

In Defense of Cows

I like cows and calves. I know, regular readers may be surprised by that statement, given that cattle are not native to Texas and I have written many times before about how exotic plants and exotic animals don't belong in a native habitat and can even be detrimental to the health of the ecology. And cattle are certainly not native species.

In general, non-native species, which did not evolve with all of the other species in the area, at best do not serve any of the same functions that native species do, and worse, may out compete native species and may even become overpopulated and invasive. For all of those reasons, I and most people concerned with conserving our native habitat, dislike exotic species.

And it is certainly true that cattle are not native to the western hemisphere. Neither are any of the other common livestock species, sheep, goats, horses, pigs and chickens. So why are they OK and nutria, axis deer, and feral hogs are not? The answer is that all of the livestock species are domesticated. They can be herded, penned, moved at our will and their numbers controlled by their owners.

Before European settlement, the native grazers of the Hill Country were bison, elk and pronghorn, and they were migratory, moving to where the grass was good and leaving when the grass was exhausted so it could recover naturally. We nearly exterminated the bison and drove the elk and pronghorn out of the area and greatly reduced their numbers.

When I was ten years old, I bought my first 4-H animals, three lambs. They never liked me and I never liked them very much. Then as the years went by, I had a series of three calves—I liked them a lot. It takes a lot of time to raise a 4-H calf and I mostly enjoyed doing it. (Breaking the ice off the water trough in the early morning—not so much.) And I was sad every time I had to sell one.

So, I have liked cows and calves ever since. But it is true that cattle, sheep and goats, or rather the ranchers who owned and managed them, have done a lot of damage to the land and our native habitats over the years. This is especially true of ranching in the early 1900s when economic and climatic conditions forced ranchers to greatly overgraze the land. And there are still properties where such overgrazing is continuing.

But these problems are not being caused by the cattle, or sheep and goats either for that matter. Overgrazing and degradation of the land is the fault of the landowner for stocking with too many animals on a continuous basis. Such practice not only reduces the vigor and health of the grass plants, but it also leads to a less productive mix of grass species, to more bare ground which leads to erosion and less fertile soil.

Just like the problem with cedar is not the properties of the individual cedar bushes, but rather the number of cedar bushes that cause us problems. It is not the individual cows that are the problem, but rather the stocking rate and lack of pasture rest that leads to degraded pastures. Cattle are certainly no more damaging to the habitat than bison,

possibly even less so. (Sheep, and especially goats, it can be argued, are more damaging to the habitat because of their consumption of more browse than cattle or bison, and thus they compete with white-tailed deer for food.)

Many modern Hill Country ranchers have clearly demonstrated that it is possible to raise cattle and still maintain a healthy, diverse, productive, native grassland habitat, and their examples are becoming more well-known and more imitated. It is probably true that as large ranches are broken up into smaller ranchettes, the owners of the latter may have a harder time raising cattle on small acreages without overgrazing them.

And finally, of course, we have to admit, most of us like to eat meat and therefore we are certainly responsible for the existence of ranching and of the beef industries with all of the ecological problems and increased use of natural resources associated with them.

Long term, world-wide, humans raising animals to eat (mainly cattle, pigs, and chickens) has resulted in extreme destruction of native vegetation including rainforests, to make room to raise the crops to feed the animals. This is a significant contributor to climate change, but a topic for future columns.

Until next time...

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