

Big Game Influences on Ranch Sustainability

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When we ask how big game can influence ranch sustainability, we should also ask how ranch sustainability influences big game. Concerns usually revolve around how wildlife and livestock compete while we ignore the positive influences wildlife and livestock have on each other.

The wildlife habitat provided by ranches is often underrated by those who would like to attack the ranching industry. The contribution of ranches to wildlife is significant however. Mineral and supplemental food put out for cattle is often used by wildlife. In many parts of the west, water tanks, constructed and maintained for livestock, allow big game and other wildlife to use areas that would otherwise be used only during wet times of the year. Predator control to protect livestock also reduces predation on deer, antelope, and other wild prey animals.

In outlying areas, the human activities associated with ranching often deters potential poachers who are more comfortable when others are not around. Studies have been conducted which show areas that are property grazed provide more palatable and nutritious forage than areas that are ungrazed and left to grow into old, matted, and decadent clumps of vegetation, shading out young grasses and forbs.

The most significant manner in which sustainable ranches positively impact wildlife is by providing wildlife space to live. If ranches fail, the land may be sold and possibly developed, or in some way put into a form less compatible to wildlife needs. This becomes more critical when we realize most of the private land in the west has been retained in private ownership because it was the most productive land and usually in the lower elevations near water. In arid parts of the west this is land that is critical during drought times. In the northern reaches this is land which is critical winter habitat. We only have to look at the situation around Jackson, Wyoming to see the negative impact development can have on big game populations.

But what about big game influencing ranch sustainability? Can a wild animal really have that much impact? Only when the ranchers hands are tied. Since their beginnings ranchers have had to cope with natural elements affecting ranches. Fences damaged due to migrating big game herds had to be repaired. Predator losses due to coyotes, wolves, or grizzly bears had to be controlled. Grass fires, floods, dust storms, drought, and severe winters were all aspects of ranching that had to be dealt with. But ranchers were able to survive because they could look at the situation, weigh the costs and benefits, and decide on the best avenue to address the problem.

This is not the situation today. Ranchers now must deal with a public that demands to be involved in numerous issues affecting rangeland management. Ranchers must now deal with a government bureaucracy that bows to a public sentiment driven more by emotionalism than by scientific fact. They must now deal with laws, regulations, and policies dictated by legislators and lobbyists who have no understanding of what it takes to successfully run a ranch. Ranchers must today deal with the forces of special interest

groups whose underlying goal is to stop all grazing and whose powerful tools are federal acts, the legal system, an environmentally receptive media, and a general public easily swayed by emotional rhetoric.

The situation however is not as bleak as it may sound. Credible special interest groups, those sincerely interested in proper natural resource management, are growing and being utilized as input sources by land managers seeking multi-interest involvement in land management decisions. Ecosystem management, a relatively new strategy for making resource management decisions, is gaining support across the west. When properly applied, ecosystem management requires consideration of all parts of the system when making decisions. All parts include humans, economy, tradition, and the natural parts of the system.

Although there is potential for big game and other wildlife to influence ranch sustainability in a negative way, there are also many ways wildlife can positively influence ranch sustainability. Many states now have programs to provide economic incentives to ranchers who implement practices benefiting wildlife. Some of these programs are tied to providing access for hunters, but in many cases the hunters are needed to keep big game at population levels compatible with their habitat. Some state wildlife agencies are recognizing the need to help ranchers control hunters and have implemental permit systems to limit hunter numbers. Other states are providing hunting permits to ranchers who provide big game habitat, or depredation permits to help alleviate problems outside hunting seasons.

In Montana, habitat acquisition dollars are being stretched by purchasing conservation easements from ranchers to ensure the land is never developed, but retains its agricultural potential while providing big game habitat. In some areas, wildlife enterprises allow ranchers to increase their income through photo safaris, hunting access, and other recreational opportunities. New Mexico, Colorado, and California have even made ranchers into wildlife managers by encouraging them to develop wildlife management plans, which upon approval of the state game agency, allow timing of big game seasons to maximize recreational quality. Wyoming and Idaho pay for wildlife depredations.

Overall the recognition by state game agencies of the contribution of ranchers to big game has resulted in policies that may reverse the net negative impact wildlife has on ranching operations. Hopefully, as the public becomes more educated to the contribution of ranchers, the demands of those with subordinate agendas will be questioned. If the real concern is for big game and other wildlife, the sustainability of ranches will be recognized as the basis for sustainability of wildlife.
