

THE GRASSLANDS DEBATES:

Conservationists, Ranchers, First Nations, and the Landscape of the Middle Fraser

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WHO SHOULD OWN THE GRASSLANDS? How should they be used? Such questions lie at the centre of debates over grasslands in the middle Fraser, a dramatic canyon landscape in the interior of British Columbia. Participants in these debates are often characterized by simple stereotypes: the fiercely independent rancher opposed to conservation and outside intervention, the outsider conservationist who wants grasslands locked up in no-grazing reserves, and First Nations who are uninvolved or politically marginal. In this article, I challenge these stereotypes by providing a more nuanced characterization of the players in grassland politics and their interests.

I describe the perspectives of conservationists, ranchers, and First Nations and show that these groups are complex, dynamic, and historically constituted. Although individuals' perspectives are not contained within these broad categories – many people associate with more than one group and all have values outside these groups – this three-group analysis is intended as an introduction to these grassland debates. If they are to achieve some measure of resolution, these positions need to be understood and respected in ways that simple stereotypes hardly allow.¹ Hence this article and the conclusions that appear to follow from my analysis. First, however, the briefest summary of the context in which the grassland debates are situated.

¹ To understand these complex perspectives, I conducted a total of fifty interviews with conservationists, government employees, ranchers, and First Nations community members. Interviews were held in Vancouver, Victoria, Kamloops, Williams Lake, Prince George, and the middle Fraser between June 2006 and November 2007. Formal interviews lasted, on average, about 1.5 to 2 hours, though several were much longer. These interviews were confidential; in this article, interviewees are identified by position or perspective rather than by name. In September 2006, I attended a one-day stewardship workshop for ranchers at Big Bar, hosted by the Grasslands Conservation Council.

GRASSLAND DEBATES
IN THE MIDDLE FRASER

The middle Fraser is the traditional territory of the Secwepemc, St'at'imc, and Tsilhqot'in First Nations, who hunted and harvested many plants on its grasslands. They burned grasslands regularly to ease travel and to encourage the growth of certain plants (and for other complex socio-cultural reasons). Fires also prevented forest encroachment and in-growth and maintained open grasslands (Blackstock and McAllister 2004; Gayton 2004; Powell 2005; Turner 1997; Wikeem and Wikeem 2004). Like almost all First Nations in British Columbia, these groups never ceded land title. Some twenty years after settlers preempted the most productive agricultural land along the middle Fraser, First Nations were allocated small reserves, most of which are rocky, steep, and excessively dry (Harris 2002, chap. 7).

The cattle industry in the middle Fraser developed to feed gold miners during the 1858 gold rush (Bawtree 2005; Kind 2006; Mather 2006; McLean 1982). The Alkali Lake Ranch, with its origins in the 1860s, is one of the oldest ranches in British Columbia (Twan 2006), and the famous Gang Ranch has been an icon of western frontier ranching since the late 1860s (Kind 2006; Mather 2006). After the gold rush, the ranching industry restructured to provide beef for the growing markets in Victoria and Vancouver (Bawtree 2005). Ranching has thus been fundamental to culture, politics, and landscape in the middle Fraser for 150 years.

This historic "resettlement" in the middle Fraser largely determined the property regime. A 2004 grasslands survey found that, in the middle Fraser, 42 percent of grasslands were privately owned, and 37 percent were in provincial Crown land (not protected areas). An additional 16.7 percent were in protected areas (converted from Crown or private land, mainly in the 1990s); therefore, for most of the past century, over 95 percent of grasslands in the Fraser Basin were in private ranches and associated Crown range (GCC 2004, 53).

In 1919, the BC provincial government passed the Grazing Act and began to systematically regulate range use.² Official range research began in the mid-1930s when the federal government opened British Columbia's first range research station at Tranquille, near Kamloops (McLean 1982; Tisdale, McLean, and Clark 1954). A longtime range manager and con-

² There was some existing provincial regulation, but it was neither provincewide nor comprehensive. As well, ranchers also carefully negotiated agreements, both verbal and written, over range use.

ervationist told me that the province increased its interventions and that, after the Second World War, “range management” became a common phrase among regulators and ranchers. A government scientist said that, by the 1960s, the Range Branch of the Forest Service had the explicit goal of keeping forage viable by setting guidelines for ranchers – for example, grazing seasons and herd sizes. Provincial range agrologists from 100 Mile House, Williams Lake, and sometimes Kamloops regulated and monitored range in the middle Fraser. University researchers also studied and monitored grasslands.

In 1973, the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) introduced the Land Commission Act, and a commission then established special agricultural land use zones, collectively known as the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) (ALC 2008a). Currently, “over 80 percent of the Fraser River Basin and Cariboo Basin Ecosections are in the Agricultural Land Reserve. Except for steep and rocky ground, the majority of valley bottoms and upland benches have been set aside for possible future agricultural use.” The ALR helps to prevent subdivision; however, it does not prevent conversion to other agricultural purposes, such as the growth of forage crops (GCC 2004, 55).

Since the 1980s, conservation networks have sought to change land use in the middle Fraser. Conservationists see Cariboo-Chilcotin grasslands as “one of the great ecological jewels of Western North America” (Steen and Iverson 2007, 101). British Columbia’s grasslands are the northernmost reach of an ecosystem that used to extend throughout the Columbia Basin: the Pacific Northwest Bunchgrass Grassland (Wikeem and Wikeem 2004). Conservationists regularly note that grasslands cover less than 1 percent of the province’s land area but are home to one-third of its red- and blue-listed species.³ They want to protect these grasslands from fragmentation and degradation; thus, preventing subdivision and development is a central goal.

In 1990, the NDP initiated the Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE), which sought to address land-use conflict through participatory, consensus-based planning processes. Several grassland initiatives were institutionalized during and after the time of CORE, in the many conservation activities that the commission catalyzed. The CORE process addressed the “big picture” issue of land allocation, resulting in the Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan (CORE 1994). The Protected

³ The terms “red- and blue-listed species” refer to species’ designations under the federal Species at Risk Act (SARA). “Red-listed” species are taxa that are extirpated, endangered, or threatened; “blue-listed species” are those that are considered vulnerable (Environment Canada 2008a).

Area Strategy was a significant component of CORE; over 12 percent of British Columbia's land was to be designated as parkland by the end of the process (Wilson 1998). There are now three large provincial protected areas in the middle Fraser: Churn Creek, Edge Hills, and the Junction Sheep Range (BC Parks 2007a; BC Parks 2007b; BC Parks 2007c) (Figure 1). Then, in 1999, the non-profit land trust known as the Land Conservancy of BC (LCBC) bought Talking Mountain Ranch with the intention of creating a conservation-oriented working ranch (TLC 2007). As well, based on input from CORE, government regulation such as the Forest and Range Practices Act changed to advance ecological values on Crown range. Thus, in the 1990s, proponents of an ecological view began transforming grasslands in the middle Fraser.

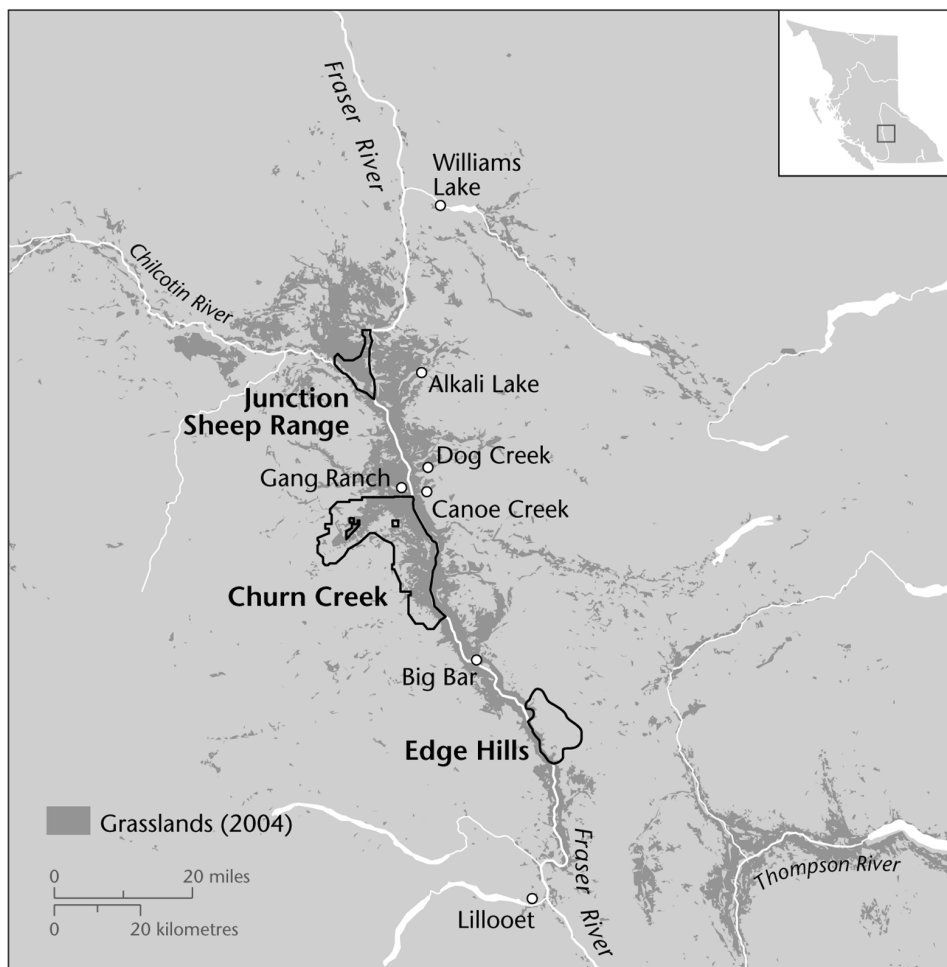


Figure 1: Provincial Protected Areas in the Middle Fraser. *Source:* Grasslands Conservation Council of British Columbia 2004a. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

Concurrently, through many processes, First Nations were making progress in claims to land and resources. At present, the Northern Secwepemc te Qulmucw (Northern Shuswap Treaty Society) and the Esketemc First Nation are participating in the tripartite negotiations of the British Columbia Treaty Commission (BCTC 2007; NStQ_{2007a}). Both groups are in Stage Four, negotiating an Agreement in Principle (Ibid).⁴ The St'at'imc and Tsilhqot'in are not participating in the treaty process, having chosen other litigation and/or other forms of resistance instead. However, at this point, the geography of large ranches and small reserves remains almost unchanged; the creation of protected areas is the only large-scale change in tenure.

The grassland debates seemed to cool after the heated disputes of the 1990s. Although many participants were dissatisfied, the scale and expense of CORE created a significant incentive to come to "solutions." A similar land-use planning process was clearly unlikely in the future. Afterwards, conservationists emphasized compromise solutions such as the "Keep Working Ranches Working" approach to grassland conservation. Valuing large ranch properties for their contiguous grasslands, they advocated stewardship and opposed subdivision. Other issue-based initiatives – such as emerging programs by the Invasive Plant Council of British Columbia (IPCBC) – encouraged collaboration among stakeholders for on-ranch stewardship. The issue of Aboriginal title was deferred to the treaty process, something land planners and managers would address at a later date. However, the different values have not been integrated or resolved; conservationists, ranchers, and First Nations hold many unaddressed interests and often have conflicting perspectives.

CONSERVATIONISTS

Birthplace of the activist organization Greenpeace, British Columbia is also known for "wars in the woods," in which loggers and environmentalists faced off over the fate of old-growth forests (Salazar and Alper 2000; Wilson 1998). British Columbia is famous for wilderness environmentalism (Wilson 1998). In the 1990s, wilderness environmentalists advocated nature preservation through protected areas, but this perspective often brought them into conflict with First Nations and resource workers (Reed 2003; Reid 2003). The landscapes that

⁴ The Northern Secwepemc te Qulmucw (NStQ) is a "political alliance between the Canim Lake Indian Band, the Canoe Creek Indian Band, the Xat'sull First Nations and the Williams Lake Indian Band (a.k.a. Sugar Cane)" (NStQ_{2007a}). The Esketemc First Nation is formerly the Alkali Lake Indian Band (NStQ_{2007a}).

environmentalists sought to “protect” were also First Nations’ traditional territories and sites of work; many social values and land uses fell outside the wilderness model (Braun 2002; Reed 2003).

Grassland conservation differs from stereotypical wilderness environmentalism (which advocates nature preservation through the creation of protected areas). Grassland conservation has its roots in government range science. Only in the 1970s (but mainly in the 1990s) did preservationists and eco-activists turn their attention to grasslands. Contemporary grassland conservation thus blends the historic, range management perspective with new ecological ideas and eco-activism. In the middle Fraser, grassland conservationists hold many views. For many, the “working ranch” model of conservation is an unsatisfactory compromise. Others believe that sustainable resource production is an important objective, integral to the overarching goal of sustainability. Overall, I argue that, although the field of grassland conservation is constantly changing, most grassland conservationists advocate wise use (conservation) with some additional ecological reserves. However, many conservationists desire the protection of large areas through the exclusion of agriculture and resource use. Depending on how it is approached, this goal may spark further conflict in the region.

A Genealogy of Grassland Conservation

In 1900, four decades after cattle were introduced to British Columbia, most grasslands were overgrazed (McLean 1982). A grassland conservationist who saw rangelands in the 1920s said, “you can’t imagine what some of these ranges were like by the 1920s ... There was so much dust. Dark, black dust”; this man said that, in order to improve productivity, ranchers focused on animal breeding and overlooked range condition. In many places, there was year-round grazing (Bawtree et al. 1998). During the First World War, beef prices were high, and almost any available range had cattle (and/or sheep) on it. There were also grasshopper outbreaks, and anything the cattle did not take was eaten by grasshoppers (Ibid.). Grasslands were invaded by annual cheatgrass (Bawtree 2005). There were “blow-outs” in the middle Fraser, where, once the vegetation cover was eaten, the wind blasted away the soil; the depressions from some of these blow-outs remain visible today. A government scientist told me that, in the 1920s at Becher’s Prairie (west of Williams Lake), “you couldn’t find a blade of grass” (2007).

Conservation-oriented grassland management began with government responses to this widespread overgrazing; the focus was on research and regulation. Then, as range researchers moved between universities and government, range management became institutionalized academically. In the 1940s, the University of British Columbia began offering a range management course, only the second in North America (Paille 2001). British Columbia soon had many accomplished range scientists working across academic/policy boundaries. At the same time, a small number of natural history enthusiasts became interested in the grassland flora and fauna, particularly grasses and birds; however, one of these early naturalists said that the initial interest in grasslands remained confined to a small group of “botanists and technical people.” Both groups shared a scientific appreciation of grasslands.

In the 1970s, hunters began to argue that rangelands should also be managed as wildlife habitat. In 1974, a *Vancouver Sun* article claimed that overgrazing by cattle at the Gang Ranch was causing a decline in the number of bighorn sheep, although ranchers were quick to dissent (Farrow 1974; Kind 2006). When the province revisited its range tenure system under the Range Act, ranchers (who wanted more secure tenure) were increasingly challenged by wildlife and game lobbyists (Dodd and Otway 1973). As was often the case in British Columbia, the hunting lobby spearheaded environmental protection efforts, although at the time this was mainly a debate about forage allocation. Passed in 1978, the Range Act mentioned other use values on ranges, including wildlife (Cashore et al. 2002).

In the 1980s, others began to advocate grassland protection from many overlapping backgrounds: as scientists, endangered species advocates, naturalists, and wilderness campaigners. Several grasslands advocates noted that the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) was one of the first environmental advocacy organizations to begin campaigning for grassland conservation. Many of its members lived in Vancouver and experienced grasslands recreationally and aesthetically.

Grassland conservation gained momentum in the 1990s. At CORE, many environmental ideas became institutionalized in land-use plans and legislation. Then, in 1996, a handful of people put out a call for “anyone interested in grasslands” to come to a meeting at Big Bar. Organizers were surprised that almost a hundred people showed up. Three years later, participants from this meeting formed the Grassland Conservation Council (GCC), a non-profit organization dedicated to “preserving, protecting, and promoting the grasslands of British

Columbia" (GCC 2007). The GCC solidified and expanded the grassland conservation networks in academic, government, and environmental circles. Some ranchers also became involved with the organization. Two early GCC slogans were "Cows not Condos" and "Keep Working Ranches Working," indicating the goal of conservation through working landscapes.

A Scientific Approach

In spite of grassland conservation's complex genealogy, it has always relied on science. However, both the science and its application have changed. Early range science focused on utilitarian studies to improve range use; plant productivity and weed control were typical concerns (Paille 2001). Although those topics continue to be important, science functions differently in contemporary grassland politics.

Conservationists in the middle Fraser grasslands now emphasize the need to protect globally endangered ecosystems from degradation and loss. The discourse on grasslands often emphasizes words such as "fragile," "endangered," "rare," and "valuable"; grasslands are clearly ecosystems at risk. Conservationists regularly situate grasslands in an international context, writing that "temperate grasslands have been modified by human activity to such a degree that little remains today in a natural state, and even less remains in some form of long-term protection" (Henwood 2003, 21).

Conservationists therefore seek to place remaining grasslands in protected areas. Starting in the 1970s, through "gap" analyses at provincial, national, and international levels, the middle Fraser grasslands became identified as ecosystems in need of protection (Parks Canada 1997). One grassland advocate noted that only "because of BC's focus on representation in the [provincial] Protected Area Strategy at the time did it become obvious that grasslands were underrepresented." Through conservationists' practices of representation, science becomes enmeshed with the moral imperative to protect grasslands; ecology and advocacy are joined through ideas of representation.

Grassland conservationists also emphasize the complexity and fragility of grassland ecosystems. In 1949, Aldo Leopold (1949, 193) wrote that American conservationists were mostly concerned with "show pieces" and had "not yet learned to think in terms of small cogs and wheels." Grassland conservationists in British Columbia are intensely concerned with cogs and wheels; they emphasize the component parts

of grasslands and their interrelationships. They focus on species diversity in grasslands, everything from the microbiotic soil crust (or the “cryptogamic crust”) to the many plant species to fauna such as sharp-tailed grouse, badgers, and bighorn sheep (GCC 2003; Hoodicoff 2005). This emphasis highlights both the subtle complexity of grasslands and their fragility. Conservationists emphasize the detailed, fragile aesthetic of grassland ecology. For example, they note that the cryptogamic crust is “very susceptible to mechanical disturbance and can be destroyed by human feet, cattle hooves, and off-road vehicles” (Steen and Iverson 2007, 124) and that it takes a very long time to recover.

For conservationists, scientific analysis of grasslands (at multiple scales) is critical to land-use decision making; they believe that grassland landscapes should be quantified in terms of ecosystem components, and they seek to map and quantify them on the basis of ecosystem values (GCC 2004). Science is also, as one conservationist said, “an important and effective advocacy tool.” He commented: “[Science] supports my story. As an advocate, you haven’t got the full story if you haven’t got the science.” In these ways, conservationists lean heavily and productively on science to support their claims in the grassland debates.

Conservationists’ Perspectives on Land Use

In the middle Fraser, grasslands are largely held within ranches and associated Crown range. Conservationists value these large properties, and interviewees from all backgrounds agreed that the biggest threat to grasslands in British Columbia is subdivision and development. They must, therefore, either support conservation on working landscapes or advocate that land be reallocated from ranching to protected areas.

In the CORE process, conservationists faced local resistance when they advocated protected areas without ranching. With respect to the Churn Creek Protected Area, a government official explained:

Once we dealt with whether there was going to be a working ranch or not, a lot of the tension went away. A lot of the ranchers were relatively pleased that there was going to continue to be a ranch there, and some of the conservationists, once they started to see all the work on grassland conservation and all the work that we were going to put in in terms of monitoring, putting benchmarks in, and putting fences in, and protecting riparian systems, I think a lot of them started to be more ... they felt better about it.

At CORE and afterwards, the “working ranches for conservation” compromise became institutionalized. The multiple-use management plan for Churn Creek, the diverse Grassland Strategy Working Group (comprised of ranchers and conservationists), and the conservation-oriented changes to the Forest Practices Act all demonstrate this attempted compromise (BC Parks 2000; Government of BC 2006). The gcc is now developing ranch stewardship programs, working with ranchers to enhance ecosystem values on utilized range (Wikeem and Wikeem 2006). As well, organizations such as the gcc make an effort to recognize high-quality range management. In a *Vancouver Sun* interview, gcc executive director Bruno Delesalle said: “We have to recognize that there are some grazing and livestock issues that have to be addressed – but we also have some success stories out there, where lands are being managed in a very effective way and trends are positive” (Simpson 2007).

However, many conservationists continue to advocate conservation outside the “working ranch” model. With respect to the middle Fraser, one environmental bureaucrat said, “I don’t think anyone in the conservation field is happy with what’s there now. People are interested in looking for more.” He said conservationists wanted “more sites, better sites ... Better management than Churn.”⁵ Some conservationists also believe that ranchers’ access to public land is exorbitant. For example, speaking about the Empire Valley Ranch, one conservationist said that it was unfair for a single business to gain so much benefit from public lands.⁶ Even those who do not directly question ranchers’ rights to such large grassland areas believe that the lands should be simultaneously managed for other purposes. In 2007, in four interviews in which I raised this point, the conservationists perceived the provision of environmental goods and services as a necessary burden on ranchers who use public ranges. In 2008, one ecologist also pointed out that the amount of forage needed per “animal unit” per month is available more cheaply on Crown land than on private land, thus justifying at least some environmental expenses on public lands.⁷

⁵ This interviewee was mainly concerned with recreational overuse (e.g., by hunters) and insufficient monitoring. This was not a criticism of the ranch management, which conservationist interviewees agreed was very high quality.

⁶ The Empire Valley is inside the Churn Creek Protected Area, and this interviewee was speaking specifically about running a ranching operation in a provincial protected area. However, many conservationists challenge the use of scarce grasslands as range or as range alone.

⁷ An animal unit is one cow and her suckling calf. Regulated volumes within Animal Unit Months (AUMs) change according to jurisdictions.

There are diverse perspectives among grassland conservationists; some are ideologically committed to working with resource producers, while others see collaboration as a means to an end. The working ranch model of conservation is the currently accepted model, but it does not reflect the goals of all conservationists. However, the goal of creating additional grassland protected areas is likely to bring conservationists into conflict with ranchers.

RANCHERS

A rancher I interviewed said, “We all want more grass.” This is an oversimplification, but it suggests that healthy rangelands are a benefit to all. The working ranch model of conservation seems like a good compromise, yet many ranchers are wary of or outright opposed to much environmental activity in the middle Fraser. One rancher told me that he thought environmentalists could become the ranchers’ “best friend or worst nightmare.” He said that ranchers were sharing all kinds of information about their ranching practices without knowing how that information would be used. Ranchers’ problems with conservation stem from a strong ranching culture, economic vulnerability and increased regulation, scientific ambivalence, and a mistrust of bureaucratic and conservation practices.

Ranching Culture

The middle Fraser is a difficult place to ranch. Unlike rolling grasslands in Alberta, the American Southwest, and even parts of British Columbia, the usable range is patchy and separated by challenging terrain. Riverside benches are separated by steep, rocky gullies. The Fraser River itself is a difficult barrier, and the remoteness of the area has long challenged ranchers seeking to move their cattle between ranges and also to market. As well, the region is extremely dry. Local ranchers told me that the ranches along the side of the river north of Lillooet are the driest in the province. Irrigation constitutes a large proportion of ranchers’ work; one rancher spent eight hours every summer day moving gravity-fed irrigation pipes.

Yet, since the mid-1800s, ranchers and their employees have worked this landscape as a productive cattle-rearing site. Ranchers experience the challenges of the landscape daily. They are proud of their knowledge and the hard, daily work they invest in their ranches. Their daily work

is embedded within a wider ranching culture that emphasizes hard work, independence, and western “cowboy” traditions. A newspaperman and glorifier of the ranching culture wrote: “They say some people will walk a mile for a smoke, but in the BC interior a rancher will fly, ride, walk, and crawl 20 miles just for a weak-minded old steer” (St. Pierre 1953). The regional cowboy culture is reproduced and made visible in the Williams Lake Stampede, local literature and histories, and the Williams Lake Museum (Furniss 1999).

History and culture affect the way that ranchers act in the grassland debates. Residents of the middle Fraser are often described as rough frontierspeople; conservationists described local ranchers as “bushed-out” and as “rugged individualists.” One conservationist noted that “ranchers are independent ... it can be hard to even get them to join the BC Cattlemen’s. They don’t like being told what to do.” Ranchers are often sceptical about the interventions of outsiders. Many ranchers I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with how government officials or conservationists “dropped in” and sought to dictate land uses.

In popular discourse, the middle Fraser landscape appears as a vestige of the Wild West, where rough, hardworking people eke out a living on dry, unforgiving land; this is the social construction of the old-time ranching family struggling against all odds. Many ranchers do struggle to make their livelihoods. However, this is not the whole story. Because ranches are valuable properties but often only marginally profitable as businesses, they can become trophy or retirement properties for wealthy people. In March 2008, American billionaire Stanley Kroenke bought the famous Alkali Lake Ranch in the middle Fraser (Phillips 2008).⁸ The other iconic middle Fraser ranch, the Gang Ranch, is owned by a Saudi Arabian businessman. Both Alkali Lake and the Gang remain working ranches and, thus, retain aspects of the “cowboy lifestyle” (Twan 2008).

Economic Vulnerability and Increasing Regulation

Since the 1970s, the BC cattle industry has faced regular economic crises. Production costs have increased while returns have fallen. A 1983 report commissioned by the province suggested that the ranching industry was not profitable enough to continue and that grazing lands

⁸ Kroenke’s wife, Anne Walton, is a Wal-Mart heir, which is why people have written about “Wal-Mart Ranchers” (Phillips 2008). Kroenke also owns the Douglas Lake Ranch and therefore now holds more Canadian ranchland than anyone else (Phillips 2008; Twan 2008).

should be reallocated towards more productive purposes (Canadian Press 1983). In May 2003, when Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was identified in a cow from Alberta, the United States banned all imports of Canadian beef (CBC News Online In Depth 2006), and the price of BC steers plummeted from \$1.35 per pound to \$0.95 (Kane 2007). One middle Fraser rancher told me that his ranch “ate” \$250,000 in the four years following the crisis. In October 2007, a tuberculosis scare also temporarily affected ranchers’ markets, again highlighting their economic vulnerability (Canadian Press 2007).

In this context, ranchers’ opposition to some environmental measures comes into sharp relief. A report by a subcommittee of the BC Cattlemen’s Association notes: “Modern day ranchers operate under a complicated regulatory regime. Federal and provincial legislation, regulation, policy, and procedure dictates much of what the rancher may do, both on the Crown range and private land” (Barnett 2003, 6). Ranchers’ concerns with changing land regulation (in the context of economic vulnerability) are twofold.

First, ranchers face increasing demands for environmental protection, often without increasing support. According to the rancher at Alkali Lake, “the seemingly endless new rules and regulations are heaping added burdens on an industry that has suffered greatly over the past few years. All the new regulations add cost and responsibility that are greatest to the rancher” (Twan 2006). Environmental improvements such as additional fencing, monitoring and reporting, and set-aside lands all cost money. Ranchers often feel that they are being asked, as one rancher said, to “produce more and more for less and less.”

Second, ranchers fear the loss of the critical mass of their industry (Barnett 2003). They say that a certain number of producers are needed to support vet clinics, stockyards, and farm equipment dealers, and to maintain a useable labour pool. This is one reason that ranchers strongly oppose protected area creation, the purchase of ranches by environmental organizations, and loss of land to treaty settlement: they fear that the land will no longer be part of the overall ranching economy. According to one rancher: “We don’t care if First Nations own ranches. They’ve been in the industry a long time ... It’s fine as long as the ranch keeps producing.”

Scientific Ambivalence

Speaking of grassland ecologists, one rancher commented that they should “come in here with a blank piece of paper and write down what [they] see. Now *that’s* science.” He suggested that many conservationists – particularly government employees – arrived with preconceived ideas about ecosystem change and the impacts of grazing. Many ranchers I interviewed were sceptical about scientific practices on grasslands and questioned the objectivity of grassland science. I heard several stories about how scientific research was biased. Ranchers criticized specific programs, such as the counting of bighorn sheep through the use of helicopters. Ranchers felt that this method frightened the sheep and that, since the research was aimed at understanding stresses on sheep, it was inherently contradictory.

Moreover, many ranchers believe that science is biased against ranching interests. Many of their stories questioned the scientific objectivity of “exclosures.” Exclosures are fenced-off areas in which ecologists study ecological change in the absence of cattle grazing. Ranchers believe the fences form a barrier and that, because cows walk around the edges of the exclosures and wear away the grass, the contrast between inside and outside appears very sharp. The exclosures and the bighorn count are but two examples of ranchers’ widespread scepticism regarding the ability of scientists and conservationists to adequately rationalize the landscape.

Some ranchers feel that their observations and ecological perspectives are not valued and, as a result, are not well reflected within official grassland discourse. When talking about the ecology of his range, one rancher said, “You don’t get that knowledge overnight. You can’t read it in a book.” Ranchers value place-based knowledge derived through long-term daily engagement with grasslands. Several ranchers felt that conservationists regard this knowledge as inferior to that produced by the quantitative science used by grassland ecologists and conservationists.

Mistrust of Grassland Conservation and Bureaucratic Practice

When asked whether he thought there could be a role for conservationists in range management, one rancher said, “There could be, I guess. But there’s no trust there.” Another rancher said of his meeting with a conservationist: “We have exactly the same goals. We want the same thing. It just kind of missed the mark on cooperation ... We both want

more grass ... We both have the same goals but the guards are up." Many ranchers I interviewed distrust many actors and processes in grassland politics, including conservationists both inside and outside government. Ranchers believed that agreements got eroded over time.

They told me about an old-time rancher who sold his land to a conservation organization under the condition that he could work the ranch until his retirement. Then, enabled by a clause in the sale that the rancher did not notice, the environmental organization raised the lease after five years. The rancher could no longer afford to work the property and "ended up in a trailer park." I heard several more examples of how ranchers felt that initial agreements changed over time and that costs eventually far outweighed benefits.⁹ Ranchers have felt cheated in the past and are sceptical of deal-making.

As well, ranchers are concerned that conservationists are not ideologically committed to the "working ranch" model of conservation. Ranchers believe that conservationists want another protected area in the middle Fraser and that they are looking for additional rangelands for no-grazing reserves. They believe that conservationists are only working with them out of necessity, because of ecosystem values on their properties. Their scepticism undermines their willingness to fully engage with conservationists regarding rangelands.

FIRST NATIONS

An Aboriginal interviewee spoke of a family member who worked on a ranch beside his reserve as an irrigator: he was so skilled that people said he could "make water flow uphill." When the ranch purchased a new irrigation system, this man lost his job and there were no other opportunities for him. He became depressed and drank a great deal. Most days, he hung around with his friends in Botanio Park in Williams Lake, though he would hitchhike weekly to a nearby reserve to visit his nephews. The interviewee said: "He had a whole lot of hurt in his life. We didn't judge him for his drinking." This man eventually died of injuries related to being abused by an RCMP officer while in custody.

Such stories of social marginalization may not immediately appear to be part of the grassland debates. Although some First Nations are engaged in debates over whether and how grasslands should be grazed,

⁹ One rancher told me about how the ALR was created with pillars of farm support to counterbalance the lost land values associated with "locking land up." Then, over time, the farm support changed and was lost, but the land remained in the ALR.

many First Nations interviewees think the issue of entitlement comes first. While other participants in the grassland debates take the existing property regime for granted, First Nations, through daily practice, official processes, and other forms of resistance, regularly challenge the legitimacy of Crown and private title. First Nations say that their historic marginalization continues into the present, and they believe that the need for land reallocation underlies the grassland debates.

Historic Use and Dispossession

A First Nations interviewee told me that her great-great-grandfather had been the sole smallpox survivor in his village, that someone from a nearby village had found him alone in a pithouse. First Nations populations were decimated by smallpox, and this, in turn, supported the settlers in their impression that there was much open space (Harris 1999). Another Aboriginal interviewee told me that his great-grandfather used to ranch but that he “got squeezed out ... There was all this paperwork but he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t even read ... In the end, all the good land went to the big ranches because they had influence with the government.”

In an 1879 statement, Chief William of the Williams Lake Band said: “The land on which my people lived for five hundred years was taken by a white man. He has crops of wheat and herds of cattle. We have nothing, not an acre” (NStQ 2007b). In his 1914 testimony to the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, Chief High Bar Joe said, “I have been using one piece of land – I have a house on it and a fence around it – I fenced the best part that I am using – I did not fence all the good land and now whitemen have gone there and have taken that place” (Royal Commission 1916). After the land was pre-empted, First Nations were allocated reserves that rarely included much good land (Harris 2002).¹⁰

After the development of large ranches, First Nations traditional uses on grasslands were limited by fencing. Historical records describe extensive fence-building by ranchers in the middle Fraser (e.g., by the

¹⁰ The Canoe Creek Band website notes that “of the band’s 5,880.4 hectares, 3880 hectares is rocky hillsides. Each of the main communities of Dog Creek and Canoe Creek are situated on approximately 50 hectares of land, most of it rocky slopes and gravel on the remaining portion” (Canoe Creek 2007). This quote has since been removed but is now available from the First Nations Environment site, an activist website that describes resource extraction and indigenous resistance on traditional territories. See: www.firstnations.de/development.htm?06-3-secwepemc.htm.

BC Cattle Company in the mid-1890s). Internal correspondence from the BC Cattle Company lists a number of fence construction projects, such as: “Barbed wire fence between Indian Reserve and upper end of Ranch. 2 miles” (Lowther 1900). Fencing reinforced the reserve system, and fences clearly and physically represented the distinction between Native and non-Native space.

As well, ranching changed the species composition in grasslands in a way that affected First Nations livelihoods. In her study of Secwepemc language and land use, anthropologist A.D. Palmer (2005, 67) wrote that “subsistence activities form an integral part of life in Alkali Lake” in ways “generally underestimated by federal and provincial agencies.” She suggests that “cattle grazing has significantly lessened the diversity of plant life,” and she cites Esketemc elder Angela George, who says: “Used to be a lot of berries. Saskatoons down here in this spot. And the ranchers here they don’t feed their cattle and they eat all the bushes.” As well, two First Nations interviewees who owned ranches were concerned with degradation on their own rangelands. Like many on-reserve ranges, these interviewees’ lands were disproportionately affected by weeds. Many reserves are bisected by roads, which are major vectors of invasive plants (The involuntary end to traditional First Nations grassland burns also likely played a role).¹¹

Reclaiming Land and Resources

Many Secwepemc communities are reclaiming land and resources through the treaty process. The Northern Secwepemc *te Qulmucw* (Northern Shuswap Treaty Society) and the Esketemc First Nation are participating in the tripartite negotiations at the BC Treaty Commission (BCTC 2007). The NStQ seeks self-government as well as “shared decision making” with federal and provincial governments regarding resources in their traditional territory (NStQ 2007a). The NStQ’s Statement of Intent map expresses the group’s interest in most grassland benches from Lillooet to Williams Lake (NStQ 2007c). They are currently at Stage 4 of the treaty process, negotiating an Agreement

¹¹ Reserve lands are bisected by roads for many reasons. In some cases, roads (or trails) predated the reserves. In other cases, the province claimed land for transportation after the reserves were created. Order in Council 1036, through which reserve lands were conveyed from the province to the federal government, specified that the province could take up to 10 percent of the reserve for logistical purposes (UBCIC 2005). This enabled the later development of roads on-reserve. In response to the problem of weeds on reserves, the Invasive Plant Council of BC has recently begun a program to provide funding for invasive plant management on reserves (IPCBC 2008).

in Principle. The Esketemc First Nation is also at Stage 4. The St'at'imc and Tsilhqot'in are not participating in the treaty process.¹²

Redistributing land in the middle Fraser to First Nations through treaties and other means is difficult because so much of it is located in private ranches. When a ranch comes up for sale, many groups discuss the possibility that the government might purchase the ranch for First Nations as part of a treaty settlement. Two interviewees – a rancher and a conservationist – described the idea of a government-established trust fund from which ranches could be purchased on behalf of First Nations. So far, this has not happened; interviewees believed it was difficult to secure the capital due to the uncertainty and difficult logistics of land claims. One First Nations person said that “not many Indians want to ranch.” Others said that some First Nations have a strong, long-term interest in owning working ranches. Another First Nations interviewee expressed interest in the expansion of her family's existing ranch operation, for which more land would be needed. In all cases, land reallocation was the fundamental concern.

Political Processes of Conservation

In 1995, after CORE, the province created the Churn Creek Protected Area in an area that Secwepemc peoples claimed in its entirety. Local First Nations were involved in the Steering Group and the Technical Working Group, through which the plan was developed (BC Parks 2000; Interviews 2007). The *Churn Creek Protected Area Management Plan* states that the plan will “not prejudice any Treaty negotiations” (BC Parks 2000). But a government official told me that, when the province bought the Empire Valley Ranch (in Churn Creek) in 1996, the Canoe Creek Band felt that it should have been awarded the opportunity to run the ranch.¹³ Instead, the ranch went to other bidders, and the Canoe Creek Band was given the opportunity to run the haying and the irrigation. This arrangement later fell through, for reasons over which interviewees disagreed.

¹² In November 2007, the BC Supreme Court found that the Xeni Gwet'in had unextinguished title to over two hundred thousand hectares of its traditional territory (Watts 2007). The St'at'imc Nation opposes the work of the BC Treaty Commission, arguing that the process is about extinguishment of Aboriginal rights. In an article in the *St'at'imc Runner* entitled “What Are They Offering to Buy?” Grand Chief Saul Terry (2006) writes, “First and foremost, the BCTC process is an extinguishment process.”

¹³ I heard from four interviewees that the Canoe Creek Band expressed interest in submitting a proposal but then did not. Canoe Creek representatives were not available for interviews.

First Nations have often been at the periphery of grassland conservation. In the 1990s, when much grassland conservation was institutionalized, First Nations were seen as undependable, and their participation was seen as optional. Regarding CORE, one conservationist said: “I can remember going to [___] band for a meeting and nobody showed up. That was typical. There must have been First Nations at the table. I can’t imagine them not. But how many and who they were?” He didn’t know.

The CORE process took place in the early 1990s, before landmark court cases supported First Nations long-held position that their Aboriginal title remained unextinguished. A government employee said:

First Nations were kind of invited to be around those tables, but it was pre-Delgamuukw, pre-Haida, pre-Taku. Delgamuukw was just starting to be discussed in sort of the mid-1990s, and there was this broad sense that you should probably talk to First Nations, but as soon as they were doing something you disagreed with, there was this broad feeling that you could kind of just keep on doing what you wanted to do. So really, First Nations were just beginning to start to be something to consider at the time.¹⁴

Some First Nations did not participate in CORE for explicitly political reasons. According to one First Nations interviewee, “they were making all these decisions, but they didn’t recognize our Aboriginal title.” He did not participate in CORE because he rejected its fundamental approach to allocating land.

Grassland conservation processes often defer to treaty processes much as does the *Churn Creek Protected Area Management Plan*. In the meantime, First Nations are working at the edges of grassland conservation. One First Nations interviewee is currently working to create co-management roles for First Nations in several Cariboo-Chilcotin protected areas, including Churn Creek. This person hopes to see that local First Nations gain more authority to manage protected areas as well as more economic opportunities. First Nations participation in “on the ground” conservation work in the middle Fraser is rare, and it often

¹⁴ Delgamuukw was the 1997 landmark case, brought forward by Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs, in which the Supreme Court of Canada found that Aboriginal rights had not been extinguished (UBCIC 2005). According to Jessica Clogg of West Coast Environmental Law (2005), the Haida Nation and Taku River Tlingit decisions meant that “the Supreme Court of Canada has rejected once and for all the Crown’s argument that it does not have to consult Aboriginal Peoples about land and resource decisions until their rights are proven in court.” In other words, the province has to consult First Nations regarding resource activities on “Crown” land.

takes place on the initiative of the non-Aboriginal project leader, on a project-by-project basis. For example, one government official described involving one band in a tree-removal project; the band was paid thirty thousand dollars to help remove trees from the grasslands.

Fifteen years after CORE and landmark court cases like *Delgamuukw*, First Nations feel they must fight to be heard in the grassland debates. One Aboriginal interviewee said: "I have to go to all these meetings to keep saying, 'Hey, don't forget about us.'" Some Aboriginal interviewees hope that the treaty process will change this political marginalization. Meanwhile, however, a small number of First Nations are becoming directly involved in other processes of conservation and land management (e.g., with non-governmental organizations) in order to make sure that their perspectives are heard.

CONCLUSIONS

Participants in the grassland debates have diverse and complex perspectives, some of which bring them into conflict. The CORE process developed land-use plans, trying to divide land among stakeholders to resolve conflicts; far from disappearing, however, conflicts were often further entrenched during that process (Mou 2002; Reed 2003; Wilson 1998). The idea that land-use conflicts can be settled at the level of land-use zoning overlooks the fact that conflicts are deeply ideological and are performed daily in infinite, ongoing ways as different people encounter each other at various sites. The grassland debates will always involve conflicts; the goal is not permanently to solve or to avoid such conflicts but, rather, to learn to work within them for equitable and ecologically sustainable outcomes.

In the future, land in the middle Fraser will rarely be allocated for a single purpose; rather, landscapes will be "multifunctional." Grassland conservation, ranching, and First Nations land rights will intersect in many new ways and continue to change the landscape. New institutional forms are needed so that grassland land use will reflect many social values. First Nations-managed protected areas and conservation-oriented working ranches are two examples of possible forms, but circumstances may demand the creation of entirely new institutions. In the meantime, there are four basic changes to land allocation and use that seem to follow from my analysis. None of them is easy, and many people are already working in these directions.

First, the issue of Aboriginal title must be fundamentally and comprehensively addressed. In many instances, the conservationists I interviewed stated that they worked with existing landowners, with the result that the issue of land reallocation was outside their purview. The treaty process is the primary vehicle for addressing land and resource reallocation in the area, but the issues of Aboriginal title and grassland conservation should be made to speak to one another in ongoing ways. This is complex and case-specific; it may involve, for example, collaborating on restoration projects and/or comprehensively consulting First Nations about future initiatives on Crown range.

Second, some additional lands need to be allocated to protection without livestock grazing. These sites will not be landscape-wide; conservationists will most likely have to relinquish the large-scale wilderness aesthetic that demands gigantic sites of preservation without use. However, the identification and protection of additional critical sites (as with the “benchmark sites” in the Churn Creek Protected Area) seem to be vital steps towards protecting the unique ecology of the middle Fraser.

Third, ranchers practising ecological conservation should be further supported in order to provide the ecological goods and services that conservationists (and broader society) demand. The gcc’s stewardship programs and the Invasive Plant Council initiatives on working ranches are excellent examples of this support, which can be extended.

Finally, it seems that ranchers should be encouraged to place conservation covenants on their properties in order to protect ecological values. Since 1995, under Environment Canada’s “Ecological Gifts Program,” landowners who donate land or interest in land for ecological purposes qualify for tax benefits (Environment Canada 2008). However, the Agricultural Land Commission is currently not approving new covenants on ALR lands.¹⁵ There are currently few institutional tools to prevent grassland subdivision – a problem with which the gcc has struggled for years. It will remain a central goal as the protection of contiguous grasslands on large properties is a basic principle in the protection of the middle Fraser’s unique socio-ecological landscape, which so many different people value for so many different reasons.

¹⁵ The ALR does offer protection against subdivision. However, landowners can apply to the ALR for subdivision, and their application may be approved within ninety days (ALC 2008b).

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