FROM THE CENTER

Time is Running Short for Big Game Herds in the West

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With the close of the spring semester at the University of Montana, I took the first opportunity to get up to the Boone and Crockett Club's Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch that lies along the Rocky Mountain front in northwest Montana. The oversight of the management of that ranch, in tune with the advice of the Ranch Committee of the Club, is a significant part of my responsibilities as the Boone and Crockett Professor of Wildlife Conservation.

I was able to spend the better part of a week on the TRM Ranch with ranch manager Bob Peebles. In the course of that week I helped fix fence, doctor cows, watch Lisa Flowers (the B&C education coordinator) and Bob work with two bus loads of elementary school kids, get to know Bob's family, and look over the ranch from one end to the other. Having worked all over the United States and in various and sundry other parts of the world, I can say that I have never seen a more varied and spectacular 7,000 acre piece of property anywhere. Nor, have I seen a piece of property more strategically located to play a significant role in conservation.

Is this constant erosion of the economic viability of ranches and the associated loss of wildlife habitat adjacent to the public's lands, particularly of the big game winter ranges, inevitable?

The ranch encompasses open rolling grasslands on the east and rises to conifer covered slopes that rise to the Rocky Mountain front where the property line abuts the Lewis and Clark National Forest with the Bob Marshall Wilderness in the background. Whitetail deer are year around residents along Dupuyer Creek. Mule deer and elk move onto the ranch in large numbers when the snow deepens in the high lonesome of the Rockies. The presence of grizzlies, black bears, cougars, and even an occasional wolf, testify to the wildness of the place - a special place filled with the magic of what has been, what is, and what can be.

My too brief visit afforded me much to think about as I sat on the back stoop of the ranch house on the last evening of my visit and watched the sun slip down toward rocky walls of the mountains. The question much on my mind concerned how long will this situation last along the Front Range, and elsewhere in the West, as ranches such as this one are, under a number of economic pressures, sold to developers for subdivision or are sold off piece meal. In that seemingly inexorable trend lies diminution of the magic and, certainly, erosion of big game habitat and hunting opportunities. How can that thrust be blunted in a politically acceptable manner and in full consideration of the needs, acceptance, and desires of ranch owners? The sun, now low on the horizon, shone full in my face and, somehow, seemed the relentless inquisitor that demanded answers to those questions.

When the national forests were created, it was unrecognized, forgotten, or deemed insignificant that those lands could not exist as intact islands in the overall landscape. Or, that deer and elk and other wide-ranging animals would wander or be forced across the lines on maps that mean so much to humans and nothing at all to other species. The TRM Ranch, similar to thousands of other ranches, has a permit to graze livestock on the adjacent national forest. There is a continuing debate about the appropriate price to pay for such grazing. In listening to and participating in those arguments over the years, I was always struck by the absence of open discussion of what I considered the prime issue - in addition to the achievement and maintenance of appropriate range conditions. That issue is the continued economic viability of those ranching enterprises and the interdependence of such federal and private land ownership coupled with the simultaneous accomplishment of the missions of each. Unspoken agreements exist that the private ranch owners will accept the, sometimes, considerable impact of wintering big game and other species in return for public land grazing at an attractive price. Further, only so long as these ranching enterprises are economically viable will the trend to subdivision be blunted. The difference between a viable and continuing ranching enterprise and a loss of this habitat for wildlife may well depend, in many cases, on the presence of grazing on adjacent public land at an attractive price. The question that should loom large in the ongoing debate concerns the consequences for wide ranging wildlife species and the recreation associated with those species of not maintaining viable ranching operations in such circumstances.

Those who ponder such matters do not require a crystal ball to foretell the future.

A hard look at what is happening across the western United States will suffice. Houses and "ranchettes" continue to spread across what were once big game winter and spring-fall ranges that were once protected in large viable ranches. Often, very often, big game are no longer welcome in the midst of developments and, almost certainly, hunters are less welcome when these large ranches are split into pieces and summer homes and "ranchettes" blossom across the once open landscape. The only

options available to wildlife managers under such circumstances is to accept lower numbers, deal with the complaints, or accept fencing to keep animals away from the developments and supplemental feeding as a substitute for winter range loss.

Loss of ranch viability due to subdivision of property is frequent when the ranch is split among heirs into parcels that are too small to make up a rational economic unit.

Or, the reality of inheritance taxes forces unwanted sales of ranches. Or, simply, the value of the land for subdivision becomes too attractive for some to resist.

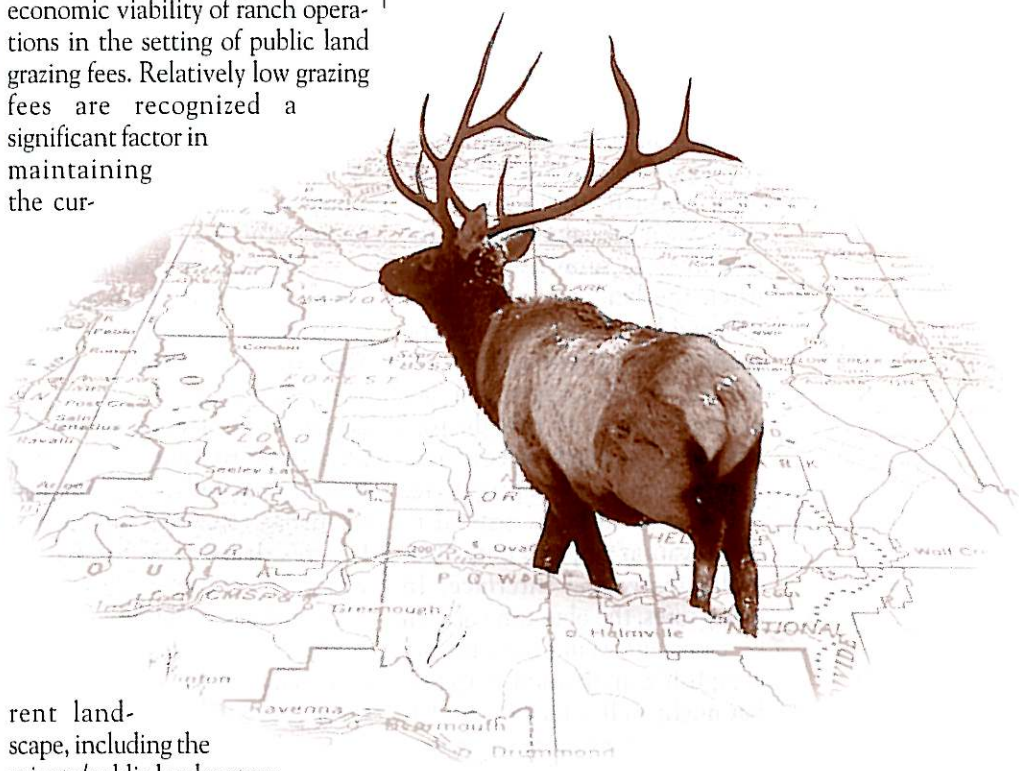
Is this constant erosion of the economic viability of ranches and the associated loss of wildlife habitat adjacent to the public's lands, particularly of the big game winter ranges, inevitable? The sun was full in my face and seemed the glare from the inquisitor's lamp that seemed to demand an answer.

Certainly, time grows short as the human population of the West grows and people look for an escape from the cities and have the resources to fulfill their dreams of a place in the country. But, in the fulfillment of that dream, is imbedded the death of other dreams of open landscapes and all that goes with it. Can that be turned around? What are some of the possibilities?

Fortunately, many - perhaps most - such ranch owners choose to hold fast to a way of life that they treasure and that may well have been handed down to them over the generations. And, they have a love affair with the land and the lifestyle that goes with such stewardship. Most choose, when at all possible, to maintain that lifestyle, the opportunity to pass that lifestyle on to their progeny, and maintenance of the present open landscape. Clearly, it is such dedicated land stewards that are key to long-term success.

There seems to be two general approaches to maintaining life styles and open landscapes - coercion (i.e., "thy shalt not laws") and incentives of some sort. I have a personal aversion to coercion and believe incentives to be a more appropriate tool of public policy that is more socially and politically acceptable and more effective in the long term. Several approaches that provide such incentives are already in place and there are others that may well be both operationally feasible and politically acceptable with some adjustments in current law and regulation.

The first of these was discussed above - consideration of the economic viability of ranch operations in the setting of public land grazing fees. Relatively low grazing fees are recognized a significant factor in maintaining the current landscape, including the private/public land partnership that - among other attributes - maintains habitat for wide ranging wildlife and public enjoyment of that wildlife including hunting. This unspoken arrangement has been in existence for most of this century with obvious dividends.



Continuation of this arrangement includes, of course, achievement and maintenance of appropriate range conditions on public lands.

The second approach, called by the name of "conservation easements", is being more and more used to maintain life styles and open landscapes. Under conservation easements the landowner sells one or more "sticks" from the "bundle of rights" that are associated with the ownership of property. The most common type of easement applicable to this discussion is the sale of the right of subdivision and development. In all sales that follow, that easement must be a built in part of the deal. The sale of such an easement affords the landowner immediate significant income, assures that future property evaluations must be based on current use rather than on the potential for subdivision, and assures that the property remains undeveloped. Such sales take place only between willing sellers and willing buyers.

This approach has been pioneered by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Rocky

Mountain Elk Foundation and the Nature Conservancy working with willing sellers that have similar interest to those institutions in the maintenance of open landscapes for one reason or another. Obviously, the application of this approach is significantly limited by the availability of funds. This approach could have much wider application with increased availability of funds. Innovation seems in order if these opportunities are to be exercised to the full extent possible.

Clearly, the necessity to pay inheritance taxes forces the sale of significant amounts of ranch property. Frequently, these sales involve immediate subdivision to achieve the highest return or sale to a land speculator that buys the property with the intent, sooner or later, of maximizing the return on investment through subdivision. Such speculators have the resources to seize the moment when the landowner(s) is most vulnerable. What if the federal (and/or state) governments could use tax liability (up to the appraised value of the desired easement) to purchase conservation easements on properties determined to be as critical to conservation purposes in the federal/private land interface? In many cases, the obtaining of such an easement would not only accomplish conservation purposes, but might well achieve considerable savings for local governments faced with providing utilities, road, and fire and police services to such developments. It seems that this approach might be worth evaluation and discussion.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 established a fund with receipts from various sources from which state and federal governments can purchase land, or rights in land, for conservation and recreation purposes. Federal purchases of land, or rights in land, must occur within the boundaries of established refuges, national parks, and national forests. From the previous discussion, it is obvious that, in some cases, obtaining conservation easements on lands adjacent to those federal lands might well yield a "bigger bang for a buck" than outright purchase. Such actions would retain those lands in private ownership, provide opportunity for the owners to continue their chosen lifestyle, provide choice in that only willing sellers would be included, preserve the local tax base, spare local governments the expense of absorbing development costs and providing services, and maintain the open landscape with its benefits to aesthetics and wildlife. For that to become possible, all that would be required would be an appropriate amendment to the Act.

Those interested in conservation have been lax in allowing Congresses and Administrations alike to redirect the Fund's resources to purposes other than acquisition of land or easements for conservation purposes to other unrelated miscellaneous purposes. In theory, some $14 billion dollars reside in that fund from which, by statutory direction, $900 million could be appropriated each year for land acquisition or easements for conservation. Over time, it has become "customary" for Congress to appropriate $150 million or less per year for purposes of conservation and to direct the other $750 million to other purposes. It is well past time for that set of circumstances to change.

Given the dramatic cuts in resources devoted to conservation in the United States, conservationists should demand that the Fund provide the full authorized $900 million per year to innovative approaches to enhanced conservation efforts - perhaps including conservation easements.

Time is running short for the big game herds and other wildlife that use the federal/private land interface in the west. With each subdivision and each loss of a viable ranching enterprise more sand runs through the hour glass. The problem will not lessen with waiting.

These are new times within which the American people struggle to save the best of past and present for the future. These new times will require new approaches for those that cherish wild things, a way of life, and open landscapes. These are not times for the timid or for those resigned to the inexorable loss of open lands and wild things. These are times when those who care about such things to clasp hands, to work together as partners, with an eye to a future America that holds on to cherished ways of life, viable ranches, open vistas, and vibrant populations of wildlife in wild and open places. The opportunity is real but fleeting. And, never will there be a better time.

The sun has disappeared behind the Front Range and there is a chill in the air that stirred me from my reverie. It was time to answer the call to supper. I took one last look across the vista and understood well what there was to work for. Then, I squinted my eyes looked over the landscape and tried to visualize what this countryside might look like divided into "ranchettes" and summer homes each with its paved roads and corrals and outbuildings. I found no room in that vision for elk and mule deer and, certainly, no tolerance for grizzlies, black bears, and cougars. I did not like the vision and felt a slight shudder as I entered the house. There must be a better way. And we had better find it soon.