

No Ordinary Burger

Trust Fosters Economic Diversity in Support of Ranches

by Courtney White

Can a hamburger save the family ranch in the 21st century?

If you're Diablo Burger, a bite-sized eatery located in the busy old-town heart of Flagstaff, Arizona, serving up natural, fresh, trendy, and tasty hamburgers supplied by two local ranches, the answer is: possibly. *Hopefully.* The restaurant also features Belgian-style fries, hormone-free whole milk milkshakes, herbs, onions and tomatoes from local farms,

This is hopeful news because the entrepreneurial, privately-owned restaurant is an example of an effort by the Diablo Trust, a pioneering collaborative nonprofit, to encourage diversified business opportunities for ranches in the area. It's no ordinary burger, in other words, not simply because of the fancy fries or trendy music, but because of what it symbolizes: the rise of a local economy that serves the cause of ranchers, city residents, and conservationists alike.

who worry about the loss of open space to subdivisions, it means rethinking the way private land traditionally gets 'protected' in the West, including age-old prejudices about livestock. For each, it means keeping the "work" in working landscapes — which is good business for everyone.

But let's back up and put Flagstaff's devilish burger in a broader context.

Of the American West's approximately one million square miles (roughly a third of the nation as a whole), half is publicly owned as national forests and parks, military reservations, wildlife refuges, or by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The other half of the West — approximately the size of California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona and Nevada combined — is privately owned or part of sovereign Native American nations. And a great deal of the private land is owned by ranchers. Furthermore,



Diablo Burger serves meat supplied by local ranches.

bread and cookies from a bakery in Phoenix, citrus from McClendon's Select farm in Peoria, Arizona, and ice cream from the Straus Family creamery, located north of San Francisco.



Courtesy of Diablo Trust archives

Cattle graze in Arizona on land part of a research project based on collaboration between ranchers and conservationists.

The Diablo Trust believes that strong family ranches maintain a healthy rural economy and culture while protecting open space from development. The question is: what does this mean in the early 21st century? For ranchers, it means innovating their age-old business model in order to develop new markets for their products. For city residents, it means participating in a local economy, especially as farmers' markets and other forms of sustainable agriculture expand. For conservationists, especially those

homesteaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took the best land first, meaning the most productive, well-watered and least snowy (lower elevation) parcels. Not coincidentally, this land is the site today of high concentrations of biodiversity, especially in riparian corridors and wetlands. According to some estimates, as much as 60 percent of endangered species in the West exist solely or largely on private ranch land. For these reasons, and more, private ranches

are seen now as critical pieces in the conservation puzzle out West.

Unfortunately, it is precisely this land that came into the crosshairs of developers in the early 1990s as the economy boomed and many urban refugees fled to the rural West. By 2005, the process of ranch and farm conversion to subdivisions reached an alarming rate of one acre per hour. This fact caused many of us in the conservation movement to realize that subdivisions were a greater threat to the region's biological diversity than the "overgrazing crisis" on public land that I had been repeatedly told by my peers was supposedly ruining the West. Instead, I learned that grass, when given enough rain, is incredibly resilient. The deleterious effects of a subdivision on the land, in contrast, were not so easily reversed. I also learned that ranches are resilient too, given the right economic and social conditions.

And yet the typical response of conservation organizations to the open space crisis was to buy a farm or ranch outright when it came on the market, at high cost, or facilitate the purchase of its development rights via a conservation easement. This strategy has been effective, but only up to a point for two reasons: first, it requires *lots* of money, which means conservationists will always be at a disadvantage to developers; and second, this "buy it" strategy often means the cessation of the land's agricultural productivity, resulting in a loss of community, history, culture and other local benefits. This is why the effort to save ranch and farmland from development over the past two decades or so, while successful in some spots, has come up short in others, such as the Front Range of Colorado, for instance.

Fortunately, there is another way to protect private land — a way that ranchers, city residents, and conservationists can work together. From my experience, I believe the most economical and long-lasting way to protect privately-owned open space in the American West from development is to keep productive ranches in business. It is far cheaper to help a rancher diversify income streams and create supportive collaborative relationships than it is to purchase their ranch on the open market or arrange

for a conservation easement on their property.

I call it the "Not 4 Sale" strategy. But implementing it requires cracking a difficult paradox: while many ranchers don't want to sell out to developers, many can't afford to stay in business either. Many landowners stay in ranching, I've observed, not *because* of the economic returns of commodity livestock production but *in spite* of them. This is why ranching is sometimes described by academics as an "irrational" economic enterprise for its dismal profit margins. This fact is supported by ranchers themselves who almost always list the social and cultural benefits of their way of life ahead of profit-making. Still, ranchers have bills to pay like everyone else. Hanging a "Not 4 Sale" sign on the front gate of a ranch means finding a way to pay those bills, which has become more difficult in recent years.

The answer is to blend the needs of ranchers, city residents and conservationists into a diverse suite of options that keep the "work" in working landscapes. They include:

Increased Profitability. Many ranchers have begun to diversify their income streams in an effort to remain profitable. Examples include: (1) increased stocking rate as a result of progressive livestock management; (2) fees from hunting, fishing, camping, wildlife viewing, bed-and-breakfast services, dude ranching, and other amenity-based activities that attract urban visitors; (3) grants from foundations and agencies for a variety of ranch and watershed-based improvements, including the creation of local 501c3 organizations; (4) participation in local cooperatives that add value to ranch products; and (5) involvement in energy projects (wind, solar), conservation efforts (easements) or small-scale development projects (a few home sites), that create additional revenue for the ranch operation.

Collaborative Networks. Starting in the mid-1990s, landowners across the West began to see the strength in partnerships. Initially, most collaborations were defensive — pushing back against this or that threat — but over time they evolved into proactive enterprises that

brought diverse opportunities to the region. They also spurred innovation — each partner often has a different skill set, a new perspective, or access to resources that might be unavailable to a single landowner. Also, having friends is critical to the political process, and to policy reform.

Restoration. The entrepreneurial opportunities for landowners to restore damaged or degraded land to health are growing rapidly. Examples include: using livestock to control noxious weeds; using 'controlled grazing' impacts (similar to controlled fires) to achieve desired ecological goals; conducting riparian and upland restoration work for water quality and wildlife habitat goals; tackling forest health concerns through thinning and other projects; repairing and upgrading low-standard ranch roads so they can restore natural hydrological cycles; and working collaboratively on watershed-scale initiatives to improve the overall health of the area.

Local Food Production. There has been an explosion of interest in recent years among city residents in local, organic, natural, and grass-fed food. The net result of this interest is clear: increased social and economic profitability for ranchers. Grass-fed beef, for instance, can frequently command 50 percent more per pound in price than commodity (feedlot) beef. Almost as important are the social and emotional benefits of getting into local food markets, including direct contact with customers, who often become advocates for the farm or ranch.

Other Ecosystem Services. For centuries, well-managed farms and ranches have been delivering ecosystem services to cities, such as healthy topsoil, wildlife habitat, clean water, fuel sources, food, functioning wetlands, and buffers against floods and fires. It is only recently, however, that these services have come to be recognized, and therefore valued, as something worthy of protecting, restoring, and maintaining, especially as urban populations grow and pressure mounts on natural resources.

The story of the Diablo Trust is a good illustration of how family ranches are employing these strategies in order to stay intact during rapidly changing

times. The story begins in 1993, when the owners of the Flying M and the Bar T Bar ranches, located southeast of Flagstaff and comprising 426,000 acres of public and private land, decided to join forces and try a new idea at the time: collaborative conservation.

Both ranches were struggling economically and emotionally. Despite adopting innovative range management practices, including short-duration grazing, the ranches were forced to take stock reductions to alleviate what were perceived by state and federal agencies as conflicts between cattle and wildlife. Worse was the emotional cost. In the early 1990s, ranchers across the West were the target of an aggressive campaign by environmental activists to eliminate livestock grazing on public lands, captured in a popular bumper-sticker at the time: "Cattle-free by '93!" Public opinion seemed to be running very much against ranchers at the time and for a while things looked bleak. The toll wore the owners of the Flying M and the Bar T Bar down. They contemplated selling out. Fat profits from real estate development on their private land looked very tempting; and they thought about it long and hard.

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Instead, they decided to form the nonprofit Diablo Trust in order to enlist diverse community support for the ranches and assist with many of the non-ranching challenges that confronted them on a daily basis. It was a big gamble. When over 100 people attended the first meeting, including many agency people and some environmentalists, they knew they were onto something important. Committees were quickly established to focus on specific concerns, such as recreation and wildlife. A facilitator was hired to help the members of the Trust reach consensus, a volunteer director was hired, and a mission formulated, which read: "The purpose of the Diablo Trust is to maintain ranches as long-term, economically viable enterprises managed in harmony with the natural environment and the broader community."

Fast forward to today. Did they succeed? The quick answer is: yes. The Trust still meets every second Friday of the month, it still has a variety of working groups, raises money for science, education, and monitoring projects, conducts community outreach programs, including an annual art-on-the-ranch day, publishes a regular newsletter, and still strives to accomplish its vision through collaboration and innovation. Here are a few examples of the Trust's accomplishments to date:

- A biological assessment and evaluation of the ranches' lands, waters and resources, including threatened and endangered species, has been completed.
- A detailed land management plan for all 426,000 acres of Diablo Trust's federal, state and private lands was written, including plans to restore historic springs and grasslands, create wildlife corridors, and protect endangered and threatened species' habitats.
- Grazing studies are being conducted by Northern Arizona University and Prescott College to compare results from various grazing management techniques.
- An inventory of all federal, state and private monitoring sites has been compiled which will enable management decisions to be timely and responsive to habitat conditions and wildlife needs.
- A hands-on education program for grades 6-12 has been created so that

children can study their role in the maintenance of healthy ecosystems.

- Almost 100 artists have participated in a program that brings artists to Diablo Trust land and their work galleries in Flagstaff.

But perhaps the best measurement of success is this one: not one acre of private land on either ranch has been developed since the Trust's founding. In other words, the "Not 4 Sale" signs on their gates were never taken down, thanks to the success of the partnerships fostered by the Trust and its programs. But is it enough to keep the ranches going until the 22nd century?

This is where the tasty burger comes in.

The tiny restaurant opened in early 2009 and has become a successful enterprise. The meat for its hamburgers is supplied by the Flying M and Bar T Bar ranches, which is part of the restaurant's pitch to its primary customers: residents, not tourists. Local food for local people. The restaurant takes only cash — in order to keep the money in the local economy.

Why local? Here's what the Diablo Burger menu said when I visited: "Because local food retains more nutrients; because it supports the local economy; because it keeps local agricultural land in production, ensuring that future generations will still be surrounded by lots of open fields, grazing lands and wildlife habitat; because local food increases community food security by retaining the experts that know how to produce food; and because local food has a story — knowing where your food comes from means that its source is not anonymous, but accountable. Lastly, by eating local you are integrating ecology, community, and gastronomy . . . you are doing well by eating well."

I did well. The food was delicious. I went back for a second burger the next day.

But it's good economic sense too. In 2002, according to a recent study, while livestock accounted for 93 percent of all agricultural sales in Coconino County, which encompasses Flagstaff, only .5 percent of ranch products were sold directly to local consumers. Meanwhile, eaters purchased \$37 million dollars of meat, poultry, fish and eggs from the commodi-

ty food system. When the study expanded its analysis to include Navajo, Coconino and Yavapai counties, it found that only \$343,000 of food products were sold directly to consumers versus \$635 million of food annually bought from outside sources. That means roughly \$700 million of potential wealth could be captured by local ranches and farmers in these counties that now drains away. In other words, local consumers could absorb virtually all

the meat produced in the county if it were more directly available to them. That's an important economic opportunity that Diablo Burger is trying to capture.

Will it work? Is it enough to keep the family ranch in business? No one knows, but it represents an effort on the part of producers, eaters, and conservationists to try something new under the sun: working together economically. This is where the hope comes in.

Author and eater Gary Paul Nabhan puts it this way: "You walk away from Diablo Burger with a lingering sense that your decision to eat there has been good for you, for the land, and for the local rural community. What more could you want?"

For more information visit www.diablotrust.org.