Comments on the Protection of an Endangered Species

PATRICK C. JOBES

Throughout much of the Rocky Mountain West, an endangered species, the rancher, struggles for his survival. Struggle for survival is hardly new to ranchers. They have endured long, cold winters, dry summers, predators, and declining wool and beef markets. These elements have taken their toll but in many pockets of the Rocky Mountain West, ranchers continue to occupy essentially the same niche as they have since World War II or, for that matter, since the turn of the century. Their means of adaptation have been slightly modified. The speed and power of their geographic mobility have increased, their dens have become plusher, their operations in their habitat have increased in scale but their niche still remains much as it has been for nearly a century.

A transplanted species that was largely responsible for the near extinction of indigenous species occupying the territory prior to their invasion, the rancher appeared to be peculiarly well adapted to its habitat. However, recent threats have begun to threaten many of the species. In particular, usually relatively isolated, locales competition between ranchers and other human species has caused some alarm to environmentalists and to administrators responsible for the protection of this and other species. The questions which these concerned persons most confront are first, whether it is possible for this species to survive these threats and second, whether the costs of ensuring survival can be justified in terms of the considerable costs which may be expended for their preservation.

Recent research in the natural habitat has led to several observations and generalizations. In lieu of the potential extinction of the species such recording is essential for knowledge available to future generations. Moreover, it is hoped that such observations will prove of scientific merit for related research.

The Rocky Mountain rancher does not appear to have any especially advantageous biological characteristics which can account for adaptation to its environment. His size and intelligence appear to be similar to other sub-species of humans. His color is disproportionately light, although early population movements among this light-skinned variety probably were more of a function of his historical idiosyncracies than of peculiar adaptive advantages among this sub-species. His current foliage, which shows little seasonal variation, appears to have evolved from earlier adaptive characteristics which have become dysfunctional elsewhere. Among these characteristics are pointed toed feet elevated at the heel, stove-piped, frequently bowed legs, and broad brimmed heads. So common are these characteristics that the rancher might become known as the broad-brimmed, pointed-toed sub-species.

Although the appearance of most Rocky Mountain ranchers is well defined, their activities can be differentiated. Predominantly specializing in the domination of more submissive animal varieties, many ranchers also participate in other subsistence activities. Many have been observed altering natural waterways, gathering and storing feed for the winter through a variety of mechanisms. They further have been observed spending inordinate amounts of time in brief migrations in four wheeled vehicles with open boxes.

Ranchers had appeared to be successfully adapted to their environment until recent years. Their domination of the environment and competing sub-species indicated that their adaptive characteristics of rugged individualism, tight lippedness, and geographic isolation,

might well permanently sustain them. However, these characteristics, so adaptive in earlier periods appear dysfunctional against new varieties of competition. Recent competitive sub-species with different adaptive skills appear likely successors to ranchers where such new skills are effectively used. These new skills, rugged collectivism, oral effusiveness and massive proximics, make their intentions for new occupation for the area appear likely. Thus, vestigial rancher characteristics so adaptive for the ranchers during the earlier period of stable agricultural land use appear to be obsolete for preventing conversion of land to other uses. In fact, these obsolete characteristics seem to guarantee that new and different successors will replace the ranchers, who, being incapable of organization or communication even for the purposes of the survival within their niche, are easy foes.

During recent years all sub-species have been subject to severe competition, in light of the environmental perils mentioned earlier, with other species. In particular, the sub-divider and the consolidator (agribusiness) have successfully preyed upon or succeeded ranchers of most sub-species. This succession alone deserves discussion elsewhere. However, a new competitor, the energy developer, recently has threatened the habitat of many ranchers. This competition and its probable impacts pose the greatest threat yet experienced by the rancher.

Many readers may object to the foregoing discussion because of its deliberate depersonalization of rural ranch society. At issue, though, is whether the society should be preserved and, if it should be, then how it should be done. The characteristics of rural ranch society make its continued existence unlikely in areas where land values exceed the potential agricultural profit from the land. Massive mining, recreational development, and residential development constitute competition to the agricultural use of land and, consequently, to the life style that emerged from such use. The impersonal discussion merely suggests that persons in agriculture in relatively natural settings have a vulnerability to imposed change from other uses. The analogy between rural ranch society and endangered animal species is ironic, though, because in many cases the animals enjoy greater protection than do the humans. Humans are felt to be capable of readapting to their altered environments as indeed they are. Even the ranchers most adamantly opposed to development will not die from development. But, their way of life will cease to exist as they lose in the competition for their land.

Federal and state governments are well aware of the issues involved in displacing persons in order to permit new uses of the land. Most displacement occurs with acquiescence, if not jubilation, toward proposed developments. Most ranchers appear to be strongly opposed to the changes affecting local lands and their lives. In spite of their opposition to such changes most legal arguments regarding development center around the probabilities of land reclamation, air and water pollution and similar effects on the physical environment. Somehow this emphasis of placing the physical environment in a more primary position than the social environment seems topsy-turvy. The way of life and the feelings of persons are the genuinely unique characteristics of humans and these are the characteristics which have emerged as most negotiable or ignored when decisions on land use are made. After all, among humans it is the manner in which life takes place rather than mere survival which distinguishes from other species. Certainly the variety of life styles deserves protection as much as do the lives of lesser species.

The author is associate professor, Department of Sociology, Montana State University, Bozeman.

Manuscript received January 15, 1979.