

July 1, 2002

To: Carl Pope  
Executive Director  
The Sierra Club

Dear Carl,

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, I resigned from the Executive Committee of the Santa Fe/Northern New Mexico Group of the Sierra Club. I did so principally in order to create more elbow room in my life for my family. However, I have also moved on to a new type of environmental activism, one that does not fit well with the Club's current policies and approaches. "In fact," I said in my resignation letter, "I have deep concerns about the future effectiveness of the Sierra Club on issues related to the public lands in the West."

I want to explain this last thought, gleaned from nearly eight years of intensive environmental activism at the grassroots level, in hopes of nudging the Sierra Club, an organization I still greatly admire, in a new direction.

The American West has witnessed tremendous changes in the last fifteen years. These changes include the rise of models of sustainable use of public and private lands; the widening threat of recreation to biodiversity; the emergence of a "land health" paradigm from the scientific community; the shift of conservation strategies from "protection" to "restoration"; and the expanding role of collaboration to resolve resource conflicts.

However, these changes, which are here to stay, are not yet reflected in the work of most main-stream environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club. As a result, environmentalists have begun to marginalize themselves in the debate over the future of our public lands.

If the Sierra Club desires to remain a player at the grassroots level—by that I mean the level of grass and roots—significant changes will be necessary. I will use the issue of public lands ranching as an ex-ample.

It is critically important for the environmental community to understand that a model of sustainable use of public rangelands by livestock has emerged over the last fifteen years. Its form takes a number of shapes—herding, planned or rapid-rotational grazing, grassbanks, dormant season grazing, etc.—but its underlying principle is the same: that controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of livestock impact on the land can yield positive ecological and economic benefit to resource managers.

The science supporting this principle is strong and diverse; as is the small, but growing, number of ranchers who put the principle to work with demonstrable results. There is also a growing body of evidence which says well-managed ranches harbor as much biodiversity, or more, than "protected" landscapes, such as wilderness areas.

This is not to excuse over-grazing, which remains a persistent problem in the West. But the existence of ecologically sensitive ranch methods means the goal of activists needs to shift from extermination to reformation.

However, this requires a big first step—an admission by environmentalists that "work" is no longer a dirty word.

The history of the environmental movement is chiefly the story of the struggle against bad management. Clear cuts, strip mines, over-grazed rangelands, toxic dumps, poisoned rivers, and, now, rampant oil and gas drilling—the catalog of abuse is all too familiar. As a result, a prejudice against commercial use of public land developed among activists, and rightly so. Ed Abbey was on target in his outrage when he called the West “cowburnt.”

But it is not the 1980s any-more. The emergence of the progressive ranching model across a wide variety of Western landscapes, including those that receive less than twelve inches of precipitation a year, means the goal of public lands environmentalism can no longer simply be to “protect” the land from human activity. Instead, its goal should be same as the progressive ranchers’—to figure out how to live sustainably in our native landscapes.

In the fall of 1999, twenty-two environmental groups (not including the Sierra Club) took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* entitled “End Welfare Ranching.” It called public lands ranching “ecologically and economically unsustainable” and proclaimed livestock production to be “the single largest source of water pollution, soil erosion, and species endangerment in the western U.S.”

In support of its call for the abolition of ranchers, the advertisement cited an article published in the peer-reviewed journal *Bioscience*, which claimed that livestock grazing had contributed to the decline of 22% of endangered animal species and 33% of endangered plants in the U.S. This article reported the conclusions of a study conducted by a group of scientists who had analyzed the effects of various extractive industries on the viability of endangered plants and animals and ranked them according to their severity.

Contrary to the claims of the ad’s authors, the greatest threat to endangered plants and animals, according to the researchers, was NOT ranching. At the top of the list was water diversion, principally dams. Ranching checked in at number three, ahead of logging and mining.

In second place was recreation.

Although the chief recreational threat to wildlife was identified as off-road vehicles, the under-lying message of the study was clear: recreation is officially an “extractive” industry on public lands and should be treated as such.

Naturally, there has been no full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for an end to public lands recreation. The reasons are obvious, including a huge case of denial. However, the 800-pound gorilla called “recreation” can no longer be ignored, and if the environmental community does not begin to put play on public land under the same microscope that it does work, then its credibility will continue to erode.

Work and play need to be treated equally and fairly. To do this, environmentalists should heed Aldo Leopold’s advice—that any activity which degrades the quality and quantity of an area’s ecological integrity should be curtailed, changed, or stopped; while any activity which enhances, restores, or expands ecological values should be supported.

It should not matter if that activity is recreation or ranching.

There is a chunk of BLM land west of Taos, New Mexico, that will never be a wilderness area, national park, or wildlife refuge. It is modest land, mostly flat, covered with sage, and very dry. In its modesty, however, it is typical of millions of acres of

public land across the West. It is typical in another way too—it exists in a degraded ecological condition, the result of historic abuse and recent neglect.

As humble as this land is, it is not unloved. The wildlife like it, certainly, but so do the owners of the private land intermingled with the BLM land, some of whom have built homes there. The two new ranchers to the area also have great affection for this unassuming land, and want to see it healed.

These ranchers intend to use cattle as agents of ecological restoration. Through the effect of carefully controlled herding, the ranchers intend to browse and trample the sage and bare soil, much of which is capped solid, so that native grasses can get reestablished again. The ranchers are calling this act of restoration a “poop-and-stomp.”

Using cattle to restore rangelands is not as crazy as it sounds. In fact, Aldo Leopold once remarked that wildlife could be restored using the same tools that had destroyed it: “cow, fire, gun, axe, and plow.” The difference, of course, is the management of the tool, as well as the goals of the tool user.

The goal of the Taos project is ecological and economic restoration; and two of the tools are qualitative and quantitative assessment and monitoring. The science community has developed new protocols over the last decade to measure range health, focusing on the functionality of ecosystems. These protocols do not measure “wildness” or “pristineness.”

Instead, they ask a fundamental question: is the land healthy at the level of soil, grass, and water? If the answer is “no,” then we need to look into our toolbox for a new, or old, tool to repair the damage.

This project is emblematic of a new conservation approach in the West. In fact, I am convinced that land health and restoration, not wildness and protection, will become the principle paradigms of a new environmental movement in the not-so-distant future.

I was encouraged to learn that Wendell Berry spoke recently to the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors. His invocation that “You cannot save the land apart from the people—to save either, you must save both” has been the guiding principle of my environmental activism.

I believe the ecological crisis confronting us is, at root, a cultural crisis. Poor human behavior caused much of the environmental damage that surrounds us today, and only good human behavior will restore the land to health. Isolating people from nature, a current trend of thought among some activists within the Club, will only further alienate us from our roots, and compound the environmental challenges confronting us.

Take the homesteaders, ranchers, and BLM managers of the “forgotten” sageland near Taos, for example. They love the land and have developed a strong sense of place by living on it, working it sustainably, and acting collaboratively to restore it to health. Each values the land in a different, but legitimate, way, with the common goal of seeing it become healthy and productive for wildlife and people.

Their sense of place, along with the new toolbox and scientific protocols for measuring land health, is the key to the future of the environment in the West. This is something difficult for the average city-bound Sierra Club member, much less an activist, to understand—that our western lands, all of them, need more, and better, stewardship, not less.

The Sierra Club’s sense of place needs to expand beyond wilderness and national parks. It needs to include the “forgotten” lands and the people who live there; and it

needs to expand beyond knowing a place principally through recreation. Club members, and leaders, need to support reasonable rural people and encourage good stewardship. There are plenty of both out there, as well as a ton of common ground, literally, where urban and rural people can meet to bridge their differences.

As the saying goes, the only constant in life is change. Ranching is enduring big changes to its very nature, but so is public lands environmentalism. Where this evolutionary process is headed is anyone's guess, but I remain hopeful the Club will develop a new sense of place to go along with the changing times.

Sincerely,

Courtney White