

Ranchers Make Contributions, but Subsidies Aren't Necessary LTE *Sierra Vista Herald* (July 2, 1989)

I am sorry Mr. Wilbourn was so upset (letters to the Editor, June 20th) with my comments on the Arizona Cattlegrowers Association proposal to pay ranchers for wildlife use of the public lands where cattle ranchers hold grazing rights.

Perhaps he would have been less upset if there had been room in the Herald/Review article (May 26) to permit some of my other comments. For instance, I noted to the reporter that there are many well-run, environmentally sound working ranches in eastern and southeastern Arizona, some where pioneer families have maintained well-balanced livestock operations in harmony with the land for many generations. Despite my personal distaste for the blood and brutality of the meat industry, I have high personal and professional respect for the men and women who have lived their lives according to the principles demanded by such a hard, down-to-earth lifestyle.

As conservation chairman of the Sierra Club in Arizona, I have stated repeatedly that the greatest threat to Arizona environment is not the ranchers and farmers and other outdoorsmen, but the urban, plastic, stucco-and-pavement mentality that has spawned the monstrosities of Phoenix and Tucson and threatens to engulf this whole desert in mindless consumerism, quick-buck development and ecological insanities like nuclear power plants and the Central Arizona Project.

But it must also be noted that not all ranchers are like the Wilbourns. Many are far more involved with real estate speculation than with cows and forage. Some are dedicated to the destruction of the public wildlife resource, including bears (e.g., at Klondyke), jaguars (Dos Cabezas) and eagles (Elfrida). And it must also be noted that the livestock industry, more than any other factor, is responsible for the deterioration of some of the world's finest rangelands into the barren, eroded wastelands that characterize so much of the landscape today — and especially those public rangelands that have been leased to private ranchers.

Mr. Wilbourn objects, as well he should, to the term “welfare ranching,” but it cannot be denied that leasing of public lands at only about a third of their market value constitutes a taxpayer subsidy of the cattle industry. And since that industry contributes such a small percentage to the total economy (far less, for instance, than recreation on public lands), the subsidy can hardly be said to be for any other purpose than to satisfy the public's nostalgia for the romantic cowboy lifestyle.

As for the fences and water development built by the rancher, they are mostly of use to the industry and more of a nuisance than otherwise for the rest of the public. When compared to the environmental and aesthetic damage caused by cattle, they certainly cannot be counted as a public benefit. In most instances, we would be as well or better off without them.

I cannot say that I agree with the constant efforts of game and fish departments to increase the size of big game herds so they can be shot by urban “sportsmen” out for the big weekend thrill — that is just another red meat industry and can unbalance the range ecology as surely as

overgrazing by cattle. But that is not the issue here. The question brought up by the Cattlegrowers' proposal is whether the taxpayer should pay private ranchers for public forage eaten on public rangelands by publicly-owned wildlife. In general, I think the answer of the public to that question is going to be "No", especially when the rancher already pays so much less than fair market value for the privilege to share the public range. If there is a conflict between cows and wildlife on the public lands, the public in general is going to opt for the elk and deer.

Mr. Wilbourn and I will, of course, never see eye to eye on these matters; but if he will agree not to ask for government handouts for the beef industry, I'll agree not to ask for government subsidies for vegetarians.