



Thad Box

Revisiting *The Western Range Revisited*

South of Page, Arizona, US Highway 89 runs parallel to Echo Cliffs, spectacular red sandstone rising hundreds of feet above the desert floor. Washes, dry ephemeral streams, wind through a narrow strip of land, only a mile or so wide, between the highway and the bluffs. To the north and west the Vermillion Cliffs echo their own symphony of color.

I first saw that country in 1960, the year after we moved to Utah. I thought it the most beautiful and vacant country I would ever see. Back then a small flock of sheep with a herder and a couple of dogs only occasionally appeared in desert rangeland. A few widely scattered farms, as transient as water in the dry streams, seemed guarded only by scarecrows.

Human intrusion into habitat of rabbits, rattlesnakes, kangaroo mice, and Gila monsters was minimal. A few hogans and one stone building were at a place called The Gap. But the rest of the area was occupied by a transhumant, shifting migration, similar to that used by desert people the world over for millennia.

I visited that area in March of this year. Double-wide trailers and prefabricated houses scatter across the landscape, each connected to the highway by dusty ruts worn by pickups. The Gap is now a village with dozens of dwellings. People sell tourist artifacts from temporary stalls erected where cars pull off the highway.

I saw few sheep, more horses—some standing in the barren landscape, ribs showing through dust-covered skin. Other horses ate imported hay in manufactured-panel pens. The occasional farm that could be identified was not readied for spring planting. Manufactured houses surrounded by cars had replaced scarecrows as guardians of would-be farms.

In less than half a century a beautiful desert used through shifting agriculture of proud nomads became a wannabe culture depending on imports from a global economy. But the change did not inflict only people native to the desert. In that same time period, opportunist people from more humid regions changed the face of the desert and permanently altered both economic and ecological conditions.

Two decades ago about a hundred miles northwest of Echo Cliffs, rangelands around St. George, Utah, became the site of endangered species controversies. Experts studied, and tried to control, the adverse effects of recreation, grazing, and off-road vehicles on habitat of the desert tortoise. As various interest groups debated land uses, huge yellow machines, bought with borrowed money and driven by immigrants, rearranged the landscape.

Hillsides were leveled and desert washes filled. Houses sprouted like wildflowers on man-made streets. Pipes brought water from afar. Vegetation in the new landscape was exotic plants transplanted from nurseries. Much of the desert tortoise habitat experts argued over is now covered in asphalt and concrete.

Las Vegas, Nevada, and Phoenix, Arizona, spread like wildfire over the deserts, setting records for house construction and population growth. They were not unique. Other cities

in the American arid zone—El Paso, Tucson, Salt Lake City, Boise, Reno—grew faster than average. Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Logan, Utah, became metropolitan areas. Creative schemes to acquire and import water were financed by borrowing against a promise of riches in cities, towns, and hamlets.

Housing developments were fueled by a euphoric belief that fortunes were to be made. Houses always increased in value, didn't they? A taxi driver in a Chicago suburb who had no steady job or credit history could, and did, purchase three houses. An industry fueled by greed thrived on sub-prime mortgages—mortgages that lenders knew borrowers could not pay. These were bundled, split into derivatives, and insured with another creation of inventive minds, credit default swaps. Then the bubble burst.

Now desert cities set new records for bankruptcies and home foreclosures. Water schemes, mostly financed by public debt, have yet to be built. A weakening economy cannot pay off the debt. Houses sit vacant. Officials scramble to attract new jobs. The wounded land must heal in its new altered state.

The desert tortoise and the American cowboy flourish mostly on screens of IMAX theaters and interactive programs on play stations. Their habitat is polluted by houses purchased with no money down and recreational vehicles charged on credit cards. Areas between towns burn more often. Exotic plants revegetate the barren landscapes.

America's desert rangelands are overstocked, not with livestock, but with houses and financial schemes that alter the landscape in perpetuity.

Ten years ago Kendall Johnson asked me to review Professor Debra Donahue's new book, *The Western Range Revisited—Removing Livestock From Public Lands to Conserve Native Biodiversity*. The book caused angst in land care professions, and Kendall wanted to use it and my review as bases for discussion on how SRM should change itself.

I found it a disturbingly good book, one that should be read by every range manager. It raised important questions about how we respond to our published objectives—objectives that speak of taking care of soil, plants, and animals. And of understanding principles of ecosystems, economics, management, research, human values, social benefits, and professional development.

Neither livestock grazing, nor any other use, is mentioned in our objectives. Donahue's book disturbed us because it made us look at ourselves. Her criticism of the range profession was valid because we had defended a use that was dear to our hearts rather than protect land we had pledged to serve.

I concluded my review by writing, "This book will make us think. It can provide a turning point in our profession. So, Professor Debra L. Donahue, this old professor has never been more proud of a student. Although many range managers will disagree with you, you have challenged the whole profession to look at itself critically. This may not have been your primary goal, but it may be one of your major contributions. Thank you."

But have we learned?

This spring I retreated to the desert and thought. One sunny day I stood on a red rock above Lee's Ferry on the Colorado River. I thought about Deb's book. I remembered her passionate plea for using arid lands to conserve native biodiversity. I thought about some range people's equally passionate rejection of her opinions. As we who love the land fought among ourselves, those who see land as an investment commodity closed out options before our very eyes.

I had just traveled through thousands of acres of the most beautiful arid lands on the planet. We humans only recently appeared in environments where evolution in past millennia hid secrets in rocks, cliffs, gorges. Petroglyphs and pictographs bear testimony that people lived and died here before us.

In our brief instant on this stage, most land—that called "private"—is managed by individuals who think they own it. The Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, US Forest Service, several Native American tribes, two states, and several municipalities have custodial care of public lands.

I saw few range livestock on either private or public land. Native biodiversity has been devastated by human greed. Arguments of whether the range should be grazed by livestock or serve as a reserve have been trumped by wants of new occupants—some born here, others recent immigrants.

This issue of *Rangelands* summarizes the results of a workshop held last December on wildfires and invasive plants in America's arid regions. Good on them. Our profession was formed to understand overgrazing and mitigate the damage by livestock. But it's time we move beyond mitigation and seek sustainability.

I thought *The Western Range Revisited* would stimulate us to define our role as transient land lovers in a one-community world where information resides only a Google away. I thought the time had come for us transients, whether conservation lawyers or range ecologists or real estate developers, to turn our actions to sustainability rather than consumption. But that time awaits us.

I looked down as river runners launched their raft into the blue-green stream. Silt that made the river red when John Wesley Powell floated down it now settles in a lake behind Glen Canyon Dam—a lake that bears Powell's name. I scanned the skies looking for California condors that humans crowded from their native state. New pen-raised birds were released this spring to supplement those moved to the Vermillion Cliffs a few years back. Newcomers wouldn't be flying around for me to see. They, like speculators after a fast buck, have to be taught to search the barren landscape for carrion put there by their handlers.

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