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News & Notes

A local grazing critic conducts his own study

When cows attack: As we reported last autumn ("Head 'Em Up, Move 'Em Out!," November 14, 2001), the practice of allowing cattle to graze East Bay Regional Park District land has been the subject of a major neighborhood beef. Supporters say grazing is a boon to local ranchers as well as a natural, pesticide-free fire-control method, since cows chow down on many invasive plant species considered fire risks. Critics say cows simply trample the greenery, muddy the streams, eat everything in sight, and may be helping displace endangered local species that need a shady, verdant habitat to survive, such as the red-legged frog.

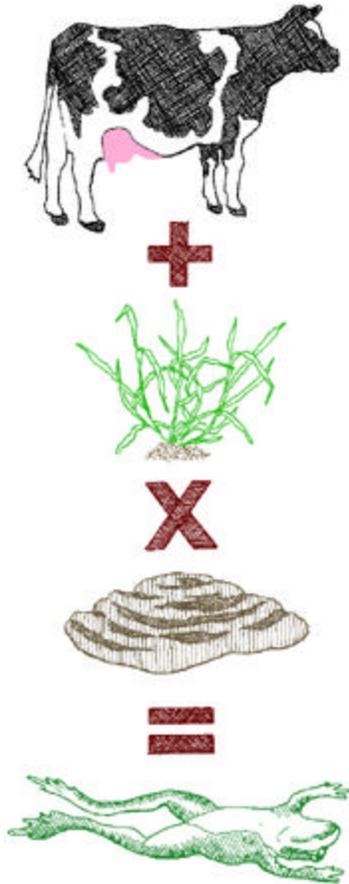
The Alameda Creek Alliance and the Berkeley office of the Center for Biological Diversity challenged the district's grazing practices in court four years ago, but lost after the judge forbade them from submitting expert testimony on grazing's impact from outside the East Bay. Unfortunately, there were no local studies. "[The judge] limited us to what was in the park district's record, and of course there was none because the park had never conducted a review," says Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Now both sides have gathered plenty of paperwork. Last year, the district produced its own study under the auspices of its Grazing Task Force, which recommended minor changes such as more fences in sensitive areas and fixing some trails. Last month, the Center for Biological Diversity issued a riposte, which included a list of more than 150 peer-reviewed scientific papers showing the impact of grazing in the Western United States. And a less scientific but more local study arrived at the same time thanks to the Friends of Sycamore Valley, better known as park-lover Greg Schneider. This one-man anti-grazing lobby released a hefty 366-page report showing what cows have done to his neighborhood park, Sycamore Valley Open Space.

Schneider's report includes some of the five thousand photos he has taken showing the park's loss of vegetation and the prevalence of cow pies. It also includes testimony from park users who have been harassed by testy bovines, including the sad tale of a Danville man who claims that a cow butted him so hard that he flew ten feet into the air and landed in a nearby pond. Schneider also contends that the district is skirting the law because, by his calculation, sixty-nine percent of the district's parks have not performed Environmental Impact Reviews to assess the effects of grazing.

While Schneider is not an ecologist or a biologist, he says it's easy to see that something's wrong, and that the changes he's witnessed in Sycamore Valley are easily extrapolated to the district's other parks. "They can talk all they want and say how it's not damaging, but it's pretty hard to dispute the photographs," he says of

his report. The Center for Biological Diversity is looking into another legal challenge, and Miller says that even though Schneider's study doesn't purport to be scientific, it will be invaluable in showing how grazing changed the face of Sycamore Valley. "He basically did the park district's EIR for them," says Miller.



The quadratic equation of East Bay grazing.