

The Good Old Days
When Things Were Not As Good As Many Would Like To Think They Were

The first trappers and explorers to enter the west saw many burned over areas on the snake plains and throughout the mid west, but not in the Great Basin. Apparently, even though the Indians of the Great Basin did burn from time to time for various reasons, the practice must have been rare indeed, for hardly anyone traveling through the Great Basin mentioned seeing burned over areas during the period, 1825 through 1900. Most wrote of traveling through valleys filled with sage brush, greasewood and rabbit brush (or words to that effect).

Many wrote of the difficulty they were having in places, making it through heavy sage, up to three inches in diameter. Yet no one ever mentioned coming to areas where traveling was made easier because the brush had been burned away. Nor was there mention that the travelers had reached an area where there was an abundance of feed because of past fires. The most abundant animals found at that time were rabbits. And no wonder, jack rabbits, pigmy rabbits and cottontail do well when a country is covered with large mature sage brush, greasewood, or rabbit brush, or a combination of all three. Jack rabbits, cottontail, and pigmy rabbits cannot survive in areas where the sagebrush has been removed.

It's no wonder the Indians weren't burning a lot back at that time. Rabbits were an important food source for them during winter. Burning would only eliminate the rabbit's habitat, which in turn would eliminate the rabbits themselves. The Indians knew this. (*Pioneering the West, by the Egan Family, p. 36*) Keep in mind, the harvest of rabbits was far more important to the Indians at that time than was the harvest of bighorn, antelope or deer, simply because there were not a lot of bighorn, deer, or antelope around.

So why then, were there so few fires when it was recorded that there was a good deal of brush throughout the country? -Well, just because there was a lot of brush in the country at that time does not mean that there was a lot grass under or between the brush, or that the brush was as healthy or as thick as it may have been at a later date. And when there is not a lot of grass growing between and under the sage brush to help carry the fire, and a lot of the brush is half dead and not doing well, it makes it difficult for a fire to spread.

Allen Savory, Steve Rich
And the Testimony of Jedediah Smith

As has been shown by Allen Savory and Steve Rich, when desert plants are not impacted by grazing on a regular basis, they often become unproductive and wolfy, to such a degree they often die. (See Document 21-c.). Plant frequency, plant health and plant vigor improve when plants are regularly impacted by large numbers of ungulates. (See testimony of Loyd Sorenson, Document 3-a., p 7. See also, Kipuka Study Sites, 50-a.).

Most historians believe Jedediah Smith was the first white man to cross through the Great Basin to the coast of California. In 1826 with 14 men and 28 horses, Smith left Cache Valley (Utah) traveling south. He passed through the tip of today's Nevada, then followed the Majove River

into southern California. Jedediah had agreed to meet his two trapping partners, David Jackson and William Sublette, the following June for a rendezvous and in Cache Valley. So in June of 1827, Jedediah took two of his best men and set out up the American River of the Sierra Nevada's and across central Nevada to keep his commitment. Latter, in a letter to William Clark, Smith described the trip:

After traveling 22 days from the east side of Mount Joseph (Sierra Nevada's), I struck the southwest corner of the Great Salt Lake, traveling over a country completely barren and destitute of game. We frequently traveled without water, sometimes for two days, over sandy deserts where there was no sign of vegetation and when we found water in some of the rocky hills we most generally found Indians who appeared the most miserable of the human race. When we arrived at the Salt Lake, we had but one horse and one mule remaining, which were so feeble and poor that they could scarcely carry the little camp equipage which I had along. The balance of my horses I was compelled to eat. (See Document, 1-a.)

Most historians believe that Smith and his men came out of the mountains just south of Walker Lake, and very likely crossed through Nevada very near where the towns of Manhattan, Belmont and Current are now located - which areas, during the early 1900's have supported thousands of cattle and sheep

If Jedediah Smith's testimony regarding vegetative condition found within the Great Basin in the early 1800's is correct, then one must conclude that the findings of Allen Savory, Steve Rich, Loyd Sorensen and the Kipuka Study are correct, plant health and frequency is improved by grazing impact.

One must conclude as well, the reason that the earliest explorers and trappers were not seeing many burned over areas in the Great Basin in the mid 1800's was because of the lack of vegetative frequency.

The Yager Journal

Perhaps, one of the more interesting aspects of early exploration and travel in the west accrued along the Humboldt River. The very earliest trappers and explorers to travel the Humboldt found feed exceedingly poor. Within a short period of time however, even though thousands and thousands of horses and cattle had been driven along the Humboldt corridor, all testimony indicates that feed conditions were improving rather than deteriorating as many now believe.

To give an idea of just how large many of the wagon trains were, in 1862, James Yager wrote, "at camp Weaver River our train was joined by eight or nine wagons & this morning we were joined by the train that camped by us last night fifteen wagons making in all about forty wagons & seventy men." Five days later Yager wrote, "Petersons' train of thirty one wagons & (L)ouise's of fifteen became connected at one time this morning, making a train of eighty nine wagons and a carriage. You would think, with all the thousands of cattle and horses and people

traveling along the Humboldt during that time - with all the impacts of setting up camp, then repacking again - all the livestock coming and going and watering twice a day, plus all the feed that was being consumed, there would have been much talk of everything being eaten off and abused. But such was not the case. Yeger and others traveling along the Humboldt during the latter years of the migration to California, mentioned over and over, how good the grass was.

Interesting too, is that the immigrants that were passing through the Great Basin in the very late 1850's and early 60's were seeing more sage grouse than the earlier travelers had seen. Does this testimony not indicate that resource conditions were improving rather than deteriorating because of the impacts of large hoofed animals traversing the area? We think it does.

Lewis and Clark, Peter Skeen Ogden and John Work

When Lewis and Clark were traveling up the Missouri River in 1804 and 1805 - wherever they found buffalo they found other wildlife such as elk, deer and antelope as well. Peter Skeen Ogden and John Work had similar experiences. Ogden had to leave the Humboldt during the winter 1828 and 29 because his party was facing starvation. When they reached the eastern snake plains and buffalo they found a good many elk and antelope as well. In 1831, John Work also found elk, antelope and even mountain sheep to be more numerous where there were buffalo, both on the eastern snake plains and in southwestern part of today's Montana.

The reason there may have been more deer, elk and antelope found in areas where large numbers of buffalo were found may have been twofold. First, buffalo, because they were more numerous and in ways more vulnerable to predation, may have acted as a buffer drawing predators away from other species. And two, everything seems to benefit when herds of large hoofed animals such as buffalo or cattle impact an area. Insect production increases, mice become more numerous, marmot and ground squirrel populations increase. Deer, elk, antelope and even bird life become more abundant.

Spanish Colonization in California

Spanish efforts to colonize Alta California in the late 1700's revealed a similar circumstance. As was recorded in the book, *Old Spanish Trail*, by LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen:

Once decided upon, the project to colonize Upper California was carried out in typical Spanish fashion, soldier and friar marching side by side to found the twin outposts of presidio and mission... Expeditions were to proceed both by land and by sea.

Two small vessels, sent from Lower California in 1769 were loaded with men and supplies for the new enterprise. Agricultural implements, seeds, tools, provisions, and church paraphernalia were taken aboard.

The land contingent was formed in two parties. The first, led by Captain Rivera, comprised Spanish soldiers and Christian Indians who drove along some 400

animals...

Potola and Sierra, with the second land party, followed the Rivera Trail and reached San Diego on July 1st [1769]... Conditions were not heartening. Ninety-three of the would-be colonizers had perished on shipboard or since landing... Of the nearly 300 who had undertaken the venture only 126 [remained]...

Frantically, one ship was sent back for supplies. while Portola, true to his orders, pushed northward by land with most of the able-bodied men for Monterrey... Portoila and his men succeeded in their heroic march to Monterey and on the journey accidentally discovered important San Francisco Bay. Supplies ran low on the return trip, writes Partola:

I ordered that at the end of each day's march, one of the weak old mules which carried our baggage and ourselves, should be killed. ...we shut our eyes and fell on that sculy mule (what misery!) like hungry lions, we ate twelve in as many days... At last we entered San Diego. Smelling frightfully of mules.

[Upon his return] Portola found things in a deplorable state. Numbers of the sick had died; hostile Indians had pillaged the camp; provisions were running low. Some urged the abandonment of the venture... Finally the relief ship came; to the friars it was an answer to their novena, a nine-day vigil of prayer.

It is hard now to understand how, in a land of such bountiful natural resources, there was then such poverty in California and such utter dependence on the importations of food and supplies from elsewhere. But crops were not raised successfully during the first years, and it took time for domestic animals to increase.

By 1820, forty years after livestock had been introduced to southern California, horses had grown so numerous they were a nuisance and had to be controlled. Jose del Carmen Lugo, native of Los Angeles, recalled:

When I was eight or ten years old, that is, from 1821 to 1824, there were great numbers of wild and very troublesome horses. They would come to the very outskirts of town and eat the pasturage, leaving the gentled horses without food even

often coaxing them away. The government finally decided, in agreement with the pueblo [Los Angeles], to have a general killing of these wild horses.

By 1841, California had changed dramatically. A Frenchman, Dufiat de Motras making an inspection for his government described Los Angeles:

The pueblo of Los Angeles is extremely rich... Within an area of 15 or 20 square leagues. local residents own over 80,000 cattle, 25,000 horses, and 10,000 sheep.

Vineyards yield 600 barrels of wine, and an equal amount of brandy...

In late October of that same year, the Bidwell-Bartleson party (recognized as the first American immigrants to reach California by way of the Great Basin) had reached the upper San Joaquin Valley. The passage over the Sierras had been extremely hazardous; The whole company was gaunt and worn. On Oct. 30, as the party was descending the west side of the Sierras:

Bidwell was only too happy to breakfast on the wind-pipe and lights-lungs of a fat coyote shot by one of the company. By nightfall, however, he was able to turn to his journal in almost a delirium of delight: "...Joyful sight to us poor famished wretches!! Hundreds of antelope in view! Elk tracks, thousands! Killed two antelopes and some wild fowls, the valley of the river was very fertile and the young tender grass covered it, like a field of wheat in May. (*The Humboldt, highroad of the west, by Dale L. Morgan*)

In May of 1844, as Fremont traveled south through the San Joaquin Valley, he noted the favorable environment and abundant animal life about them:

Flowers and oaks were only part of the wild beauty of this valley. There were vast herds of wild horses and cattle, tule elk, pronghorn antelopes, and blacktail deer. Overhead there were flights of ducks and geese that passed like small storm clouds... [And later]: They crossed the Tuolumne, Merced, Kings and Kern Rivers,... In this part of the San Joaquin Valley the wild horse herds were larger than any the men had ever seen. Horses roamed the grassland like herds of buffalo the Great Plains... he noted the favorable environment and abundant animal life about them. (*Fremont, Explorer for a Restless Nation, by Ferol Egan*)

It was not until large herds of cattle and horses began to appear across the West that western range lands that wildlife began to increase. In fact it was in the 1940's and 50's, at the very time that our range lands were alleged to be in their poorest condition, that we were seeing the greatest number of mule deer, sage grouse, ducks and even song birds throughout the Great Basin.