

Meeting the Challenge

Environmentalism and ranching-maybe no compromises, just solutions.

It takes something a little bit uncompromising in a person to make it as a rancher, cowboy, or a farmer, or in any occupation that puts a person in close contact with the land and with hard physical work. It takes some gumption, and it takes, or makes, a person who is ready to stick up for himself when his ways or his livelihood are challenged, whether that challenge comes from nature or from other human beings.

Maybe that's why this business of answering the onslaught of the "green lobby" has been so frustrating for the rural element. If being uncompromising has been cowfolks' strength, it has been their Achilles' heel, too. Putting up a tough, resistant front only goes so far in defending one's livelihood and lifestyle when the opposition has more people, money, and votes. There comes a point where taking the hard line-or trying to ignore or wait out the conflict-means setting oneself up for a bigger loss.

Of course, some might say here that to portray the differences between these two factions as oppositional is to suggest that ranchers are anti-environment, or that they are simply reactionaries. Neither is true. What is true, however, is that the ranching industry on the whole has seen its operations and its ways come under attack by those who claim to be spokespeople for the environment. Whether or not the attackers are in the right is not the question here. Survival is.

In the West, where public land usage is such an important issue, ranchers have come most heavily under fire. Here, where the efforts to enlist public sympathies have been most pivotal, the momentum has not been on the side of the rural element.

As with so many other industries that are composed of small, family-run, essentially "cottage" enterprises, ranching lacks the organizational wherewithal to wage a battle of public opinion or lobbying or court skirmishes. The opposition, in the anti-ranching ranks, is organized. These nonprofit, tax exempt, grant-funded and donor-funded entities live to crusade.

Thus, to fight with them is to play to their strength.

This kind of situation calls for different tactics. Or for no tactics at all, but rather a move that pre-empts the whole issue by making big strides toward alleviating it.

In our article "Welcome to the New Ranch" (pp. 46-48), writer John Brown delves into the quiet revolution that is going on in New Mexico under the leadership of an unlikely alliance of one rancher and two environmentalists. They call their organization the Quivira Coalition.

In their statement of purpose, these three wrote that they were "entering the grazing battlefield not to referee the contest of wills between ranchers and environmentalists, or to mediate a truce, or even to find common ground among combatants. Instead, we propose to lead people to another playing

field altogether. We believe that an alternative exists that allows the land to heal, and perhaps thrive, while enabling ranchers to make a living."

Brown explores those alternatives in greater depth in his article. For our purposes here, suffice it to say that the Quivira methods take stewardship to a new and higher level. They nudge the ranching industry toward a more pro-active, constructivist approach that sets the issue aside even as it takes steps to remedy it. Taking as a starting point the public's slowly dawning recognition that well-managed grazing-whether of private or public lands-is a beneficial land management tool, the Quivira braintrust demonstrates how new grazing methods, and other range management efforts, can profit the rancher as well.

We've explored this kind of territory before, as we did a few years ago in our story on Malpai

Borderlands Group, headed by Arizona rancher Warner Glenn. Glenn's thrust was to engage the other side in a positivist manner, rather than to confront them (July/Aug. 1995). He took the radical approach of involving environmentalist groups, including the Nature Conservancy, in his efforts. With Quivira, we see the same strategy. Rancher Jim Winder joined the Sierra Club to learn about that organization from the inside.

Maybe there is hope in this approach where other agricultural issues, or western lifestyle issue, are concerned. In our last

article "The Oldest Profession," writer Eric Grant showed how the trend of gentrification, or hobby ranching, is taking productive land out of rancher's hands, even as the urban exodus into the hinterlands causes property and inheritance taxes to soar. Another battleground is the whole business of the animal rightists' outcry against beef producers and the other meat industries.

And then there is the sport of rodeo, which is under fire from the most extreme of the animal rights groups. It would be helpful if more ranchers or anyone-could lend support to rodeo, because it seems that the rodeo world is beset by radicals who would otherwise be haranguing ranchers. And who just might, if they are successful in affecting rodeo. In this sense, rodeo might be the front lines of the whole urban/rural conflict in general.

Incidentally, one way to lend support to rodeo is to join Friends of Rodeo, a group that recently opened a website at www.FriendofRodeo.com. They can also be reached at 209-726-0261.

It may be that, at bottom, all these conflicts have their basis in a common root, a broader social phenomenon that is also being felt in religion, education, law, morals, and manners.

The culture wars are fought on every level. In the end, though, our best hope is not to fight but to rise above.

-JFM



Ranchers at a Quivira Coalition workshop.