Nevada Survey on Uses and Management of Public Land Shows Support for Ranching, Recreation, and the Environment

The state of Nevada is 87% public land owned by the federal government and administered by various federal agencies. The majority of these lands are managed by the Bureau of Land Management of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture. Other lands are administered or managed by the Department of Defense, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Over 90% of the population of Nevada lives in urban centers, but over 90% of the public lands are in rural counties with less than 10% of the population.

The opinions and beliefs of the people of Nevada about the uses and management of our federal lands are frequently debated in federal, state and local governments, by the media, in the resource management agencies, among educators and researchers, and in the classroom. Yet very little data on the subject is available. This survey of Nevada citizens was undertaken in 1997 by the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension to find out more about the opinions of Nevadans about public lands in the state.

The Survey
The survey asked questions about several familiar issues in public land management: rural community viability, ranching and livestock grazing, wildlife and wild horse management, mining, recreational uses, fire control and so forth. But an important aspect of the survey was to find out how Nevada citizens believe decisions about the uses and management of these lands should be made, including who should be involved and what kinds of local interests and impacts should be considered.

Those surveyed were registered voters. A total of 1,111 completed questionnaires were received. The response rate from the urban counties was 48% and from the rural counties was 58%.

The Results
Only 26% of the urban and 24% of the rural respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the management of Nevada’s public lands. Both strongly disagreed with decisionmaking only at the national level; they agreed with decisionmaking at the state and local level. They also strongly agreed that informed citizens should be allowed to work together with agencies in the decisionmaking process, and that decisions must be fair to the local people most directly affected. They also agreed that the general public, local communities, wildlife organizations, agricultural interests, and recreation and hunting and fishing interests should all have greater inputs into the decisionmaking process.

Both urban and rural respondents strongly agreed that hiking, camping, bicycle riding, horseback riding, wildlife habitat, livestock grazing, and fishing were appropriate activities on or uses of public land. Seventy-five percent of the rural and 68% of the urban respondents agreed that livestock grazing is an appropriate use on

(con't on page 18)
with recreation further estranges us from nature. Under the recreational paradigm, the land becomes something “out there,” precious and remote. We love the land, we seek its pleasures, and we delight in its aesthetic qualities, but we don’t really know it in detail. Not anymore.

When we lose intimacy with the land, we lose knowledge; and when we lose knowledge, we begin to make flawed decisions. Evidence of this abounds at almost every level of the debate over the role of public lands. For example, someone told me recently that there is a shortage of trained botanists available for work. They said it was verging on a crisis.

There is certainly no shortage of lawyers.

Of course, work is only one way to gain an intimate knowledge of land; scientific study is another. There are others, but the question remains: do we really want to replace work with recreation on our public lands?

Isn’t there room for both?

It is my profound hope that, if we can tear down the false wall that separates recreation from grazing, we can make real progress toward sustainable use of our public lands. The first step on this road is to stop the finger-pointing. The second is to listen to the land. The third is to get to work.

It’s not as crazy as it sounds.

Nevada Public Land Use Survey
(con’t from page 14)

public land. Both urban and rural respondents agreed that ranching makes a positive contribution to our rural communities.

Most respondents agreed that wildlife habitat is important on public land. More rural respondents (82% to 58%) agreed that hunting was appropriate. The response to whether or not wildlife habitat is improving was mixed and uncertain. Respondents agreed that proper management can result in compatible use by both livestock and wildlife and that hunting of some wildlife species is a useful management tool.

Both urban and rural respondents strongly agreed that rural community economic health and community and family values should be considered in land management decisions. They agreed that we should reach a balance that equally considers both rural communities and the environment, and that ranching is a part of our heritage and should be protected.

Both urban and rural respondents agreed that we should manage for healthy ecosystems and trust that endangered species will recover. They both strongly agreed that we should be concerned about endangered species.

Both urban and rural respondents agreed that controlled burns are appropriate if they help the natural plant community, and that vegetation management should be used to prevent wildfires.