Fear and Loathing on the Pecos

by Courtney White

“Pecos Draft Allows Grazing, Curtails Camping”

This recent Santa Fe newspaper headline was too tempting to resist. I read on.

“Fewer people would camp but cattle grazing would continue unabated under a new plan for managing the national Wild and Scenic section of the Pecos River,” wrote journalist Ian Hoffman in the Albuquerque Journal North. “Authors of the Forest Service’s new plan say people, not cattle, pose the greatest peril to the river’s wild and beautiful character.”

Really? How interesting. Hoffman quoted the predictable outrage of Forest Guardians’ John Horning: “They won’t let you and me camp within a quarter-mile of the river,” said the well-known opponent of public lands grazing, “but any day of the week cows can graze, defecate and trample the plants up and down the river corridor.”

Recreation More Damaging to Riparian Area

In the article, Dan Crittenden, Forest Service District Ranger for the Pecos region, countered that recreationists, not cattle, were causing the most damage within the sensitive riparian zone below the wilderness boundary. In fact, cattle are excluded from this stretch of the river. “I think we’re on solid ground for litigation on grazing,” said Crittenden.

I put down the newspaper. What an intriguing twist on the “cows bad, recreation good” rhetoric that has dominated so much of the grazing debate from the environmental side. I mean, if recreation posed a greater threat to the health of the riparian ecosystem along the Pecos than grazing, shouldn’t environmentalists be threatening lawsuits over THAT? But they weren’t.

I decided I had to go see for myself.

Once there, I quickly learned that the Forest Service does not intend to reduce the numbers of recreationists along the river. Instead, it plans to displace them to areas away from the fragile riparian zone within the recreational corridor.

And I just as quickly learned why.

Too Many People

In “campground” after “campground,” I saw the environmental abuse created when too many people camped too long in an unregulated manner. The ground had been trampled to powder, often right up to the river’s edge; fire rings and trash proliferated; the lack of sanitation facilities meant that people were defecating wherever they pleased; the forest had been hacked apart for firewood; and vehicles rioted on the earth.

According to Ranger Crittenden, who was my host for the day, these “campgrounds” belong to the State Game and Fish Department, which owns the land. He said the Forest Service was trying to acquire the properties in order to impose order on a situation that was very clearly out-of-hand. He said the State was willing

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to deal.
That was good news because the changes couldn’t come a moment too soon.

As we drove up and down the river, I thought: take away the people, their cars, and the trash for a moment and you would swear the ground had been overgrazed by cattle. Throw in a significant riparian area, and add a Wild and Scenic River designation on top of it, and you would have a recipe for major outrage on the part of the environmental community.

Except that PEOPLE caused this damage, not cattle.

Ironically, by all indications the grazing of the high country by cattle is causing little or no significant damage to the riverine ecosystem. This is because the Bear Lake Grazing Association, composed of a dozen ranchers from the Las Vegas area, hire a herder for the three-month grazing season. This herder lives with the cattle and keeps them on the move, minimizing adverse impacts.

Arizona Willow Thriving

In fact, the endangered Arizona willow (Salix arizonica) is thriving along the upper Pecos, right in the heart of cattle country. The newspaper quoted scientist Duane Atwood of Brigham Young University, who has been studying the Arizona willow, as saying the area from the “Pecos Falls to the headwaters of that drainage is probably one of the best stands of Arizona willow anywhere.” What pressure the willow is receiving from grazing is “more by elk than livestock. You see a lot of elk pellets.” Dan Crittenden concurs.

Show him the damage done by cattle, he says, and he will take action. Meanwhile, the damage caused by recreationists is as plain as day. Of course, this recreational pressure will continue to get worse over time. Dan put the situation succinctly into perspective. “In recreation management, all the easy decisions have been made,” he said to me. “Now we’re faced with the difficult ones.”

For example, he would like to allow the leases to expire on a swatch of summer homes in the Cowles area, smack in the middle of the Wild and Scenic corridor, in order to restore the riparian area. This has stirred up a hornet’s nest of opposition from the lease owners.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service apparently must weather this position on its own. Crittenden says the environmental community has been silent on the issue. “Where is their support?” asks Dan.

It is a very good question.