

Cattle Controversy: Why Livestock Doesn't Belong in Wilderness

By Clare Mack

"Up through the woods the hoofed locusts streamed beneath a cloud of brown dust."

— John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

It's evening in the High Uintas Wilderness in northeastern Utah. Alpenglow dances, rose and purple, over granite peaks as shadows extend across the valley. Glacially carved lakes feed into high alpine rivers that form the headwaters of Utah's major rivers. Thick forests of spruce, fir, and lodgepole pine blanket the hillsides; above treeline, tundra plant communities cling to high alpine ridges. You crest a slope, expecting to encounter elk, mule deer, moose, or any of Utah's multitude of other native species, only to encounter a herd of domestic sheep. In this wild refuge, the appearance of private livestock is jarring, and it diminishes your "wild" wilderness experience. Those visitors who haven't encountered a cow or domestic sheep in wilderness may not be aware that livestock are authorized to graze almost a quarter of the 52 million acres of protected wilderness in the lower

otherwise-undomesticated wilderness areas for over half a century.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 mandates the preservation of certain tracts of undeveloped federal land at the most protective level of public land administration—that is, "protected and managed so as to preserve [their] natural conditions."

Yet at the passage of the Act, Congress allowed certain preexisting, non-conforming activities to continue under some circumstances. Grazing constitutes one of the more troublesome of these activities due to its damaging effect on wilderness lands and wilderness character.



Grazing in the Mojave Wilderness, California. George Wuerthner

The history of grazing in wilderness is a story of compromise. Livestock grazing

was a primary use of federal public lands from 1930 to 1960, but public use and public opinion began to change in the mid-1960s, leading to the passage of numerous environmental statutes, including the Wilderness Act, and the application of a conservation ethos to the management of public lands. The first draft of the wilderness bill, introduced to Congress in 1956, explicitly forbade grazing in wilderness, but grazing language was added in subsequent drafts of the bill to placate the politically powerful livestock industry in the American West.

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48 states. Due to grazing language in the Wilderness Act and its 1980s-era corollary, the Congressional Grazing Guidelines, grazing has been occurring

Congress stipulated that, subject to reasonable regulation, livestock grazing “shall be allowed to continue” in those wilderness areas where grazing was established at the time of wilderness designation. This provision is an exception to the general premise of the Act, which directs agencies to manage wilderness areas to preserve their wilderness character and natural conditions.

Grazing in wilderness was effectively expanded by the 1980 Congressional Grazing Guidelines, which explicitly prohibit curtailing grazing solely because an area is designated wilderness. They also permit the perpetuation of existing facilities (including fences, line cabins, stock tanks, stock pond dams, and more), and in some cases the construction of new facilities, as well as the use of motorized equipment to facilitate grazing operations “where practical alternatives do not exist.” Since their adoption, the Grazing Guidelines have been loosely interpreted by land management agencies, leading to a growing trend of allowing vehicle use for tending cattle and sheep, fixing fences, distributing salt, and “riding the range.” The incompatible activities allowed in wilderness by the Grazing Guidelines—vehicles, motorized equipment, development—are only a few of many chisels that persistently chip away at wilderness values in the name of grazing.

Grazing will always be incompatible with wilderness, and with the purpose of the Wilderness Act. Livestock displace and imperil wildlife, crush sensitive riparian zones, defecate in streams, damage soils, and wreak havoc on fragile ecosystems. They can turn once-rich topsoil to dust, flatten archeological sites, and spread disease to native species. For instance, back in the High Uintas, as that domestic sheep herd grazes on the forage native species need to survive, it also spreads disease and parasites to bighorn sheep. The infected bighorn sheep are then killed by land managers eager to protect remaining uninfected bighorns.

Livestock actively graze about 10 million acres of the 52.4 million acres of wilderness in the lower 48 states. Livestock grazing occurs in over 330 wilderness areas and in all of the 11 western states. Most of the grazing in wilderness takes place in arid or semiarid climates, areas particularly unsuited to grazing. In fact, although grazing diminishes a huge number of wildernesses in the West, wilderness grazing only contributes one-tenth of a percent of all forage fed to livestock in the United States, largely because wilderness lands tend to be the least

suited for livestock grazing due to their ruggedness or inaccessibility. And yet, livestock grazing exponentially diminishes an area’s “untrammelled” wilderness character and the opportunity to experience the unique benefits that authentic wilderness provides.

Wilderness Watch is committed to fighting the threats that livestock grazing pose to wilderness, and in our recent trip to Washington, D.C., we urged Congressional staff and members to take steps to end grazing in wilderness. There are many possible avenues Congress could take to end grazing in wilderness, but the most effective and equitable approach would be to automatically permanently

retire a wilderness grazing permit that is waived back to a land management agency by a permittee. We also asked Congress to close the nearly 3 million acres of unassigned grazing permits that currently exist in wilderness. Those acres—called grazing “allotments”—are vacant now, but they could be reopened to grazing in

the future, unless Congress or the agencies permanently close them.

Regarding the Congressional Grazing Guidelines, Wilderness Watch advocates that Congress amend the Guidelines to clarify that exceptions in the name of grazing should be made sparingly, and always with the spirit of the Wilderness Act in mind. Grazing is inherently contrary to the concept of wilderness. Removing livestock grazing from wilderness is essential to protecting areas “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man” and ensuring that the “primeval character” of these special spaces is safeguarded.

Now imagine hiking underneath those same peaks in the High Uintas in five years, and you stumble upon a herd of wild bighorn, with no sign of livestock grazing anywhere. How much wilder is your experience in the wilderness? And how much more is wildlife thriving there? Set your pack down and settle in, friend. This untamed vista is yours. The protection of ruggedness, of wild sheep and wilder landscapes, is why Wilderness Watch fights everyday to protect our wilderness areas.

To read WW’s detailed policy paper on grazing in wilderness, visit our website or contact the office for a copy.



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