

THE MYTH OF OVERGRAZING

For a long time now it's been accepted that overgrazing has been a huge problem here in the American West. And I suppose it's true that early on, our public lands were eaten off in such a way that there was little feed left when fall came each year. But to say that our ranges were hurt or destroyed by overgrazing is simply not true.

If such were the case, then why was it that it was at the very time when we were running the most cattle and sheep on our rangelands, that we were producing the greatest numbers of deer and sage grouse here in western American. And too, if our rangelands were in such bad shape at that time, why was it that the cattle and sheep did so well during that period? And why was it that the deer that were harvested during those years bigger and heavier than they have been since?

I know that there are those who will say, - but look at our rangelands, isn't it true that overgrazing destroyed most of the native grass under story that existed on our rangelands prior to the coming of white man? And is it not true that an estimated sixty thousand bighorns running within the boundaries of today's Nevada, and two million sage grouse scattered across our western rangelands?

People can believe such claims I suppose. However, such nonsense is not supported by scientific or historical evidence. Truth is the first explorers to enter the Great Basin, included Jedediah Smith, Pete Skeen Ogden, Milton Sublette, Joe Meek, John Work, Zenos Leonard, James Clayman and Charles Preuss, all of whom traveled through the northern portion of today's Nevada between 1827 and 1845, were critical of what they saw. Many said there was hardly enough grass to even feed their horses as they crossed through the country. Others said that the whole region was nothing but a barren wasteland. Some were forced to eat their horses because of the lack of game found. Others ate insects and the soles of their moccasins in order to survive. A few antelope were seen, but not many. John Word said that he saw mountain sheep tracks near the head of the Bruneau River, but none mentioned seeing a sage grouse or deer.

Later during the California Gold Rush when the great numbers of people were making their way down the Humboldt, a few sage grouse were seen. However, most of these sightings occurred in the late 1850's the 60's and the 70's – after thousands of horses and cattle had been trailed through the country.

Interesting as well, was the fact that it seemed that the later travelers, those traveling in the 1860's and 70's were reporting better feed conditions than were reported by earlier travelers.

This is an indication that if anything, the impact of grazing was already having a positive effect on the grass and other vegetation that was then found along the Humboldt.

However, it was not until sometime in the 1920's or 30's when mule deer began to increase – soon after effective predator control was implemented. That's when things really began to improve. And if all the information that I am seeing is correct, it was then when people began seeing greater numbers of sage

grouse and song birds. It was about that time too when people began seeing mountain lions for the first time. Evidently, lions were a product of increasing deer numbers, and deer were a product of predator control, which was a product of the sheep industry. In other words, it might be said, that to a large degree, it was the introduction of sheep to the country that eventually brought about the great deer and sage grouse era that peaked in the 1940, but then continued through the 1970's or 80's. It's something to think about.