

USING A HAMMER TO SWAT MOSQUITOES

Livestock as Management "Tools"

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Some livestock grazing proponents maintain that livestock are important management "tools," and therefore commercial grazing should not be banned on public lands. A four-step process is offered to assess the "livestock as tool" argument in specific situations. More often than not, the cure is probably worse than the disease. However, if the final conclusion is that livestock grazing is the best way of dealing with a certain resource problem, a special permit can be granted while a general ban on livestock is in place.

In response to the growing call for the elimination of livestock production on public lands, those opposed to an outright ban seek various justifications for the continued acceptance of ranching on public lands. One frequently employed argument is that we need livestock as "tools" to improve or restore rangeland health. In other words, livestock--utilized properly--would allow the achievement of management goals such as the control of exotic weeds, reduction of fuel loading, or the creation of better wildlife habitat.

However, before you accept this argument, make sure that livestock are the right tool for your specific problem. A hammer can be used to swat mosquitoes on your face, but the collateral damage your face would suffer makes a hammer a dubious instrument for avoiding bug bites.

Most often, those who advocate using livestock as "tools" are more interested in preserving the cowboy lifestyle or the ranchers' privileged use of public resources than in searching for ways to restore ecological health. Nevertheless, there may be a few instances in which livestock grazing furthers a specific management goal. The key issues are whether alternatives to using livestock exist, and what the comparative costs--including and especially ecological costs--of the various options are. If a "solution," like using a hammer to get rid of mosquitoes, causes more damage than it prevents, then obviously a different solution should be found.

In any event, livestock need not be lost as management tools under a general ban on commercial livestock grazing of public lands. Exceptions could be made where livestock are used for specific, legitimate management purposes. For instance, the Wilderness Act precludes the use of motorized vehicles in designated wilderness yet allows motorized access in emergency situations, such as the rescue of injured people. If, after investigating all other alternatives, livestock grazing is the only option that works--a situation akin to an emergency in a wilderness area--then Congress could allow for these isolated exemptions.

Clearly, there must be a process for evaluating proposals for maintaining or introducing livestock as management "tools." Managers, activists, and the concerned public should consider the four-step procedure outlined below as a way to determine whether livestock are indeed the best tool for the job. The goal is to avoid wielding "hammers" when less dangerous remedies are available.

Step One

Ask, "*Is the 'problem' really a problem?*" Claims that livestock can solve a perceived problem need to be scrutinized closely. Often there is nothing broken that needs fixing, though livestock proponents may see it that way. For instance, in some places, land managers argue that we need to graze public lands to increase shrubs to produce more deer. If greater deer production were the goal and need, there might be some logic to this. However, one can easily refute the need for more deer--deer are among the most common and pervasive large animals in the United States. We do not need livestock to create more deer habitat--there's plenty already.

If, after careful evaluation, there appears to be a legitimate resource problem, go to step two.

Step Two

Ask, "*Are there negative 'side effects,' and what are they?*" Even if livestock can be shown to achieve some specific management objective, livestock grazing does not occur in a vacuum. There are consequences for putting livestock on a piece of ground, other than just the ones managers are trying to effect. In essence, the cure may be worse than the disease.

For example, some livestock proponents argue that concentrated, early grazing of cheatgrass by cattle can reduce the vigor of this exotic annual and also eliminate it as a fuel source; this tends to reduce the competitive advantage of cheatgrass over other plants on a site. Controlling cheatgrass is desirable from an ecosystem restoration perspective because cheatgrass has taken over millions of acres in the Great Basin region, it is highly flammable, and the frequent fires that can result when cheatgrass moves in may eventually drive the native perennials out.

Yet what are the other effects of attempting to control cheatgrass with livestock? A holistic analysis does not focus on a single species. Livestock production has many impacts. For instance, since livestock hooves disturb soils, and the animals themselves are often vectors for the distribution of exotic plant seeds, the use of livestock to control one species like cheatgrass may increase the overall number of weedy species on the site. In addition, heavy grazing-if not done very carefully-can also damage native perennial grasses. Thus, while it may reduce the vigor of cheatgrass, livestock grazing can also hurt the very grasses that land managers are trying to conserve.

In drought years, cheatgrass, an annual, doesn't sprout. When cattle are turned out during such dry periods, the only thing left for them to consume are the native grasses, thus speeding the loss of native perennials on the site. (Again, this points out the problem of commercial use. Most ranchers will simply not volunteer to remove their cattle from an allotment, especially in a drought year, when other forage options are limited, and most managers are loathe to buck the desires of the politically well-connected livestock industry.)

Whether they are "tools" or not, cows still compact soils, reducing water infiltration. They still destroy biological crusts. Cows compete for forage with native species. Predators may still be persecuted and killed. Livestock can still transmit disease to wildlife. Range developments and fences may still be needed.

Another problem is that most research purporting to demonstrate how livestock can be useful for controlling weeds, and so forth, is conducted under very strict conditions--the kinds of conditions not typical of a commercial livestock operation, and perhaps not even achievable on most public rangelands. The fact that livestock grazing may successfully accomplish a particular end under highly controlled and experimental conditions does not lend support to the argument for the continuation of commercial livestock operations on public lands.

Step Three

Ask, "*Are there alternative methods for achieving the same goal?*" Unless a legitimate attempt has been made to seek alternatives to livestock, it is likely the "livestock as tool" argument is a convenient excuse for keeping the status quo. When other options are seriously explored, especially those that allow natural processes to be reinstated or revitalized, livestock grazing may become a much less attractive management tool.

For example, some livestock grazing advocates assert that livestock are needed to "control" smooth brome on the plains. But prescribed fire in the spring and early summer can achieve the same goal, and in most places, fire has fewer ecological liabilities than livestock. In some instances, as in the use of prescribed fire, the cost of these alternative tools may appear marginally higher than the use of livestock-but not if you consider all the negatives associated with livestock grazing.

Step Four

If livestock are the best tool for a particular situation, seek special, limited permission for their use. If, after considering all the alternatives for solving a problem and after considering all the ecological costs of various solutions, livestock grazing comes out as the only viable option, a special use permit can be granted for the particular sites and situations that have been evaluated. Meanwhile, a general ban on commercial livestock production would remain in place.