

Contrary to Popular Belief:

By Tracy Schohr

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Anti-Cow Activists in California Who Have Changed Perceptions.

The West has expansive open spaces and scenic vistas that are home to ranches. These ranches preserve a piece of the Wild West, family traditions, contribute to the economic prosperity of our country, produce a safe food and play a huge role in preserving natural resources.

The statement above is true and dear to cattlemen. Yet in the newspapers, at public forums and in text books something else is portrayed. Often times ranching is described to be unnatural and detrimental to natural resources. This portrait of the industry outrages ranchers yet often resonates with the public.

However, I am excited to share with you three stories of individuals, whose perceptions of the ranching industry were changed in light of increased knowledge, talking to ranchers and visiting ranches. So rest assured people can change and become ranching advocates.

Think of the 70's.... The environmental era was in full-force, there was a growing concern about our nation's wildlife, air, water and soil that was being polluted and destroyed. A social movement was in place, growing in popularity and rooting itself in politics.

Denise Defreese, Park Supervisor with East Bay Regional Park District (Park District) had a personal perception of the 70's version of things. If something was "ugly," it must be bad. Originally she carried this same personal bias as she began her public service career managing open spaces.

As a graduate from California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo with a degree in natural resources management, she was educated for the job. Yet, she has no recollection of grazing being discussed in the classroom and she had never been required take a range class.

In 1999, Defreese became the Park District supervisor of the 6,000 acre Briones Regional Park located in the heart of California's urbanized Bay Area.

"I remember looking at the land and realizing something had to be done. The park was definitely overstocked and there were complaints from the public about the cattle," states Defreese.

When she arrived changes were underway to select new grazing tenants. As she recalls, the stars aligned for her to have the opportunity to work with grazing tenants on the park that had a fresh perspective and who were interested in doing the right things.

Instead of total removal of the livestock, she learned from the ranchers

what she did not learn in school, how to manage cattle for specific results. For example, the 6,000 acres had only two pastures, new fencing was installed to manage the cattle and prevent unsightliness in public areas.

It was internal Park District research that was happening around the Bay Area and research from Pt. Reyes on the benefits of cattle grazing on stockponds for amphibians that solidified her belief that grazing can play a positive role in land management.

Today, Defreese continues to evolve the grazing program at the Park District while she broadens her knowledge of grazing. She noted that an online course created by Mel George's, Ph.D. a specialist at the University of California, Davis, titled Ecology and Management of Grazing was one of her most recent valuable educational programs she has participated in.

"All of the education and discussions with ranchers is making me understand how valuable it is if you are able to move the cattle around," states Defreese. "As a result of moving cattle we're seeing some really good results – reductions in Yellow Star Thistle and increases in perennial grasses – this is the part that makes park people really excited!"

Currently, Defreese manages the Vasco Hills Unit of the Park District.

Today, her motto is to listen to what academia has to say, and then go out to the field and work with the ranchers.

She strongly believes that as a land manager, "You must talk with your tenants or ranchers in the area, and learn from them about the land itself."

Defreese is not shy to say she was not originally a supporter of cattle grazing. "I came on to the land with it looking one way – the way it used to look I know it is not accurate. I started to understand cattle could be good. In fact, cattle on the land is not the problem, it is the lack of management of the cattle on the land that is the problem."

The next individual I want to introduce you to took his passion for grasslands and limited knowledge of their management, influencing change as a conservationist and undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Growing up in the East, Grey Hayes, Coastal Training Program Coordinator for the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, was not exposed to livestock until his early twenties when he moved to California. Hayes was instead familiar with suburbia and large regional parks.

Hayes recalls how his view of cattle grazing was originally created, "As a student focused on environmental studies I was enrolled in a watershed restoration course that included a case study on a campus creek that was being negatively impacted by poor cattle management. The challenge of course was to figure out how to keep cows from negatively impacting riparian habitat, California Red Legged Frogs and water quality."

With ¼ mile of no vegetation on the creek, his class worked with the college to fence the riparian area and give cows an alternative water source.

"I was empowered and inspired to continue to make change after this class project," states Hayes. "After that I advocated to get the cows removed and with student pressure, the tradition for decades of cattle grazing was discontinued on the campus."

At that time Hayes was conducting a study on the campus grasslands, in particular, focused on a small-onion-like blub called *Muilla maritima*.

"Subsequent to the removal of grazing, special interest plants that used to be on the grasslands were

disappearing. The tinkering of livestock grazing had resulted in the decline of wildflowers and native grasses," states Hayes.

It was at that time that Hayes started questioning his work to remove cattle from the college campus. In discussions with others in the area he began to learn from the ranchers' "traditional ecological knowledge," that the conservation of some native plants required grazing cattle in specific ways.

His own observations and work with local ranchers led him to advocate that cattle be reintroduced to this UC Santa Cruz campus. Cattle were reintroduced to bring back special plants, control invasive plant species and reduce fire fuel loads.

Sheila Barry, University of California Cooperative Extension Livestock/Natural Resource Advisor noted that Dr. Hayes was one of the first to state that the cessation of livestock grazing is a threat to an endangered species. His article titled, "The Saga of the Santa Cruz tarplant" which was published in *Four Seasons* in 1998 recognized that next to development and invasive species, removing grazing from sites with Santa Cruz tarplant was a threat.

"In the process of bringing cattle back to campus I got to know a lot about how ranches operate, how the ranchers perceive coastal grasslands, and how the cattle interact with land," reflects Hayes. "I discovered the importance of ranchers helping with grassland management."

He has learned from ranchers "traditional ecological knowledge," including their intergenerational observations from being on the land every day. Hayes emphasized how high he values the land management information ranchers share with him.

After his early conservation work, Hayes went on to get a doctorate, looking closer at livestock correlation with biodiversity on California's Coast. Today he is using his education, research and conservation lessons learned to focus on getting the right information in the right people's hands. His full-time work with outreach and education is targeted at land managers, agencies, regulators, policy makers, and ranchers whose decisions affect the vitality of California Grasslands.

Commenting on his education program, Hayes states "Ranchers often have the information they need and can share that information with agency

personnel, other land managers and regulators whose work affects rangeland health and the economic vitality of ranching; these individuals are on a steeper learning curve than ranchers when it comes to making sure their decisions about grasslands are well informed."

We continue to learn lessons about livestock grazing and we have to put more lessons into action, concludes Hayes. Along this line, he shared a case where land was purchased with public funds to protect rare species on the site and subsequently cattle were removed. Today, the site remains ungrazed and the Ohlone Tiger Beetle, one of the site's endangered species, is nowhere to be found. This is a future challenge on Hayes' horizon to get cattle reintroduced to the site.

A little bit different version of the story comes from Judith Boshoven, Living Lands Manager at the Defenders of Wildlife in Washington, D.C.

"I was a vegetarian for 15 years," states Boshoven.

A dark evil word for any cattlemen to hear, unbeknownst to the Stone Family they invited this vegetarian out to Yolo Land and Cattle Company, Woodland, Calif. She joined Hank, Scott and Casey Stone on a day they were working calves and having a BBQ. Like many California ranchers, the BBQ was nothing other than a celebration with friends and good food, beef tri-tip to be exact.

Boshoven was the newly hired Director of the Landowner Stewardship Program of Audubon California, a program to assist private landowners in restoring and managing habitat for wildlife on their farms and ranches.

"I was pregnant at the time, and Hank made sure that I got some of his beef," recalls Boshoven like it was yesterday. After taking a taste of red meat after over a decade without, she realized it was simply delicious.

"I was like, this is so good," chuckles Boshoven. "I ceased to be a vegetarian after the whole experience out at Yolo Land and Cattle."

Scott Stone stated "Judy was a regular at the Wednesday night Davis Farmers Market, always coming by our stand with her boys for a burger!"

Her love of beef has not changed since her career transitioned from working in Yolo County with private landowners to enhance biodiversity in the agricultural landscape, to our

Nation's Capitol. Today, she not only supports the beef industry by consuming the product, but is an advocate on the Farm Bill to provide incentives for voluntary land management projects and land protection on working farms and ranches.

Back when she was a vegetarian, Boshoven thought of herself as a conservationist wanting to restore habitat to support abundant and diverse wildlife populations. Like many others, as a student at University of California Davis, she was mostly unaware of the agriculture landscape that was surrounding her and how it was an integral part of what supports local biodiversity.

Since she has gotten to know and work closely with ranchers, today she realizes that not only do they consider themselves to be stewards of their land, many are truly good stewards of the land in her mind and want to do what is best.

"I have come to recognize the rancher's role as being really important," states Boshoven.

However, she notes that we must strike a delicate balance between being

stewards of biodiversity and producing the goods we need as human beings.

"We all need to eat as well," comments Boshoven. This is what led her to continuing to work in the field of voluntary private lands conservation.

"We all need safe, healthy food, and even better if it can be produced and consumed locally and sustainably" comments Boshoven. Judy worked with the Stones on various habitat conservation projects, such as excluding cattle from restored riparian areas and installing solar pumps to water cattle, planting areas with native grasslands and using managed grazing to maintain them. Her experience with the Stones and other Yolo County ranchers and farmers is what led her to continuing to work in the field of voluntary private lands conservation as the Executive Director of the Yolo Land Trust and then at Defenders of Wildlife.

Like many other who have had a chance to get out on the land and see ranching firsthand, read the recent research, heard from ranchers their love of the land and recognized the pride

ranchers have in carrying on a family tradition, perceptions truly are changed.

"I love telling this story! The Stone's did not know I was a vegetarian and if they realized, it might have made a horrible first impression for me to come to their BBQ and then turn my nose up at their cow," concludes Boshoven. "I experienced it first hand and had my perception changed".

These three individuals' stories demonstrate that perceptions can truly be changed about cattle grazing and ranching. It can happen when there are opportunities to get out on the land to see ranching first hand, recognize ranchers' love of the land and learn from scientists the value of grazing. As ranchers we can help make these visits happen and participate in research projects that result in changing people's perceptions about the ranching industry.

For more information on the environmental benefits of grazing visit www.carangeland.org/research.html.



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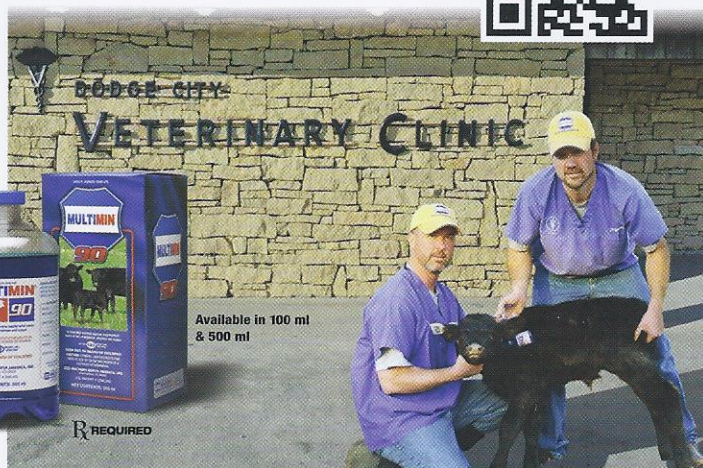
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