

Man and Nature on the Western Range



# Man and Nature on the Western Range



Karl Hess, Jr. The Cato Institute

Foreword by John A. Baden

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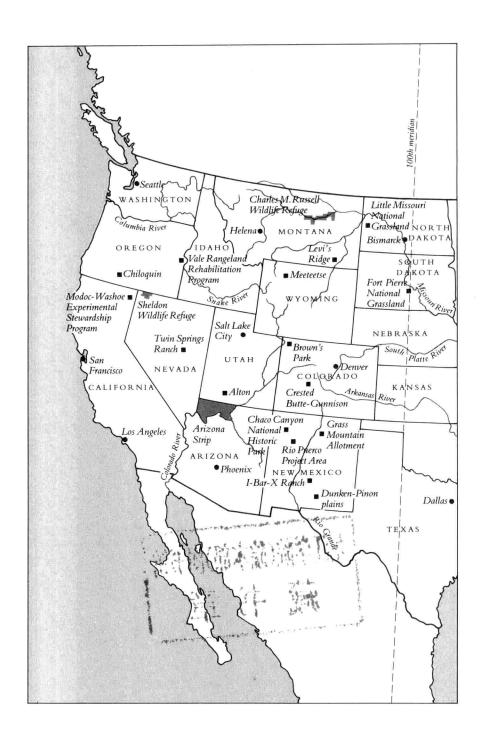
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## Foreword

"Conflicts of interests dominate the short run but conflict of visions dominate history." Thomas Sowell, A Conflict of Visions

Karl Hess may be the last sane optimist who deals with America's federal lands. He brings intelligence, goodwill, and empathy to this analysis. His ethical and logical consistency is impressive. After completing this book, the reader will be in a better position to gauge rangeland policy and practice.

Among informed observers, there is a "sense of the meeting" that throughout the West, governments have operated as engines of plunder as well as arbiters of justice. For more than a century, there was a coherent direction to culture, economics, and politics. This paradigm favored development and the institutional arrangements that fostered it. Exploitation and centralized management of the West's resources dominated federal policy. Even nonexploitive ideals such as national parks, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges were under politically dominated scientific management.

The Bureau of Reclamation, the Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management have exemplified this perspective and attempted to manage via centralized command and control. Throughout the West, the results have been much the same as in Eastern Europe—tragedies of ecological, ethical, and economic erosion at the end of the vision. Even legislative mandates requiring multiple use considerations have not altered the outcomes.

In the West, as elsewhere in the United States, the rubric of "free enterprise" was and is opportunistically used to camouflage subsidies and justify environmentally costly behavior. Authority to act, often with others' money, was granted through politics. Through politics, institutions were created that insulated actors from the consequences of actions. Hence, on the federal lands we see the subsidized "chaining" of millions of acres of piñon and juniper and the subsidized clear-cutting of national forests. Subsidized dams provide subsidized water to produce subsidized crops stored through subsidized fees. These distortions of the market process have predictable and grotesque environmental and economic consequences. Visions upon the Land: Man and Nature on the Western Range explains how such actions result in devastation to the rangelands and communities of the West.

Throughout history, most people who depend on land and natural resources have learned how to avoid the tragedy of the commons. However, when politics insulates actions from the reality checks of nature—a political perversion Hess discovers throughout the West—the tragedy of the commons becomes institutionalized. Today, several groups (for example, welfare ranchers and sylvan socialists) have become dependent upon the continuation of the tragedy. If we are to see our way to a new vision of and for our West, a new approach recognizing the needs and capability of the land and its people is needed.

The policy questions of the western range are scientifically complex. These questions also carry heavy ethical and economic baggage. Few people can unpack these bags and not be affected by their personal evaluations of the contents. Today, traditional institutions and practices of the West are challenged by an increasingly strong coalition of disparate interests and philosophies. The reformers include fiscal conservatives who oppose subsidies to the wealthy, classic liberals who believe that good intentions exercised through government power too often lead to corruption and waste, and environmentalists who are offended by the land management of the iron triangle: bureaucrats, favored interests, and elected politicians. These reformers hold the logical, empirical, and moral high ground against the old-time exploiters of an increasingly precious set of ecological and social values.

In Visions upon the Land, Hess challenges the exploitation of the West with a strong blend of Thomas Jefferson's political economy and Aldo Leopold's ecology. He thoughtfully explains how the West's political institutions erode environmental quality. He begins impartially to unpack the baggage and help us understand that because of inappropriate bureaucra-

cies and opportunistic politics, the people of the West have not found a sustainable harmony with their land.

Hess explains the implications of different institutional arrangements. From *Visions upon the Land* we learn how to identify those arrangements that encourage people to adapt their individual behavior, culture, and local institutions to the realities of their environment. Hess believes that these institutional arrangements which harmonize liberty and ecology should replace those based upon political plunder and predation.

In exposing the hypocrisies of special interests hiding behind myths, *Visions upon the Land* makes naked their shortsighted self-interest. It helps us see that there is an even greater distance between Ed Abbey's and Jim Watt's visions of the West than their positions in the alphabet. Honest people have a hard time with these differences, for there are no knockdown arguments to resolve policy questions based upon competing but compelling ethical systems.

Hess gives us stories, experience, and logic to help us resolve policy questions. By creating land communities and disposing of the institutions that impose and engender elitist visions, these philosophical, ethical, and political divides can be closed. Each vision can thrive and coexist with others within the land community. Only the parasitic need be excluded.

Visions upon the Land will not be without its initial critics and skeptics. Individuals put at risk by Karl's data and compelling logic, bureaucratic managers, commodity groups, and environmental crisis entrepreneurs will quickly surface. But this book will be immensely helpful to intelligent and sincere reformers who value and respect the classic liberal values of Jefferson and the ecological ideals of Leopold. And over time, Visions upon the Land will develop a steadfast group of supporters, for as Garrett Hardin has often told me, "important ideas have long gestations."

Karl Hess's are such ideas. Visions upon the Land is an exceptional field guide to the great remaining mystery of the West-how to preserve the freedom and potential for independence of that region's people while preserving an ecology of which mankind is an integral part.

John A. Baden President Foundation for Research on Economics and the Environment

# Preface

Five years ago, I sat down to outline a book on the western range. I began with the assumption that livestock grazing on public lands was a proper starting point. It was a subject I knew well and one for which I had strong feelings. Starting there, I fleshed out my outline with what I believed to be new and important ideas. Two years and many outlines later, my confidence in those ideas had waned. Only my initial assumption seemed solid and reasonable. I was stuck.

Two events moved me off center. The first was a conference on the land ethic in Big Sky, Montana. There, I learned a lesson in tolerance. My assumptions of what constituted ecological right and wrong, of good and bad, were not universally shared. Others saw the natural world differently from the way I did, arriving at contrasting conclusions of ecological good and bad. A land ethic did not mean the same to each person. This ethical relativism troubled me. It forced me to rethink the meaning and place of a land ethic in a world lacking consensus on a topic I believed to be so vital. I left the conference puzzled, wondering how best to reconcile my strong commitment to a personal land ethic with the demands and constraints of tolerance.

The second event came a year later, at an Earth First! gathering in the Kettle River Mountains of northeastern Washington. I went as an observer, hoping to learn more of how that group envisioned the meaning and purpose of western public lands. It quickly became apparent that livestock grazing had no place in their agenda. They were committed with religious fervor to a vision of a western landscape exorcised of livestock. That vision had taken hold of their lives and was funneling their energies toward a single objective.

The lessons of visions and tolerance played in my mind as I thought of the book that had eluded me so far. As I reviewed and rethought former outlines and notes, it became clear to me why I was stuck. I had spent three years looking in the wrong places for the handle I needed to bring a fresh perspective to the story of the western range. My attention had been so focused on judging public-land ranchers and the federal agencies that regulated them that I had missed the obvious. Ranchers with their livestock and federal agencies with their public-land policies had shaped and transformed the western landscape. Yet their effects upon the western range had been symptomatic of something more fundamental.

Thinking back once again to the lessons of visions and tolerance, I understood what was fundamental to the history of the western range. The key to its understanding was to be found in the landscape visions that people had brought to the western range and in the degree of tolerance people had exercised while pursuing them. Those visions embodied what people expected from the land. They also fueled people's ambitions to realize those expectations. And their effect on the land was as lasting and real as the farmer's plow upon a virgin field.

Today, I realize that my first conscious encounter with landscape visions came at that Earth First! gathering. The vision of a West freed of ranchers and cattle, however, would be only one of many landscape visions I would encounter as I reexamined the western range. In that process, I would discover that visions of the western landscape had motivated men and women long before the arrival of Earth First!. Such visions had sparked the ambitions of the first settlers and become an enduring part of the West. They thrive and continue today.

The history of the western range is, in part, the story of people's visions of what was and is right for the landscape of America's public lands. It tells of the conflict between those visions and the land and people of the western range. It speaks to the limits of human tolerance in the struggle to effect ecological good. Most of all, the story of the western range is a modern paradox. In a society so conscious of diversity, the western range stands out as a land deprived of diversity in a most crucial sense.

America's public lands are celebrated for a richness of life and a variety of landscapes unmatched elsewhere. Yet beneath the veneer of diversity lies another reality. The dreams and aspirations that have fixed the course of the western range have imposed three singular visions upon the land. Those visions have triumphed at the cost of human diversity. Their intol-

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erance has deprived the land of the promise of what a variety of landscape visions could bring.

This book is about the environmental and ecological consequences of those singular visions and their profound influence on the western range of past and present. Those visions have attended to what people and nature ought to be, not to what they could be in an environment of freedom and diversity. Those visions have heralded environmental decline on public grazing lands. They have pitted men and women against nature and against their own self-interest. They have weakened our faith in the ability of people to live responsibly and in harmony with the land of the western range. They have brought into being agencies to regulate people in their dealings with nature and then later to exclude them from the natural world. They have diminished the ecological potential of human diversity.

It is to the diminishment of human diversity, to the lost faith in people living with nature, to the intolerance of unchallenged visions, and to the ecological and environmental consequences of all three that I direct my book. Whether public-land grazing should or should not exist is less important than the fact that it does exist. From that vantage, a new vista opens to the history of the western range and to the place of men and women in the natural and social community. Visions on the land lead us beyond the mythology of cows and cowboys to the high drama of man and nature on the western range.

In writing of that drama, I have selected a variety of personal accounts from the many men and women I visited while researching this book. Those accounts appear as narratives before each chapter. They are spoken through my voice and relate the stories of exceptional ranchers—unrepresentative ranchers, perhaps, but ranchers who do exist and have excelled. They are people who have tried to come to terms with the western range peacefully and with respect. Their examples, however, do more than illustrate the personal trials and tribulations of a select group of caring ranchers. They also address the environmental concerns of all caring people. They speak of hope and promise for a land that has seen too little peace and has been shown far too little respect. They point in the same direction this book is intended to lead—toward a western range where people can and will choose to live responsibly and in harmony with the land.

Karl Hess, Jr. Las Cruces, New Mexico

## Acknowledgments

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I also offer my thanks to the many men and women who shared their time and stories with me as I traveled throughout the West. Some are mentioned by name in the pages that follow. Many are represented in the ideas and examples that give life to my manuscript. All have deeply influenced me. This book is a tribute to their caring and perseverance.

I wish to offer special thanks to Therese Hess for editing what at first was a very rough manuscript and to Marianne Keddington for editing redundancy from the manuscript and polishing and refining the final product. To my wife, Joanne, I offer love and thanks for bearing with me during a very difficult period. I hope the product of three years of work will make our personal sacrifices not in vain.

Finally, I thank my father for instilling in me a profound respect for human creativity and freedom; for providing insight into thought and nature as processes; for encouraging my celebration of diversity in all forms; for teaching me an abiding tolerance for those who, in Thoreau's words, follow a different drummer; and for being my friend.

. . . it is the continuing policy of the Federal Government . . . to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony . . .

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969

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