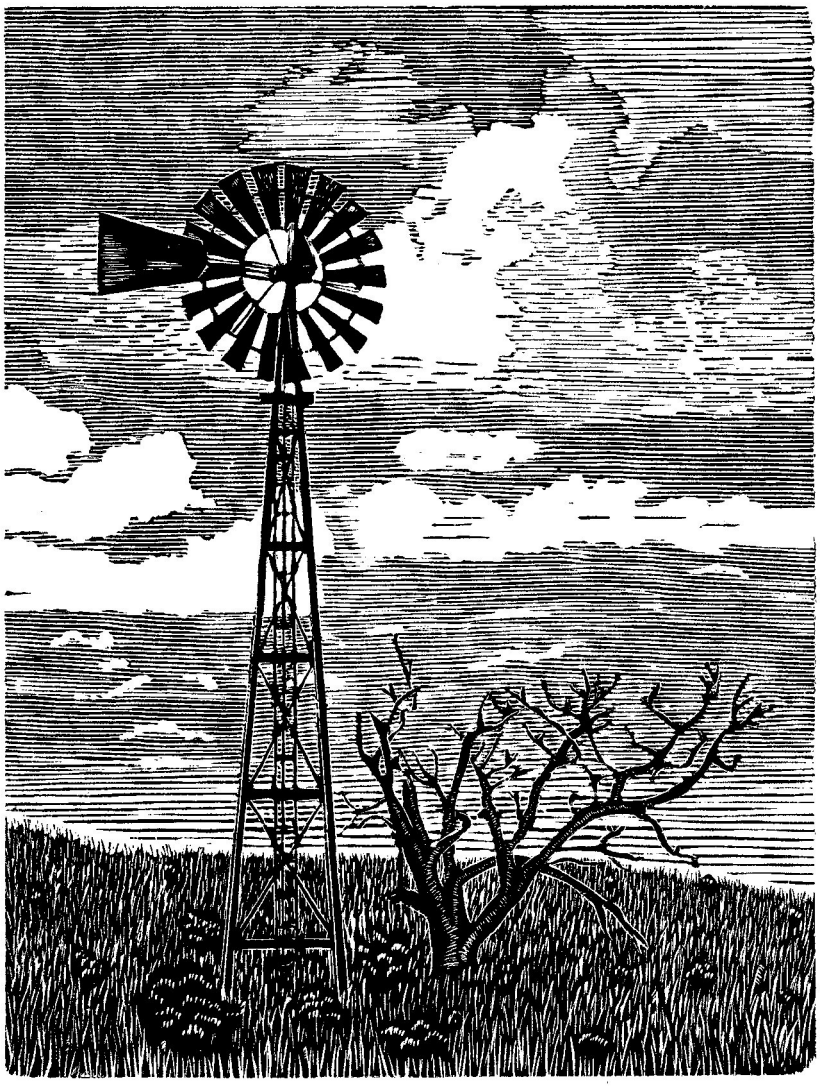

Why and How to Buy a Cattle Ranch (For Restoration)

The "Why" of It

Agrarian reformer Wes Jackson believes that, "We live in the most important moment in human history." In keeping with Jackson's sense of importance and immediacy, Christian Parenti thinks we are faced with "the most colossal set of events in

human history: *the catastrophic convergence* of poverty, violence and climate change." Their reasoning: the Earth's temperature is headed to heights above which humankind has never lived; with 63 individuals—43 of whom are Americans—owning as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population, the planet has never experienced such an extreme concentration of wealth; human population growth and resource consumption have never attained current levels; and the Earth's species are undergoing a rate of extinction as much as 1,000 times higher than normal. The solutions can be clustered into five general categories: zero-carbon sources of renewable energy, weatherization of home and buildings, elimination of our consumptive lifeway, mass transit replacing "car culture" and habitat restoration.

These recovery criteria can be thought of as "The Great Transition," away from our fossil-fuel-based economy. A critical part of habitat restoration is appreciation of "soil enthusiasts" like Rattan Lai, Director of the Carbon Management and Sequestration Center at Ohio State University. They maintain that responsible soil management can recapture most of the "legacy load" of atmospheric carbon by bringing soil back to health and allowing plants to do what they do: convert sunlight to the materials that we use to live with photosynthesis. Recall from your childhood science education that photosynthesis is that sunshine-driven natural process that transfers carbon from above the earth's surface to below ground and stores it in roots and soil, where it remains for long periods of time — often millions of years — before it is slowly released into the atmosphere by way of death and decomposition. It doesn't occur on bare soil without plants.

The process of photosynthesis — the most essential natural process for life on the planet and the basic building block for all life—is thought by increasing numbers of soil enthusiasts as a critical part of the cure for combatting climate change. Recall this process: when sunlight reaches vegetation, the plant absorbs atmospheric carbon dioxide. Carbon (CO_2) is a naturally occurring, essential chemical compound. C stands for carbon, O for oxygen and the number 2 means two oxygen atoms are bonded to a single carbon atom. Plants break "C" apart from the "O_2," consumes the carbon and returns the oxygen for us to breathe. After the oxygen is released back into the atmosphere, the plant then converts the remaining carbon into high-energy sugars and carbohydrates. The key to this process is CO_2, as carbon sugars created through photosynthesis are the building blocks of life – they are the beginning of the food chain for just about everything on earth.

As my wife Lucinda's and my respective classroom and courtroom worlds drew to a close, we began to think about how to find a place to live that would recapture the idyllic freedom of wilderness we enjoyed while backpacking and the opportunity to pursue the restoration practices we learned on various restoration service trips. After realizing that the wilderness was no longer available for purchase, we learned that the most profitable places to pursue meaningful habitat restoration were on depleted rangelands. Per acre, one of the least costly ways to accomplish habitat repair is to purchase a cattle ranch. So we bought the Pitchfork Ranch in the southwest corner of New Mexico and began our restoration efforts.

The "How" of It

According to the United States Department of Agriculture's 2012 Census of Agriculture, the average American farmer is 58 -years old, and a mere six percent of farmers are under the age of 35. As the farming work force ages, retires, and dies, 63 percent of the nation's farmland will need new tenants within the next 25 years. This spells opportunity, yet how does one go about buying a ranch? From what we learned, these are the fundamental areas of inquiry.

Preferred Region: If you are at home in the Sonoran Desert, the Arizona and New Mexico landscape is the place to start. If you're partial to cold winters and snow, then look to Montana, Wyoming or Colorado. Distance from town is important because access to food and other necessities is a weekly concern.

We found the Pitchfork Ranch simply by contacting a local realtor after satisfying ourselves that the high desert region of southwest New Mexico was well suited for our concerns and close enough to grandchildren and other family. We also spoke to the local representative of The Nature Conservancy who told us about several areas where they thought the habitat would satisfy our requirements and our interests. So-called "conservation buyers" who are interested in preservation and restoration are not rare in today's world, and, after making our interests clear to the realtor, he led us to the Pitchfork.

Land Condition: More than half of the United States' rangeland, both public and private, is severely degraded, with its carrying capacity reduced by at least 50 percent. There is overwhelming evidence that livestock production has impoverished the West's biological capital. In 2005, only 16 percent of New Mexican ranchland sales were

attributed to cattle and crop production and 84 percent to development, recreation and other so-called amenity values. Fifty percent of ranches with federal permits are merely "hobby ranches," as working ranch landscapes nationwide continue to disappear. There is pressure and competition from developers and the rich seeking second homes—the dreaded McMansions—most of whom have little interest in restoration. These statistics don't imply that there is no place for cattle on the range, because there is. Yet, at least in the Southwest, cattle are implicated in a deadly combination with human habitation that has severely damaged the land and contributed to desertification. The causes are many: the introduction of sheep by the Spanish colonists (by 1865, sheep outnumbered cattle 37 to 1); fire suppression initiated by a variety of Europeans which promptly ended the Native American practice of burning every 7 to 10 years; the over-trapping of beaver in the 1820s; agricultural recounting and aquifer depletion; the rise in the number of cattle in the 1880s and overstocking; and drought - and present day human-caused climate change.

There are range management experts who assess land health. When we purchased the Pitchfork Ranch, we had not considered the question of land health, but were fortunate enough to have it evaluated after purchase and learned that, although it had been in cattle production since 1904, the ranch was neither over grazed nor had it declined to a state where it could not recover and forever remain in a degraded condition. The ranch had not reached its tipping point, beyond which recovery is either not possible or too costly. We recommend the Quivera Coalition in Santa Fe New Mexico as a good place to find a consultant to evaluate habitat health.

Price and Size: Often, the single most controlling question in acquiring property is its price. Size and location are the primary factors that determine price and establish the basic contours of any acquisition. Per acre cost for ranch land in New Mexico ranges from $150 per acre up to $1,000 or $2,000 per acre, depending on the size of the ranch, its location and amenities. Every potential purchase has comparable sales prices in the area to help guide a decision. Of interest to those suited for smaller property, we have nearby friends who acquired an 83-acre parcel they refer to as a "preserve" on which they are using the same techniques we draw on to restore the Pitchfork Ranch. We know of other restoration projects of as much as 200,000 acres, another of just under 18,000 acres, an 11-acre rural home, an urban home of eight city lots or .36 acres and an urban rental of .02 acres that all make use of similar techniques. We all use the same approach: the installation of grade control structures to lessen erosion, aggregate soil, arrest runoff and improve wicking and the plantings of vegetation slow rainwater sheet flow and sequester carbon.

Water: Without water, there is no restoration. Most ranchers maintain meticulous records of their wells: age, depth and maintenance information. The local history of rainfall is available from the National Weather Service. We know the rainfall on the Pitchfork Ranch for every month since 1884. The presence of above ground water—a creek, stream or ciénaga—is always a blessing and arguably as important as any element in an acquisition. Invariably, birds use green spots for stopovers. In March of 2008, the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization issued a study, "Hotter and Dryer, The West's Changed Climate" in which it found that the West is being affected more by changed climate than any other part of the United States outside Alaska. "When compared to the

20th century average, the West has experienced an increase in average temperature during the last five years that is 70 percent greater than the world as a whole." The average New Mexico summer is 3.4 degrees warmer now than in 1984, and cooler temperatures—unlike the weather when extended droughts end—are not returning as they have historically. Climate change is one of the most critical factors that will influence your decision to purchase land for restoration.

History and Health of Prior Owners: Ranches often are a checkerboard of ownership: private or deeded land; federal land overseen by the Bureau of Land Management; state land managed by the state land department; and subsurface mineral rights owned by the government or a previous owner who sold the land but retained mineral rights. It will surely be discouraging if you purchase a ranch and later learn that others own subsurface mineral rights and that there could be a nearby mine site in your future.

There is also the question of pollution, so the health history of prior owners is of interest. A nearby ranch has this ownership history: John Doe #1 died of lung cancer; John Doe #2 suffered from exposure of the chemical additive Rumensin for cattle feed that ended up in horse feed, they subsequently lost 60 horses, and his daughters also became ill; John Doe #3 had brain cancer and died within weeks of his diagnosis; and 70-year old John Doe #4 was diagnosed with cancer in his esophagus, liver and gall bladder. Realtors involved in two of these four sales died prematurely. We are not prone to being spooked, but industrial and other pollutants have poisoned the planet, and the toxicity resulting from the pollution of our water, the atmosphere and the land is believed by increasing numbers of scientists of having catastrophic consequences for human health.

Title companies provide a broad range of services. They typically search the public records regarding a pending sale and guarantee good title. They can also provide detailed historical ownership and mineral history. The Bureau of Land Management also has a record of the mining history on federal land that is leased to ranchers. The same holds true for state leased rangeland. If federal or state land is leased to the current seller of a ranch property, those lease rights are an important part of the sale and that history needs to be examined.

Migration Patterns: While habitat repair enhances carbon sequestration in the service of mitigating climate change, its long-established goal has been in the service of wildlife. A critical consideration in the purchase of a ranch is its location in terms of migration. Avian flyways are well known and easily identified by contacting the Nation Audubon Society, Ducks Unlimited, Wild Bird Journal, United States Fish and Wildlife Service and similar organizations. Mammal migration corridors are also widely known and can be ascertained by contacting The Nature Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Society of North America. Over 75 percent of mammal conservation corridors are imperiled and the acquisition of a ranch within migration corridors adds immeasurably to the benefit of restoration.

Family, Community and Isolation: As an additional step for those who wish to have convenient access to family, it is necessary to select an area of the country near your tribe. Solitude is a dominating aspect of ranch life. Community is absent on a ranch and having consequential relationships with people close by can be a important part of the mix.

There are also a number of lesser factors to consider: improvements to the ranch headquarters, barns and corrals; the number of wells with windmills; submersible pumps, water storage tanks and pipelines; the number of drinkers; fences and their condition, neighboring encroachments, ingress and egress, easements and size and types of grazing leases, availability of electric and telephone service, and the reason for the sale.

The "Bottom Line" of It

There are few opportunities to benefit dwindling wildlife populations and to challenge climate change that are more promising than habitat restoration. One of the most rewarding opportunities to accomplish habitat restoration is to acquire a cattle ranch. The cost per acre can rarely be equaled, and the potential to benefit both human life and wildlife is better on a ranch than almost any other place. These photographs taken at the same location on the same day of the year, nine years apart, illustrate the improvement that can be accomplished in just a single decade.


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