and streams. Rob Grumbles, Dr. Dick Rice, Dr. Jim Sprin-



LEFT: Healing ground bared by drought, native seedlings grow in cow tracks. Repeated summer rains germinate millions of seeds to thicken grass stands and restore native shrub populations depleted generations ago. Observations of local long-rested land in comparison to grazed lands establish much higher seedling response on grazed areas. RIGHT: This dense growth of deer vetch is 20 yards from a livestock/wildlife water hole. This nutritious native legume is common on Kaibab Plateau grazing land. Vulnerable, edible legumes are indicators of health and proper management. If the land required “rescue,” such plants would be rare or missing.

kle and their colleagues from University of Arizona Extension have a huge fund of knowledge. So do Bob Sandberg and the local BLM and Forest Service folks. Nobody has more practical knowledge about bringing back valuable local shrubs like winterfat and four-wing saltbrush than Art Meen of the Fredonia NRCS, unless it's Dr. Jim Bowns of

in plant production, drought-induced plant mortality, etc. It's worth talking with people who've made it work and healed the land at the same time.

The Arizona Strip has suffered more damage from nonnative notions than from anything else. The first Euro-pioneers had grown up with year-round rainfall and swards of fine textured shortgrasses grazed to the nub for thousands of years. Overgrazing didn't seem like a problem to them. They adapted, but their out-of-place ideas cost them, and the coun-

areas. The forest looked chewed.

Tourists routinely saw an average 1,000 deer per trip while traveling the 44 miles from the Grand Canyon's North Rim to Jacob Lake Inn during the 1950s. Hunters could buy unlimited doe permits. Even spruce trees were browse-lined by hungry deer. Old-timers said the deer overpopulation years earlier was many times worse.

A fair evaluation of causes of environmental harm worldwide might conclude that only mindless industrial development is a greater danger to nature than someone from far away with a college degree, a deeply ingrained and somewhat unconscious imperialism in his mind, and a policy to implement. GCT is giving off signals that it may be wiser than that. We'll see.

Mark Twain claimed that only the finest people can go ahead and do what they intended to do in the first place after someone else tells them they should do it. I'm betting on the hope that Grand Canyon Trust has some very fine people. Maybe an environmental group will use its access to financial and volunteer resources and public goodwill to create on federal land the kind of wonderful results progressive ranchers have produced with similar land areas on private land—the kind of things that some motivated Somalis and others have created without governments.

A program of ranching using existing fences and herding to carefully control tim-

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Southern Utah State University. Retired rangers, BLM employees and cowmen and women with decades of knowledge about local climate and plant responses have much to offer GCT.

What a concept! Drop the “pristine nature's avenging angel” green mythology persona. Bring the resources and goodwill of the environmental movement to bear on actually solving the problems of humans living on lands that look like 70 percent of the earth's land surface.

There are real issues. Constant expenses like taxes, payrolls, mortgages, bank loans and vehicles don't blend easily with climates producing 2,000-percent-plus annual variability

try. Miles of bones from cattle that died of thirst while trying to leave drought-stricken land littered drive trails. The worst overgrazing was done by deer. Imitating the game parks of Europe, the feds killed all the predators and stopped the locals from hunting. This caused a massive explosion in deer numbers and severe erosion. When sanity in game management returned, the world went crazy, and local men went off to fight World War II. Deer numbers exploded again. Until careful logging from the 1960s to the 1990s allowed sunlight into the mixed-conifer zone and grew a lot of grass, flowers, berry plants and aspen trees, the summer range limited deer survival. They crowded into the meadow

ing, intensity and frequency of grazing could combine with appropriate restoration technologies and volunteer labor—which could work wonders, given good rain and snowfall. This vast land area could also be used as a grass bank where GCT could lease grazing to ranchers while its allotment rested from droughts, fires and treatments. There are many opportunities for neighborly cooperation leading to improved land health in the whole area. To take advantage of those opportunities, two challenges must be met:

(1) Ranchers must do everything possible to learn and continue to improve their stewardship; and

(2) An environmental movement which has raised millions fighting “livestock grazing” must shift its rhetoric to preserving habitats, diversity and rural cultures worldwide.

No objective sociologist could argue against the fact that urban elites are practicing what Wendell Berry defines as imperialism against rural cultures. The painful irony is that environmentalism has been used as the tip of the spear enforcing the imperialism while activists (who are not Native Americans and who all live and play on former native lands and eat and wear products from lands “withdrawn” from nature) saw this as just punishment for imperialism practiced by the pioneers against nature and Native Americans.

It’s time for everybody to wake up and grow up. News Flash: most Native Americans are now members of families with a ranch. They love that life and want more of it. They see it as natural. We could just drop the whole imperialism thing and learn to live with each other and the land harmoniously as the natural allies we should be. No one could do more meaningful work. No group has ever had a better chance to set a meaningful example of wild lands and human communities blessed by aware, sensitive, adapted inhabitants (as opposed to mere residents) than the Grand Canyon Trust has now. GCT can transform the environmental movement. It can use this motto: “Don’t point the finger—point the way.” ■

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ABOVE: A year after being “rescued” from logging and fire suppression, nothing grows. Officials who did not know the country thought propagating a fire in a 100-year artificial fire-suppression fuel load during a severe drought was “natural.” BELOW: Research has demonstrated that properly grazed lands have highest plant diversity. Overgrazing and horrendous overuse by deer as a result of nonnative policy copied from European game parks decades ago on the Kaibab Forest have been overcome by careful Forest Service/rancher cooperation for many decades.

