



Social Capital and Ranching : A Partnership of Conservation in the West

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Twenty years ago, the idea that grazing livestock would become a central component in the discussion of large landscape conservation in the American West seemed ludicrous. Now, though, things have changed drastically. Ranching, and therefore livestock grazing, is talked about in a way that includes it as a viable means for not only conserving but also restoring previously damaged land, and for good reason. Ranchers and environmentalists have changed how they view and manage the land, based on a mutual interest in protecting the open lands of the West. However, while it appears as if the conflict between ranching and environmentalism has somewhat subsided, there now exists a new problem. How can ranching, which conserves land, manages livestock grazing in a sustainable way, and promotes collaboration through grassroots movements be sustained on a larger scale? How can we fulfill what author and public lands expert Charles Wilkinson calls a “crossing of the next meridian, this time not a geographic marker but a line of intellectual, social, and government commitment?”

Introduction

A well-known scholar and expert on ranching recently referred to the Western range as the “leaking lifeboat” of large landscape conservation (Sayre 2007, 46). The phrase is a contradictory metaphor filled with both fear and hope. On the one hand, he infers that ranching has the potential to conserve the vast, open land of the American West. However, he also believes there is a puncture in this lifeboat – the lifeboat is “leaking” – a serious problem we must not ignore. For example, agricultural acreage in the West has decreased steadily about one million acres per year from 1964 to 1997, and the trend is still headed in that direction (Sullins, Theobald, Jones and Burgess 2002). One of the root causes to this problematic decline undoubtedly centers on a major socioeconomic shift in the U.S. after World War II, one that brought with it massive growth in western population and, therefore, urbanization in the form of real estate development, infrastructure growth, and fragmentation. All of these factors are major threats to ranching. Today, as these threats show no sign of relenting, the important question is how to strengthen the hopeful side of the metaphor – ranching that can conserve land – so that it can survive and so that the natural West can survive. In other words, how do we sustain the “lifeboat,” or rather, “rebuild the ship while continuing to sail in it” (Sayre 2007, 46)?

In short, there is no simple answer to this question, but there are clues to what could potentially work. Ranchers today are adapting to the changing social, economic, and physical environment around them in order to survive, and in doing so have brought up possible solutions. For instance, some have diversified their streams of income, finding new ways to make money, and therefore, broadening their financial safety nets. Diversifying could certainly provide one answer to the

question of how to sustain ranching in the near future, but there are also others. One of the more promising solutions is the building of social capital, often equated with “community development” or “community collaboration,” but more accurately stated these are the social ties and partnerships across a variety of levels and types of organization that can help a rancher in sustaining an operation. I will go further in depth with this idea later on in the report showing how social capital actually can help sustain a rancher’s land and business and therefore contribute to conservation at large. Even though social capital may not be easy to build, it is still worth trying to figure out how it works and how to foster it. In the process, we not only increase the chances of finding a more nuanced answer, but we also raise discourse on a crucial topic of western landscape conservation and challenge traditional notions of the role of ranching in society.

Conservation Potential of Ranching

Before exploring further *how* ranching could be sustained in the future, it is important to first explain *why* many ranching operations in the West should be sustained at all. The first two paragraphs of this report suggest that ranching should continue, but not everyone agrees on this point. Some, mostly environmentalists, say that livestock grazing, in any shape and form, simply does not belong in the natural ecosystems of the West, a sentiment that reverberates from past years of conflict. Yet, since the 1990s, many environmentalists and ranchers have realized that livestock grazing, and ranching as a whole, do not inherently conflict with land conservation, but the two can be reconciled.

Of course, this conclusion of consensus did not happen without years of struggle and rhetorical gridlock. During the peak of arguing in the 1980s and 1990s, it was ranchers and

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environmentalists who engaged in what ranching expert Courtney White calls an unfortunate “tribal warfare between denizens of the “Old” West and advocates of the “New,” with lassos on one side, and lattes on the other” (2008, pp. xii). He is referring to a substantial shift in sociopolitical and economic power during the post-World War II period. Before this time, ranchers were largely in control of the fate of public land and were under little government regulation for grazing or any other sort of natural resource use, for that matter. What resulted on the range over the years was a “tragedy of the commons” situation in which individuals staked out land, usually healthy riparian areas, and grazed as if there were no limits. Therefore, when political power and new cultural sensibilities began to shift to the “new westerner,”—the hiker, fisherman, and other urban-based recreationalist—the rhetoric of overgrazing raised concerns.

Closed-range environmentalism grew out of this concern and not just because of ranching but also for other apparent abuses of the public domain – clear-cut logging and open-pit mining, in particular. The movement would eventually gain enough clout to influence Congress under President Nixon, hence the signing of a raft of legislation like the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and an early version of the Clean Water Act, as well as a bill creating the Environmental Protection Agency (White 2008). These may be important policies to some extent, but their passing also represented, at least to ranchers, a favoring of the environmentalist side of the spectrum on the part of the government. The debate began to polarize as a result. Many ranchers stayed strong to what they saw as their rights, culture, and tradition in the threat of losing all of this while environmentalists rallied behind the battle-cry, “Cattle Free by 93,” a sentiment backed by famous writer Edward Abbey. Not until a decade or two had passed did the conflict start to calm down and talk of finding consensus arise.

Historically, it was in this period of time that the paths of ranching and conservation began to intertwine. Both sides not only became fatigued from fighting, but there was also mounting evidence for the triviality of a polarized debate. One example helps explain. During the 1980s in southern Arizona, there was a large parcel of land in the Altar Valley—the Buenos Aires Ranch. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) would eventually convert this ranch into the Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge through lobbying pressure from major environmental groups and wildlife agencies. Because of the threat to an endangered bird species, among other apparent negative effects, these groups wanted to protect the area from overgrazing. They would achieve their goal—livestock was removed and kept that way since. However, despite the massive effort to revive the masked bobwhite – over 25,000 captive-bred birds were released – there has been no success in restoring the population (Sayre 2006). In this specific case, removing livestock clearly has not improved the situation. On the other hand, it would be misleading to use this piece of evidence as proof that grazing is necessarily good. Overgrazing has proven to cause irreversible damage to grassland ecosystems. Rather, it should simply show that removing livestock completely does not necessarily produce better results. Thus, the lesson is that neither of the extremes

of this argument, overgrazing nor removal of grazing, could provide the best solution. There needed to be a middle ground.

The rise of studies in range ecology, simply the science of rangelands, would provide one avenue for finding mutual interest. Specifically, livestock and grasslands do not need to conflict in the way they were perceived. A report from *Conservation Biology* maintains that “because of the similarities between the effects of natural disturbances and animal husbandry, [rangelands] can harbor many features of pristine habitats” (Pykala 2000, 105). That is, many range ecologists, who claim that grasslands are accustomed to natural flux (fires, grazing, and climate change), draw the parallel between the natural disturbances of grazing animals that used to exist more broadly across North America and the cattle that now occupy their place. Grasslands, according to these ecologists, require a consistent source of disturbance in order to maintain a “natural” state. In response, ranchers have worked with ecologists and environmentalists alike to come up with ways to more closely replicate the mechanisms of the specific ecosystems upon which they graze.

It is important to emphasize the word “specific” here because melding range ecology, a relatively new science, with land and livestock management has proven extremely complicated and context related (Havstad 1993). Unique environmental conditions govern every ranch. While there have been attempts at creating an overriding template for how to manage land holistically (See Savory 1999), the results are uncertain. Many in this field disagree over the effectiveness of Savory’s holistic resource management (HRM), the idea that the natural integrity of rangelands can be greatly improved by altering traditional grazing practices into a more sustainable method (i.e., implementing practices such as rotational grazing or prescribed fires). Others maintain that the path to improving rangeland biodiversity comes from a general adaptive mindset – simply thinking more about one’s environment and then finding new ways to manage – instead of following one set of rules. What is likely more important than debating which method achieves the greatest benefits, at least for the moment, is to recognize that numerous ranchers across the West have tapped into the growing knowledge of range ecology to better the natural conditions of their land (i.e., watershed, biodiversity, plant growth, etc.). And for many, it has worked. To know that there are cases where a rancher changes his land management and is therefore able to conserve, and even restore it, gives great hope to the collaborative efforts of environmentalists and ranchers.

Perhaps even more hopeful is the ability of ranchers to protect the open lands of the West from urbanization. Rangelands represent a crucial part of the West: vast, open areas. In 1989, almost sixty-one percent of the total land base in the eight western states was rangeland and half of that was privately owned (USDA 1989). They still dominate today. Roughly forty-three percent of all acres in livestock production in the West were connected to grazing allotments in 1992 meaning that many of the private ranches were also connected to public land (West of 100th, p.26). Rangelands then, because of how much they encompass, have the ability to maintain the West’s physical identity by protecting large tracts of land from urban

development and fragmentation. They keep ecosystems in tact therefore preserving a natural integrity that does not exist in such prevalence in the eastern U.S. Couple these facts with the potential for biological restoration of overgrazed areas from the past by using a more adaptive style of land management (Brown and McDonald 1995), and it seems obvious to include ranching in the conservation discussion.

Many in the conservation community already know that ranching does not have to be excluded from the discussion these days. Both sides have found a relatively stable consensus to use as a foundation for further work. On the ranchers' side, changing how they ranch, whether they change because of the pressure from the conservation community or not, has certainly led to positive outcomes; on the environmentalists' side, incorporating an agricultural tradition of the past into a new way of thinking about western lands has protected numerous areas from urbanization without giving up their personal beliefs or values. A dichotomy has been dissolved, at least to some extent. People still disagree, and always will, but the conversation has come a long way from twenty or even ten years ago.

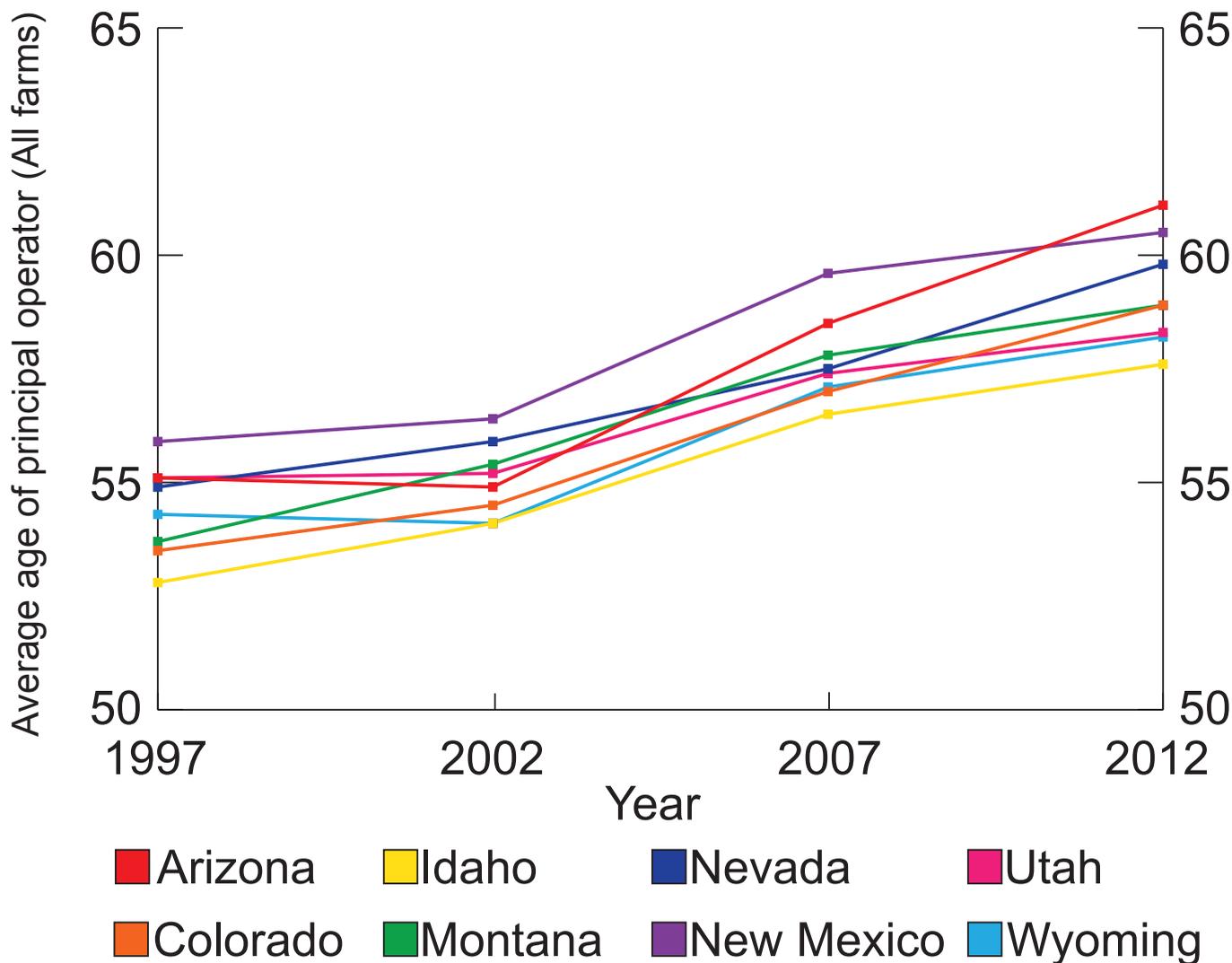
What ultimately resulted from conflict in the 1990s and 1980s, at least in one sense, was the formation of a large number

of local community-driven organizations of ranchers and environmentalists aimed at seeking mutual interest. These are the groups that currently occupy the front lines, grappling with the question of what to do about the sinking lifeboat, that is, how to increase the longevity of ranching that conserves. They ask this question because they know that there is a unique opportunity to collaborate and work towards solving a major problem together. Many of these organizations have witnessed successes, which give us all reason to believe that we should continue to think about how to keep their efforts afloat. In doing so, we contribute to a redefining of the role of ranching in conservation, a process of critical thinking that is important in itself.

A Formidable Challenge

Up to this point, it may seem like the current state of affairs between ranchers and environmentalists shows an optimistic future. Conflict from the past has settled down significantly, new organizations have formed, and they are conserving land. These variables should not add up to a conclusion that nothing is wrong, however. In fact, there are probably more signs that point towards the demise of ranching in the West than those that point towards survival. These pressures, most

Figure 1: Average Age of Principal Operator (All Farms) in the Rocky Mountain West



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service

of which derive from social, economic, and political changes, must not be ignored if the question of how to sustain ranching is to be asked.

A new socioeconomic climate poses the most significant threat to ranchers today. Ranchers deal with factors like encroachment on land from urban development, increasing land prices due to booming real estate growth, consolidation of power in the hands of agricultural corporations, pressure from environmentalism to change traditional practices, and the uncertainty of finding new leadership for their operation. The last example listed here is particularly problematic as it relates to the increasing average age of ranchers and farmers in the West (**Figure 1**). That is, ranchers are facing an increasingly daunting task of carrying on their operations, which involves finding younger people to fill their spot. Yet, with the shifting sociopolitical nature of many western states, many young people are not associated with agriculture as a career but rather with technology and business. Almost all of these factors relate in one way or another to the changing paradigm that is the New West. And while it may be impossible to predict whether or not rangelands will remain in the near future, this new economic playing field would surely play a part in its demise.

The “New West” is a term that describes a major shift in sociopolitical and economic dynamics from primarily extractive-based, “Old West” industry – mining, logging, and ranching – to a primarily recreational, tourism-based, urban, and high-tech industry. Before World War II, the western market depended on a demand from the eastern states for raw natural resources. It was strongly connected to the eastern market, that is, and not until after the war did the western economy begin to build its own unique identity (Gottlieb and Wiley 1985). This new entity developed an industrial maturity that did not exist before the 1940s, and furthermore, eventually allowed for the infrastructural growth necessary to support a larger population and economy.

As a result of this new foundation, a massive and rapid migration is exactly what occurred. From 1970 to 1995 the West grew in population by thirty-two percent whereas the rest of the country grew only by nineteen percent (Case, Alward, Banks and Butler 1997). Much of the increase was isolated in urban areas where there were the most job, real estate, and general economic prospects. But the growth in cities like Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Phoenix during the postwar period can also be attributed to another factor, physical amenities – attractions like a pleasant climate, recreational opportunity, and retirement convenience (Ullman 1954). People, both old and young, wanted the excitement and comfort of this new frontier. And for similar reasons, population continues to grow today, even more so than during the postwar period. Hence, from 2000 to 2010, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and Idaho were the four fastest growing states in the U.S., respectively (Mackun and Wilson 2011). Other western states and cities follow in pursuit.

Simultaneously, as cities boom in size, surrounding rural areas can become developed. In fact, the nation’s fastest growing type of land use is actually rural residential development, something that has not happened since 1950 (Brown, Johnson, Loveland, and Theobald 2005). This statistic does not

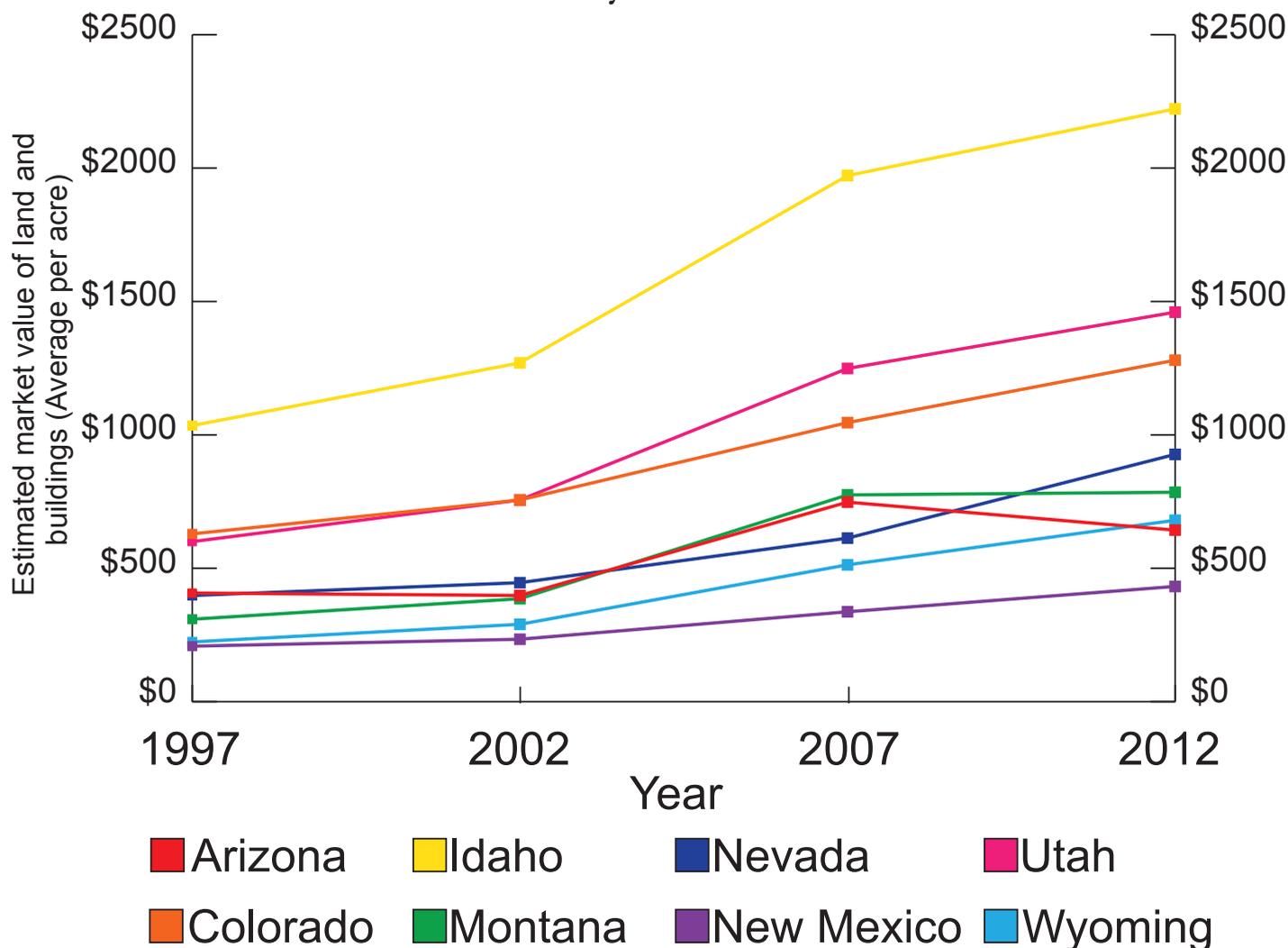
even include suburban and exurban (just outside of suburbs) growth, another pressing matter when it comes to the threat of open spaces and ranching economics. True, the burgeoning expansion of recreational and bedroom communities signaled the move away from the old extractive industries of mining, logging, and agriculture, which, in certain cases, undoubtedly led to negative consequences for the biological value of open western lands. However, somewhat ironically, the decline of the Old West also meant the profound rise of urbanization, which has subsequently led to an increased level of wildlife habitat destruction and fragmentation of lands surrounding the urban areas. Some would argue that the conversion to real estate development is not as bad as it seems, claiming that farming consumes lots of water, grazing degrades the quality of public lands, and, therefore, there is a net gain in the new western economy (See Wuerthner 1994). Not fully considered in this argument, though, are the consequences to private, vast rangelands, the pieces of land that have potential to maintain the openness of the West.

Many of the consequences have already occurred. Increasing demand for rangelands due to the growing population around western urban centers has raised land prices dramatically over the past forty years (**see Figure 2**). Higher land prices equal a higher price tag for ranches. Add to this unstable economic markets, unpredictable climate, enormous estate taxes, low return on investment, and political uncertainty over access to public lands (from past lobbying pressure on the government from environmentalists), and there is no wonder why ranchers are choosing to sell their land to private real estate developers or subdivide it themselves (Sheridan 2001). Otherwise, many have attempted, some successfully, to diversify their income with second jobs or by offering other goods and services from the ranch.

The competition from booming real estate growth in the New West, along with other challenges from the new economy, represents a key hurdle when discussing the survivability of ranching. In response, there must be a reforming of the “Western Range,” a concept of governing laws and regulations invented during the early 1900s that maintained that the “value of ranches would always be a function of their productivity for livestock” (Sayre, 2005, 25). Of course, with the new western economy in full force, ranchers can seldom depend just on livestock productivity. And with the new definition of the Western Range comes the sense that ranching need not always be associated with the Old West. The two sides of Old versus New and traditional versus progressive should not have to be as locked into a dichotomy as the rhetoric suggests.

Thus, the discussion on ranching and conservation has come to a turning point. It requires moving away from this impasse and towards a more adaptive approach, a way of redefining our preconceived notions of livestock grazing, ranching, and conservationism. Even if the Old West may be dying out, which many seem to think it is, then we should still consider attempts at reconciling ranching and sustainability as a definite possibility at conserving large landscapes in the West. That is because we have seen it work in certain cases. And even if this new way of thinking about ranching is a zero sum game in the

Figure 2: Estimated Market Value of Land and Buildings (Average per acre) in the Rocky Mountain West



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service

sense that it is temporary, it should still be considered a gain as a way to learn about how conservation in the American West is changing.

Social Capital as Conservation

As a part of this research project our team of students travelled around the West – Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado – to meet with ranchers, environmentalists, federal and state agencies, writers, and academics to see these places in person. We went knowing that there is only so much that can be learned from reading the literature on a topic. It is easy to piecemeal together a picture of what seems to be complete, but really there is always something else there that can only be filled in by going out into the field and seeing the places written about in articles or talking to people who wrote a particular book. One of the places was in Montana, in the Blackfoot Watershed, a valley totaling about 1.5 million acres fifty miles northeast of Missoula. And there we met with an organization called the Blackfoot Challenge.

The Blackfoot Challenge (BC) is a collaborative group of landowners, scientists, loggers, hunters, anglers, environmentalists, nonprofit workers, and government employees with

the goal of conserving land and the rural way of life. Central to this goal is collaboration, or as they like to put it, “finding the 80 percent we can agree upon and looking past the 20 percent that we cannot.” In the early 1990s, the local community of the watershed began to push back against the growing pressure from subdivision and second-home development in the area. This development greatly challenged the wildlife habitat and the rural character of the Blackfoot region. Known for a long withstanding tradition of collaborating, this initial community created in 1993, the BC. Since then, they have been growing in their social outreach and in land protection.

What is remarkable about the group is that what presents a formidable challenge to most ranching communities, the economic pressures from the new western economy, only seems to strengthen their ability to achieve their goals. It is not that the economy does not present hurdles for them, but rather that they have been able to work within the system to create something unique. Likewise, the BC has been able to draw in more and more members to their team, locally and from the national level, because of the attention they have brought to the detrimental effects of real estate development. They have found a collective mission. Hence, some large, politically and financially

powerful organizations, like The Nature Conservancy (TNC), have taken interest in their work. Having TNC as one of your partners provides a political validity to the work you are trying to do. That is, TNC gives a sort of recognition to those on the outside of the community that the BC, and ranching in general, is a part of landscape conservation. Also, TNC provides economic backing to the BC, giving them a better chance at buying up lands from other companies (extractive companies, that is) in the region and at setting conservation easements.

It is important at this moment to elucidate the concept of conservation easements and how they affect private landowners' role in public conservation. Put simply, conservation easements are a permanent legal agreement between a private landowner and a land trust or government agency (take TNC) that limits how a landowner can develop land in exchange for a financial gain, usually in the form of tax deductions or credits. If a landowner donates an easement to a land trust, instead of selling an easement to another landowner, and that donation benefits the public by protecting important natural resources, it can qualify as a tax-deductible charitable donation (Land Trust Alliance). An added benefit, according to proponents of easements, is the increased natural value of the land as it is protected in perpetuity, which can potentially lead to greater economic output for a rancher or farmer, not to mention simply guarding land from potentially harmful development. If a rancher agrees to an easement on his land then he gives up certain rights, such as building irrigation structures, but is still able to use the land for raising livestock or growing crops. Those who own the land after one owner has left still must abide by the legal terms, which vary among easements. No two easements are exactly the same.

With the rapid growth of urbanization in the West, easements provide a seemingly ideal mode of protection in that they counter growth and allow farmers and ranchers to remain on the land earning income. Thus, the result is not only that these open landscapes are remaining biologically habitable, but also a rural lifestyle becomes more economically sustainable. However, some pundits argue that easements are not actually contributing to conservation because they serve very specific economic goals of landowners rather than working towards a more holistic sense of conservation (Morris 2004). Much of the critique against easement effectiveness comes from anecdotal sources, so there must be more quantitative analysis to come to any conclusion. Easements have, on the other hand, shown many quantifiable improvements in biological diversity and in creating a more economically feasible operation for landowners. Many have noticed these benefits, so the legal agreements have continued to grow in quantity and land coverage in the West.

The Nature Conservancy plays a large role in encouraging the growth of easements on private land. In fact, they are the largest holders of easement acreage in the U.S. with around 3.2 million acres in possession (Kiesecker et al. 2007). Certainly, TNC is a large and economically powerful organization that provides backing to other organizations and individual landowners, so it makes sense that they own so much acreage. The fact that they are such a powerful organization gives private landowners an avenue through which to connect their conservation work, say if they are working on land that is under an

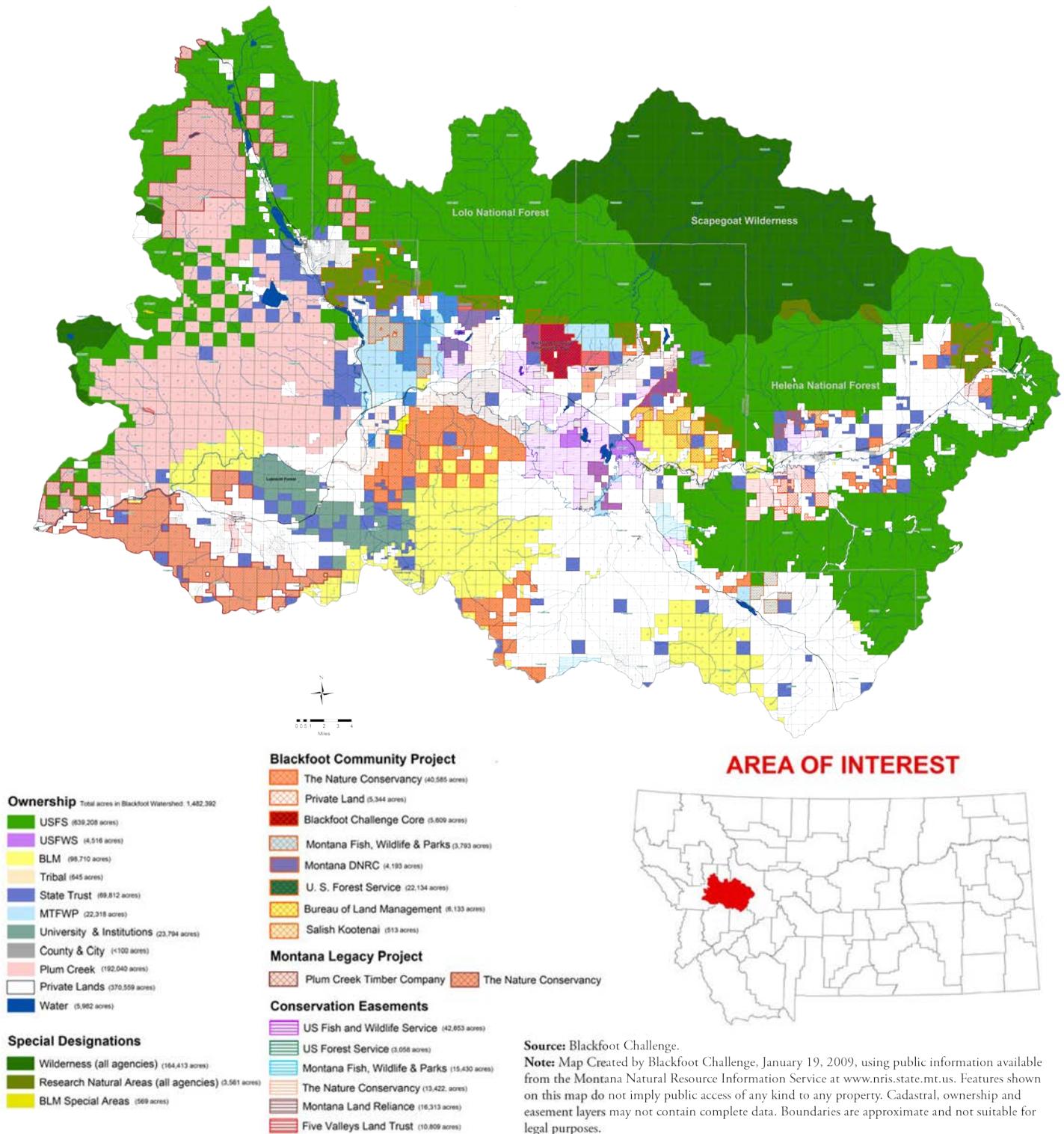
easement, for example, to a larger, more public scale. In other words, TNC is well-known and politically connected in the conservation community, so they have the agency to bridge the gap of small, private landowners to larger public initiatives, such as preserving open landscapes from urban development. One of these groups of landowners that is backed by TNC, and receives these benefits of being connected to a large-scale goal, is the Blackfoot Challenge.

The group out of Montana, partly because of TNC's support, possesses a significant amount of capital, and not just in the economic sense, but in other ways as well. They have built up a base of social capital – all of the benefits they receive from their many, and powerful, partnerships – over the years. In **Figure 3**, the breadth of social connections that the BC has access to is apparent. They also have a growing symbolic capital, a term made famous by social scientist Pierre Bourdieu that represents all the resources someone, or in this case some group of people, have based on recognition or notoriety. The BC is often used as a sort of poster-child in the discussion of ranching and conservation because of their feats and, therefore, they can obtain more capital in all meanings of the word. Capital, then, does not often come in one shape or size, and multiple “species” of capital, to use Bourdieu's terminology, often feed off of each other. They are interrelated. Going into a full-fledged explanation of social theory would be outside of the scope of this paper. With this little understanding we can, however, look into why a group like the BC can sustain itself despite the changing economic conditions.

A solid foundation of social, economic, and symbolic capital allows for flexibility through uncertainty, especially for private landowners. In the case of the BC, public land agencies and environmental organizations, like TNC, have bought easements in the Blackfoot Watershed, and have greatly benefited those in the community not only by keeping large landscapes in tact but also through tax breaks. The BC has been able to direct the resale of 88,000 acres of private corporate land and also keep 89,000 acres of private land under perpetual conservation easements (McDougall and Kuziw). With the strong political and economic tie to TNC, the BC has been able to partake in easement deals that they may not have been able to do otherwise. Furthermore, due to the easements, the BC has built a greater financial base while still working on and conserving the land. Social capital, then, in the form of a strong connection with TNC, among other environmental organizations, nonprofits, and governmental agencies, has enabled the BC to garner a stronger economic base and thus better navigate the socio-economic challenges of the dynamic New West. This conclusion also shows that a diversity of social capital takes an important role in sustainability, that TNC is not the only organization through which the BC builds capital. Rather, the BC is connected to many other groups who help cover the complexities of the issue of conserving large landscapes in the West.

To explain, another way that social capital plays into the sustaining of ranchers in the BC is through the sharing of knowledge and building of trust on a small and large scale. During our visit we met with a rancher named Jim Stone, the chairman of the BC board. He gave his own story of acquiring the ranch from his father and feeling like there were “ten years

Figure 3: Blackfoot Challenge Private, Government, and Nonprofit Land Ownership and Easements



Source: Blackfoot Challenge.
Note: Map Created by Blackfoot Challenge, January 19, 2009, using public information available from the Montana Natural Resource Information Service at www.nris.state.mt.us. Features shown on this map do not imply public access of any kind to any property. Cadastral, ownership and easement layers may not contain complete data. Boundaries are approximate and not suitable for legal purposes.

where [he] had no idea what to do,” but then learning from other landowners in the area over time how to manage things like water, predators, and the health of large tracts of grassland. “I couldn’t have done it without my partners,” he said. Taking his example might lead to the conclusion that the more connections, or social capital, the more likely a longer term outlook. Stone’s example not only represents the significance of simply learning through a shared experience, but it also acts as a metaphor for how the BC works as a whole. The organization places

community and collaboration right at the center of its work. This ideology is what they were founded on and they embrace it unlike many. The logic goes that by finding common ground, with everyone who holds a stake in this watershed before deciding how to manage the land, future conflicts can be avoided and more pragmatic approaches to problems can be taken. It takes a certain level of trust in this system to operate well, looking past personal beliefs and values, giving up individualism to some extent, and working towards common interest. What

ideally results is a network of people and organizations that can support each other if need be. Since their inception the BC has built this network, including over sixty partners and about 500 people from the community involved on committees, to become a formidable force in the conservation community at large (McDougall and Kuziw).

Some claim that the BC represents the epitome of community-based conservation. Take it from TNC's webpage showcasing their connection to the group: "If you are looking for a model for cooperation in the rural West, you need look no further than the Blackfoot Community Project." Or from Dave Smith, director of the Intermountain West Joint Venture: "Across the West, you won't find a better example of collaborative, strategic, and results-oriented conservation" (McDougall and Kuziw). The organization receives high praise from many. They provide a feasible example of how a local, grass-roots effort can not only conserve large amounts of land but also give hope to other communities looking to do the same. The BC illustrates a potential answer to the question of how to sustain ranching in the New West, and that answer seems to be related to collaboration and community building. However, as is common with this topic, what seems obvious is never actually obvious, and there are always peripheral factors that muddle up the clarity. Understanding these factors can aid us in finding a more realistic answer.

First, the words "collaboration" and "community" should be used carefully. They are thrown around a lot in this discussion, and they are fine words when speaking generally, but they oversimplify. And it is also in part *how* they are used. Collaboration is often used as a word to describe the means to an end, the end being the finding of a common goal. It is risky to make collaboration the central guideline of an organization because either the constituents of the group can become fatigued with constantly trying to find mutual interest or the more pragmatic objectives of that group can become impeded. Of course, collaboration in itself is not innately hindering, it is more about what role collaboration plays in the particular organization. In the case of the BC, the initial formation of people could not have happened without collaborating. They knew that the only way to push back against the threat of urban and second-home development on their land was with numbers, and therefore, they used a common interest as a means for a change, not just for the sake of collaborating because it might bring something good. Additionally, the word "community" also runs into trouble. It is uncertain what exactly the term means or to whom it refers in the context of ranching, but most often, at least from the outside perspective of ranching, it connotes conservation that occurs with the "support and active participation of local residents, rather than being imposed on them by outside powers or experts" (Sayre 2005, 151). This definition serves some justice to what the BC does, but to label them a "community-based conservation" group overlooks the intricacy of how they actually function and have come into existence.

Part of why the idea of the BC community is more complex than it seems is explained in their own mission statement: "We support environmentally responsible resource stewardship through cooperation of private and public interests"

(McDougall and Kuziw). The important part is "cooperation of private and public interests" because it signals that community-based does not only have to mean governed by the agendas of local residents. Community for the BC occurs at different levels, and around their original core of mostly agriculturalists in the watershed other players have joined in their mission. The informal membership of the group is composed of private landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials, and corporate landowners. Although this larger reach came on after the inception of the core group, the BC could not have achieved such success in conservation without the benefit of relationships to organizations such as TNC or to the Fish and Wildlife Service in Montana, just to name a couple. They could not have accumulated the same social, economic, and symbolic capital without outside connections, and therefore may not have been able to withstand pressure from a growing urbanization of the West. A similar phenomenon happens with many other coalitions of ranchers and environmentalists around the West. Nathan Sayre in his book *Working Wilderness*, when talking about the Malpai Borderlands Group, a well-known coalition sort of like the BC that works in southern Arizona and New Mexico, explains the idea like this:

"Holding this complex of relationships together, then, is not so much a matter of locals versus outsiders, or private interests versus public ones, but rather of mutual interdependence: a sense that shared goals can only be achieved cooperatively. This, in turn, requires mutual respect at the level of everyday interactions" (2005, 151).

"Community-based" or simply "community," then, to the BC and for many other groups alike represents a label that can oversimplify and make their work seem replicable in ways that it is not. When talking about these conservation efforts the emphasis should be more on contextual, individual details rather than trying to generalize.

Another factor, that creates problems when trying to come up with an answer or a model out of the successful groups like the BC and the Malpai Group, is context. Something often hidden behind the apparent strength of these groups in creating sustainability is a host of variables that have gone their way in the past (i.e., fortune). For the BC, a combination of strong leaders, powerful relationships to partnering nonprofits, and the driving force of a mutually opinionated community all lined up to help legitimize them as a reputable force in the conservation arena at large. This is not to say that their success should only be attributed to context or luck. Rather, the incredible amount of hard work, in the planning process and literally out in the fields, on the part of the individuals who have made this organization what it is, has aligned with the right mix of contextual ingredients to make a more considerable impact. If the context holds this much importance then there remains the question of what the BC can teach other groups across the West. The BC represents consensus, trust, ecology, and open communication – all traits that could be seen as instructive or replicable in other situations. Yet, while these traits should be strived for in trying to conserve landscapes there should not be one template that works for everyone. A significant reason

many of these types of collaborative groups in the West have been able to do well is that they have adapted. Adapting means they have not confined themselves to one structure or model. Instead of a model, then, what should take its place?

More careful and critical examination of cases that have worked needs to happen. There are, in fact, possible pragmatic solutions to sustaining ranching in the New West that can be taken from cases that have worked; they are simply complicated and dependent on the context to which they are applying. The BC has shown the importance of building trust in partners that can bring about more capital. However, for other groups this connection-making may not be as simple as building trust, and they may not even have potential connections. Also, a larger network does not necessarily have to be the route to sustainability. A ranch that I visited as a part of this research exemplifies this idea. It is called the Chico Basin Ranch just southeast of Colorado Springs, Colorado, and there they strive to diversify their environmental assets by not limiting themselves to raising livestock. The ranch sells leather goods, puts up their place as a vacation spot, promotes eco-tourism through recreation and hunting on their land, puts on special events on the ranch, and offers educational courses. In this way, the ranch strengthens its economic safety net during a changing economy and at the same time builds up a positive, marketable image. As is true for this ranch, not all ranches have to be a part of an organization like the BC in order to successfully conserve land. Chico Basin is able to spend more time on conservation strategies, something they have been at since before the postwar environmentalist movement, because of financial stability. And this stability largely comes out of self-driven motives. Other ranchers in the region fall into a similar category. Dale Lasater and Mike Callibrate (separate ranch owners) have tapped into a growing market of sustainable, local food buyers, especially in the Colorado Springs area, and therefore have made names for themselves as sustainable beef producers. Even though they are not a part of a group like the BC, the three ranchers I spoke to have become a part of a larger community that supports ranching as a means for conservation.

However, that these three ranchers from Colorado operate to bring about conservation without as deep of a foundation of social capital as the BC does not mean they do not use capital, in all forms, to maintain their operations. They too have connections that support their sustainability, mostly due to the burgeoning, in terms of population and economy, Front Range cities of Colorado. Plus, these areas have seen a growth in local food consciousness that ultimately supports the environmentally-aimed livestock production of ranchers like Lasater, Callibrate, and Phillips. In this case, it is easy to see that because of a broader trend in conservation – the push for local food sourcing – ranchers and farmers can benefit financially, and in turn, help protect land. Thus, in one way, the source of capital for these ranchers becomes available through a systematic shift and their ability to benefit from the resulting new markets and organizational support. Finding ways to further this process of creating new avenues for sustainability for ranchers – replacing older ideas of land management and environmentalism on the Western Range with new values and rules of conservation – is

surely an endeavor worth pursuing, albeit difficult.

Conclusion

Clearly, ranchers are changing the way they graze livestock, and they have been since the 1990s. The uncertainty is in the long-term outlook of this change. Yet, more important than looking to a potential end-goal is growing awareness of the process of working towards a more cohesive and progressive system of conservation in the West. What we can say for certain now is that the groups like the BC or the Malpai Group, among many others, are acting as incubators for these new conservation dynamics of the West and that they are creating a lot of discussion about the state of western landscapes – what threatens the land, what can protect it, and how to deal with a new paradigm of economy and society. That discourse in itself is valuable because it reveals aspects of western society, and U.S. society as a whole, that must be looked at more critically. For example, take the fact that the West is booming in urbanization and that, as a result, the political ecology is changing drastically (and has been for a while). By conversing about how ranching fits into this change in social and physical environment, we are able to better understand the role of local food sourcing, land management, conservation policy, and broader cultural shifts, just to name a few, as they relate to conservation. Thus, the process of working towards conservation is just as important, if not more so, as reaching, if even possible, an end goal.

An analogy that helps explain the importance of process-based conservation is the “leaking lifeboat.” The “lifeboat” may be filling up with water, that is, ranching that conserves the vast, open lands of the West may be facing exceedingly difficult socioeconomic challenges, but that does not mean we should abandon the boat. Trying to keep ranching afloat in desperate situations, many landowners and organizations have succeeded in creating new ways to sustain practices and cultural lifestyles that seem an unlikely partner of the New West. Ultimately, they have paved the way for innovative thought that spurs new discourse and generates tangible solutions to conserving large landscapes. Of course, many have also failed in this struggle, leading landowners to abandon ship, and even the collaborative groups like the Blackfoot Challenge face exceedingly difficult roadblocks. Some critics point out that it may not be worth it to continue to struggle to find solutions for sustaining the “lifeboat,” that we should turn our attention towards making sure the inevitable urbanization happens in a more ecologically-minded fashion. However, through the successes of many ranchers and landowners, and most importantly, the potential to learn from these successes (and failures), we should feel a sense of perseverance.

Ranching does not need to be in opposition to the changing New West, and by simply trying to solve problems of conservation in the New West through the lens of landowners, new pathways are generated, and not just within the discourse of ranching. Outdated ideas of the Western range, such as the fact that ranchers were once able to make all of their livelihood by selling livestock, are put in a much more critical light. New connections are made between landowners and the growing populations of the West, enabling the growth of social and

financial capital potential (the case of the Colorado ranchers, for instance). And when this capital potential grows, avenues of collaboration from landowner to urbanite, landowner to nonprofit or for profit, and producer to consumer open up as well. The multifaceted relationship of conservation to collaborative practices, political ecology, and environmental policy, among many other topics, becomes apparent when attempting to solve issues surrounding ranching in the West. This is because conservation-based ranching (some landowners would say most ranching in the West has been conservation-based) is not just a practice of raising livestock sustainably, but rather a complex, multidisciplinary endeavor and lifestyle that requires the attention of many who are not seemingly involved. In other words, ranching that conserves is not simply a topic discussed by ranchers, and the issues facing many ranchers are not just issues for ranchers to solve themselves. Instead, by persevering to maintain the “leaking lifeboat,” people from many different backgrounds and topics from many different disciplines must become involved.

Thus, it is worth persevering to keep ranching that conserves afloat because it not only has a substantial potential to conserve land, but also because it can spark further discussion about how best to conserve a radically changing West. And that discussion requires the help of urbanites, consumers,

producers, nonprofits, for-profits, government agencies, farmers, and ranchers alike. This conclusion begins to answer the question: Why bother with something that seems to have a grim outlook? If ranching seems to be declining in the West because of a boom in urbanization and a changing economic system, why should we not hop onto another “lifeboat” if it exists? Part of the answer is simply that there are still many ranchers and landowners in the West who cherish the lifestyle of living on the land and raising livestock and who are conserving land. The other part, as I have continually written, is that understanding how ranching can and cannot work within the system of the New West is integral to understanding large landscape conservation in the West. Tackling the challenge of sustaining a practice that is in jeopardy because of a socioeconomic change sheds light on what must be done in other regards than just agriculture to reinvent a system for conservation. Ranching, then, is not just an avenue for conservation, but also an avenue for realizing what and how problems related to conservation must be solved in the West. Without this way of testing the validity of the system that governs the West, issues that inhibit conservation are left unsolved. It seems clear that this reason is enough to prove the utmost importance of keeping ranching that conserves alive.

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