

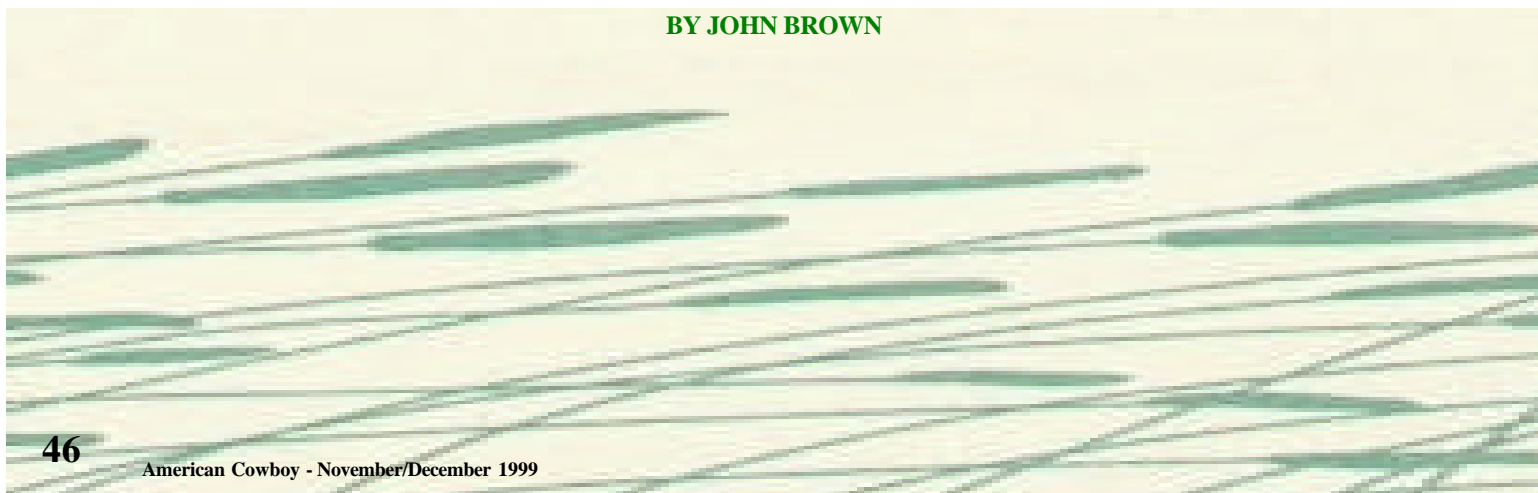


ELLEN BARONE

Welcome to The New Ranch

*The old ways aren't working
in some parts of cow country.
And the malls are on the march.*

BY JOHN BROWN



SANTA FE, N.M.-The Quivira Coalition is an unlikely Grange Hall full of New Mexico ranchers, environmentalists, and public land managers who believe that they might have something of benefit to share with each other, something that might actually enhance the economic and philosophical well-being of people who will not ever, in a thousand elections, vote the-same straight-party ticket. Headquartered in Santa Fe, the Quivira Coalition believes that healthy public rangeland and economically robust ranches might share the same grass.

The Quivira Coalition works toward construction of "The New Ranch," a place where cooperation has replaced confrontation, where common interests and common sense prevail, where environmentalists might come for supper. The New Ranch represents a

third-party position, an extension of the points of view of knowledgeable, well-intentioned environmentalists and ranch families who have found their livelihoods and a way of life on land they have worked for generations.

The founders of the Quivira Coalition-rancher Jim Winder, former Sierra Club staffer Barbara Johnson, and conservationist Courtney White-think they have discovered "a reasonable solution to the increasingly angry debate that surrounds grazing in the American West." In an early statement of purpose the three founders wrote that they were "entering the grazing battlefield not to referee the contest of wills between ranchers and environmentalists, or to mediate a truce, or even to find common ground among combatants. Instead, we propose to lead people to another playing field altogether. We believe that an alternative exists which allows the land to heal, and perhaps thrive, while enabling ranchers to make a living. We call it 'The New Ranch.'" And it looks exactly like Winder's Heritage Ranch near Nutt, N.M.

He describes the operation as "a midsized ranch, with 300 cows spread over some very good range." Winder's father had managed the ranch carefully, and Jim had followed his dad's enlightened principles of stewardship. "It's not as if the range improved overnight once the coalition was formed," he says. "In terms of grass and livestock we were in excellent shape, but I didn't feel that we

were doing well in communicating with either environmental groups or governmental agencies."

Winder took a step that some cattlemen might regard as radical indeed: he joined the Sierra Club. "I was treated with respect from the beginning, and I began to learn about the non-livestock aspects of running a ranch." And he met two environmentalists with minds as open as his, with ideas about how from time to time a ranch might take things easy.

Here's a ranch at rest.

Typically, only about two percent of the ranch's acreage is being grazed on any given day. The cattle are kept moving in millennial imitation of the historic grazing patterns of bison or elk. And these are large herds: The New Ranch



Ranchers hear of new ways to use fire as a range restorative tool at a Quivira Coalition workshop at Carrizo Ranch, near Capitan, N.M..

supports heavier stocking patterns than did the old ways. When the herd passes tomorrow to a new grazing area, they will have eaten less than 10 percent of the forage available in today's. The fundamental goal of The New Ranch is to maximize plant production during the growing season: the more plant tissue that remains after the cattle have passed, the faster the plants' recovery.

Meanwhile the cows' hooves have cultivated the soil surface between plants. Old grass has become ground cover, ready to be eaten by the earth-bound creatures that are the basis of the entire ecosystem. The soil's crust has been broken, enabling rainwater to infiltrate more quickly. Every hoofprint has planted a grass seed.

As it did with Jim Winder, the New

Ranch may demand a change in cattlemen's management style. Operating on the premise that poor land management-not cattle-causes ecological damage, the Quivira Coalition asks ranchers to consider new ideas about herding, rotation of cattle on the grass, and protecting streams. Macho Creek flows through the Heritage Ranch. Year-round it runs with precious, clear water as never it did when Winder grazed his cattle there during the growing season.

He had grazed the creek only slightly in the spring, just 50 heifers spread across 13 sections. But when he moved cattle off Macho Creek completely during the growing season, the improvements were immediate. Because Winder had managed his upland pastures so well, he could take the replacement heifers to graze there with the mature cows.

Back on the creek, the cottonwoods began to sprout, and the grass began to grow with a vengeance. Now Heritage Ranch cows come to the creek in the dormant season, and they find forage there, outstanding forage, in quantities 10 times greater than before. "My supplemental feed costs are way down," Winder says. "I'm running more cows at a lower cost."

Here's a ranch among the ruins.

The coalition itself embraces brand new ideas with potential blessings for the land. The colorfully named "Poop and Stomp Project" is a recent case in point. An innovative but dirt-simple use of cattle as a tool of reclamation, the project will make grass grow on the ruinous tailings left by copper mining in the hills around Santa Fe. Using nothing more than electric fencing, some hay, and native grass seed, holistic ranch manager Terry Wheeler will herd cattle up and down the tailings. As the cows cruise the tailings eating the hay that Wheeler provides in small moving lots, they will stomp the seed into the damaged earth to await the next good rain and, meanwhile, the manure begins again its ancient cycle of fertilization and regrowth.

At Rio Puerco in northern New Mexico, Wheeler is herding 80 heifers up and down a tailing at an eighth of an acre a day, putting organic matter into essentially lifeless ground, beginning with rumen bacteria in the manure, the micronutrients around which all life

begins. "These tailings are not intrinsically bad; America's urban lifestyle, our economy depends on them," he says. "I'm just looking for a way to heal the wounds our technology has made." He takes ground at its lowest point of succession, degraded and useless, and he adds organic matter as a medium of growth for other plants, for animals yet to come. He works at lessons learned. Using alfalfa hay and oat mulch, he slams animal impact at tiny parcels of gradient land. Tomorrow he will slide his three-strand turbowire fences again at damage that waits like lead, and his English cattle will find a new paddock just ahead when the sun comes.

Here's a ranch that replicates.

Consider the success of a herding project on the western slopes of the Colorado Rockies, in the valley of the North Fork of the Gunnison River, southeast of the town of Paonia, on a federal grazing allotment known as West Elk. Since the early 1990s, grazing plans for the allotment have been drawn at an open meeting wherein anyone interested in putting cattle on West Elk can contribute opinions to group decisions on livestock numbers, the grazing season, pasture sequence, range improvements, and livestock monitoring. The cattle are managed as a single herd. In this rugged high country the herd is moved as a seaborne cowboy might move the ocean: some cattle, the aggressive feeders, are forever pushing into new pastures; then come the large body of the herd, with a few cowboys along to push the stragglers out of the grazed areas. As a rule, moves spill into adjacent grazing units, although sometimes the herd must be shoved five or ten miles at once. Even amid the altitude and the steepness and the forest, a half-dozen cowboys can easily handle the thousand-plus cow-calf pairs that constitute the permit on West Elk. Border collies help. They help a lot. Salt serves as an attractant in the moves, although far more time is given over to horseback chores than to putting out salt.

The results?

More flexibility in management, with opportunities to respond quickly and profitably to changes in the weather, short and long term.

Improved cattle performance, with



CHUCK WEST

Former Sierra Club staffer Barbara Johnson and conservationist Courtney White (above) and rancher Jim Winder (right, with Sid Goodloe) – are the founders of the Quivira Coalition.

increased calf weights by 50 to 100 pounds, a decrease in the number of open cows, and declining vet bills—the latter benefit attributable to fresh feed and short, low-stress moves.

Better relationships among ranchers, as everyone works together toward a common goal.

Improved range conditions, with fewer areas of either over- or under-grazing.

Here's a ranch that works.

Courtney White makes a compelling case for his coalition, and he begins with a reference to a farmer, the author Wendell Berry, who wrote, "You cannot save the land apart from the people or the people apart from the land. To save either, you must save both." White understands the outrage and the pain that ranchers have felt in the face of newly arrived city people with different ideas about the use of this nation's resources. "Ranching involves people," he says, "people who have deep ties to the land, both historically and emotionally. We [environmentalists] should learn to respect those ties and learn to think anthropologically; ranching, after all, is a distinct culture. How can environmentalists fight for the rights of indigenous cultures around the world and then turn a blind eye to rural cultures in our own backyard? Respect has to be applied evenly and fairly."

White knows that The New Ranch, in its exploration of scientifically

supported and ecologically sensitive ranching, will make peace among people who love the land, who appreciate beauty and solitude in the most spiritual ways imaginable. Increasingly, the peacemakers recognize a common enemy. They live in places deserving of protection from what Winder, White, and Johnson call "the



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spread and stink of urban sprawl which threatens both the health of the ecosystem and the vitality of ranching."

The New Ranch can stand against the encroachment of suburban sterility. It can thwart the subdividers. It can stop the shopping centers.

It will do so in the achievement of its objectives, both social and environmental. The New Ranch will abolish over-grazing. It will ensure the protection of streambanks and wetlands. It will allow native grasses to return and flourish. It will create habitat for endangered species and protect wildlife in all its forms. The New Ranch will accommodate recreational use of public land. It will demonstrate that prohibition of grazing on public lands is both impractical and ecologically suspect.

Here's a ranch with a telephone.

In the evolving ecosystem that is the New West, the Quivira Coalition is a good place to begin. The coalition conducts outdoor classrooms, workshops, and site tours. A terrific newsletter passes along information about current coalition projects and recent success stories. An owner's manual for The New Ranch is in the works. If you'd like more information about holistic ranch management, please contact Courtney White or Barbara Johnson at (505)820-2544.

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