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Barbara Brower

# Sheep Grazing in National Forest Wilderness

## A New Look at an Old Fight

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The Bridger Wilderness of Bridger-Teton National Forest takes up most of the west slope of the Wind River Mountains in western Wyoming. Within the wilderness boundary lies the tallest of Wyoming's mountains, Gannett Peak; the Green River, a major tributary of the Colorado, begins here. But Bridger Wilderness is more than big mountains and important headwaters; it is a battleground for old adversaries who have

struggled to direct the use of America's wildlands, and who compete to influence the federal agency charged with administering this piece of public land (Figure 1). The livestock industry, environmentalists, and the US Forest Service are the players in this battle. And though this particular battleground is shaped by uniquely American institutions and history, the contest itself is one that can be found around the globe.



**FIGURE 1** Wind River Range, Wyoming, USA; Fremont and Jackson Peaks. Domestic sheep and recreation users compete for access to these mountains. (Ink drawing by Jan Olsen)

### Settlement, ranching, and the politics of national forest management

The agency responsible for America's national forest resources is the US Forest Service, itself part of the Department of Agriculture. Abiding agency policy was laid out in 1905 by Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot: National forests were to be administered to achieve "the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run." Such policy notwithstanding, the Forest Service, like any federal agency, is ultimately answerable to the US Congress, which authorizes its funding—and is itself beholden to special interests. And in much of the western US for most of the last 100 years, the range livestock industry has been the dominant special interest.

The shift from allocation to reservation of federal lands toward the end of the

19th century initiated conflicts with the public-land states and with accustomed users of formerly free-access resources. These conflicts persist today. The appropriate use of these lands and resources is one of the most contentious, divisive issues in the American West. This debate sets environmentalists against loggers and ranchers, draws national environmental and industrial groups to each side, places federal management agencies between these competitors and against one another, drives politics and polarizes communities, and has generated such heated antagonisms over so many years that there is small prospect of any resolution. Although the combatants often invoke science, history, and red-blooded American ideals in service of their arguments (each side drawing from a different deck of these trump values), plain fact and verifiable history and science are often hostage to

myth and the momentum of arguments crafted and refined over generations.

This unresolved conflict continues to influence the management of the national forests. Many people are familiar with the battle over trees in the national forests, particularly in the Northwest's old-growth forest remnants, where big trees grow. Yet in most of the intermountain West, big trees do not grow: only ragged forests of low-value lodgepole pine and slow-growing spruce and fir cloak the mountains that delineate national forests in the region (Figure 2). But this has not kept the 140 million acres of these national forests free of conflicts over use and protection.

### Wyoming ranchers and forest grazing policy

Forage, not trees, has historically been the important commodity harvested from the national forests of the arid West. Returns from the fees charged graziers for their use of this range consistently exceeded timber income on most forests over much of the 20th century. The economies of such states as Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, and Idaho have long depended heavily on ranching, and the summer range supplied by the national forests is critical to many ranchers. (It surprises many, including native westerners, to learn that, despite the widely embraced image of the West as the cattleman's kingdom and home of the cowboy, it was sheep ranching that often figured prominently in the developing economies and societies of western states.) This has meant that the disproportionate influence of the western states in matters of national resource policy has been turned to the advantage of western livestock producers, whose wealth and social importance placed them in positions of power in the range states. But as rancher influence has waned (with the reduced importance of the American farm sector in general and western livestock in particular and with increasing competition for the attention of western politicians from other constituencies, especially environmentalists), the range livestock industry has lost its commanding voice—without entirely losing its abil-

ity to steer federal grazing policy, as a Wyoming example will show.

The range sheep industry and the Forest Service share a long history in the Wind River Mountains of southwestern Wyoming, which became part of Yellowstone Timberland Reserve in 1891, just a decade after the first sheep bands were driven into the mountains to graze. The beginnings of federal jurisdiction coincided with the Wyoming range sheep industry's boom period: The state's sheep business grew sevenfold between 1895 and 1910—from 700,000 to 5,400,000 animals. Sheep supplanted cattle as Wyoming's most valuable commodity, and their owners assumed some of the cattlemen's former role in the social, economic, and political life of the state.

One function of the livestock industry in this era was to guide the infant Forest Service as it undertook to manage grazing on the national forests. The agency's first Chief of Grazing, sheepman Albert Potter, collaborated with Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot in developing Forest Service planning guidelines intended to be responsive to local needs. Established stockmen were invited to share in decision-making about forest grazing and took the opportunity to entrench themselves while excluding less influential competitors. Thus, recent immigrants and, often, disenfranchised Native and Mexican Americans who depended on itinerant bands of sheep trailed through publicly owned rangelands were the losers. Federal agency and dominant industry cooperated to produce a system of national forest forage allocation and grazing management that shaped the administration of other public lands, ensured a strong voice for affluent, influential stockmen, and remains in effect today.

As part of the initially established forest reserve, Bridger-Teton National Forest has experienced the whole history of Forest Service administration. Throughout vicissitudes in administrative policy, sheep have continued summer grazing in the Wind River Mountains. Changing fortunes in the livestock industry and its adversaries have been reflected in subtle variations in Forest Service policies on grazing, as the following case demonstrates.

*In 1905, Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot stated that the goal of administering national forests was to achieve “the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.” Such policy notwithstanding, the US Forest Service, like any federal agency, is ultimately answerable to the US Congress, which authorizes its funding—and is itself beholden to special interests.*

*The shift from allocation to reservation of federal lands toward the end of the 19th century initiated conflicts with the public-land states and with accustomed users of formerly free-access resources. These conflicts persist today.*

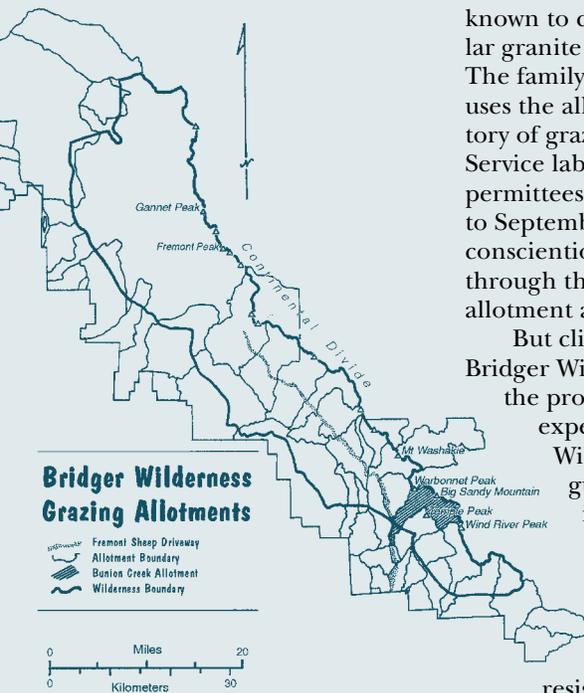
**FIGURE 2** Bunion Creek Allotment, looking north toward Cirque of Towers. As in most of the intermountain West, the forest is only low-value lodge-pole pine and slow-growing spruce and fir. (Photo by Barbara Brower)



**FIGURE 4** Deep Lake, East Temple, and Steeple Peaks, an area most attractive to climbers. (Photo by Jan Olsen)



**FIGURE 3** Grazing allotments in the Bridger Wilderness.



**Sheep and Deep Lake/Bunion Creek**

The Bunion Creek allotment, 11,000 acres of alpine forest, meadow, and mostly rock, is one of the southernmost allotments within the Bridger Wilderness (Figures 2 and 3). Its scenic heart is a set of peaks and small lakes centered on Temple Peak and known to climbers, who revere its spectacular granite walls, as Deep Lake (Figure 4). The family of French Basque descent that uses the allotment is part of a 100-year history of grazing here. Though the Forest Service labels it a barren allotment, the permittees who run sheep here from July to September use experienced ewes and conscientious herders to move sheep through the dispersed grazing within the allotment and call it one of their best.

But climbers and other visitors to the Bridger Wilderness, drawn to Deep Lake by the promise of wildness and solitude expected in federally designated Wilderness, are appalled and disgusted when they meet 2000 bleating sheep. Although the Wilderness Act of 1964 permits domestic livestock to graze in Wilderness areas, this politically mandated concession to the livestock industry was bitterly resisted and remains controversial.

Widespread among environmentalists since John Muir is the unshakable conviction that

grazing means environmental calamity. Forest grazing is particularly destructive, and sheep grazing does the most damage. There is a history of overgrazing in the western United States to justify concern and a tendency of managing agencies to see grazing effects through the grazer's—not the ecologist's—eyes. But better management and far fewer animals today have reduced many of the problems of an earlier period. One hundred thousand sheep grazed in the Wind River Range 100 years ago, at serious ecological cost; today there are fewer than 10,000. But the perception of negative impacts remains widespread, especially among climbers and other wilderness visitors (Figure 5). Their continuing virulent complaints about sheep encounters near Deep Lake led the Forest Service to redirect the sheep to another part of the wilderness. Ironically, though climbers were thus spared exposure to “hoofed locusts” and the Forest Service escaped their complaints, the less visited but more fragile alpine environment has proven less resistant to grazing impacts. Aesthetics and expectations of recreational visitors have trumped the Forest Service's mandate to protect the resource, or so it appears. In this contest, the sheepmen themselves were inconvenienced but accommodated: the Forest Service stayed true to its history in the region and made room in the forest for the sheep of a well-connected Wyoming ranch family—one of only two families still in the sheep business there.

A more recent contest may displace domestic sheep permanently from Bunion Creek and perhaps all of the Bridger Wilderness. Two endangered species endemic to this part of Wyoming have stronger friends than even the livestock

industry—at least so far. Protecting endangered grizzly bears as required by the Endangered Species Act creates a threat to the marginal economics of sheep ranching. Grizzlies are widening their range within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and one or two have started snacking on sheep in the north end of the Bridger Wilderness. Given present trends, it is only a matter of time before the bears move south. But because of a reintroduction program for the native bighorn sheep, the grizzlies may find only wild sheep at Bunion Creek. Bighorn were all but eliminated from their native ranges in the West, mostly because of disease brought in by their domestic cousins. A remnant herd on the east side of the Wind River range falls within the jurisdiction of another forest, in a different Forest Service region. The east-side forest's biologists initiated a program to expand the numbers and range of their bighorn herd, apparently unaware that domestic sheep still grazed west-side allotments. Wide-ranging young bighorn males mixing with domestic sheep may contract *Pasturella* or other afflictions fatal to wild sheep, then return to their bands, spreading death. The solution is to eliminate such encounters—which would end domestic sheep grazing in the Bridger Wilderness.

### Prospects

Management of public lands in the western United States is highly politicized and changeable, involving many players and an array of issues. The outcome of the contests in the Bridger Wilderness is yet to be decided, for it rests on a number of uncertainties:

- The Endangered Species Act that creates the current grazing conflict is under attack and may be revised, reducing its threat to the range livestock industry. Though the livestock industry is weaker than it used to be, it shares its positions on environmental law and policy with other, still significant constituencies such as developers and the mining industry. And ranchers benefit, too, from important American myths, particularly the idea of the Western Frontier and romantic visions of the cowboy: many see ranching as an essential part of the American landscape.

**FIGURE 5** Climber approaching Deep Lake, with Temple Peak in the background. (Photo by Jan Olsen)



- Last year, the Forest Service banned, for a time, the use of mechanical devices, including climbing hardware, in the wilderness. A reinstatement of such a ban could exclude climbers and mute that antisheep voice.
- Perhaps the US range livestock industry will fail entirely in the face of globalized competition.
- Or perhaps the increasingly common practice of participatory decision-making will change the terms of debate and reduce the influence of national interests on local resource users. This reaction to top-down conservation and development, more and more often put to use in the developing world, has begun to be applied to public-land planning in the rather different social-historical context of the United States.
- Or could it be that environmentalists and ranchers find common cause? In settling the interior West, ranchers fenced and irrigated hay meadows that are now the picturesque foreground to the region's big mountains and a critical habitat for important wildlife. Neither combatant is happy with the conversion of the open pastoral foreground to condominiums and the "trophy homes" of the New West—a landscape now accommodating itself to telecommuters and media stars rather than stockmen.

So the future of wilderness management in the Bridger Wilderness of the Wind Rivers remains open, the forces acting on it in flux, and the prospects for grazing uncertain. Also uncertain for some of us, in a situation of such muddled perception and policy, is whose side to be on.

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