
Press Release: The Hopi Tribe

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Cooperation to Turn Brown Earth Green

Kykotsmovi, Arizona--Its June and Spring is barely getting underway on the Hopi Reservation. For most visitors, the Hopi Reservation is just a scenic drive from the pine forests of Flagstaff or the Painted Desert of Winslow, Arizona. But what is considered "scenic" is in the eyes of the beholder.

Times have changed on the Hopi Reservation and overgrazing has become a major problem. Over the past few years, animals on the land have grown until the range couldn't support any more animals. A handful of Hopi cattlemen have documented the damage done to the range by the expanding cattle herds, wild horses, and sheep. The overgrazed condition of the land is compounded by unseasonal weather conditions, making the recovery from the last three years of drought extremely slow.

As the hillsides are scanned, it is evident in certain areas where the land has been hammered over the years. Grass and shrubs have been grazed to the ground. The animals are so hard on the vegetation that many plants have vanished from the range leaving behind patches of brown dirt.

For the Hopi, the range is unique. The semi-arid reservation contains plenty of summer range. However, most of the cattle herds which belong to individual Hopi cattlemen, graze in the valleys below the mesas year round.

The Hopi Reservation is the birthplace of a combination between natural "self" cattle regulation and tribal regulation. Since the 1930's, Hopi cattlemen acquired grazing areas and worked with the Hopi Tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to allow the herds to graze freely within permitted areas.

Since the introduction of cattle to the Hopi, ranchers have assumed practices of self regulation by fixing watering ponds when it needed it and reducing their herds when drought conditions persisted.

The Hopi Tribe first adopted Range Management policies in the 30's. Hopi Tribal Range Managers concerned about the land, enacted Ordinance 43 in 1988 for broader and more uniform regulation of cattle in concert with range management.

The Hopi cattlemen are sympathetic to the Hopi Tribe's efforts for more pro-active range management. After years of raising cattle, they've been trained to look at grassland, figure out what it can handle, and graze cattle on it accordingly.

"If a range looks battered, you pull your stock off or pay the price for next year when the grass is down and the cows are hungry," states one longtime cattle rancher.

Tribal officials cattlemen agree that overgrazing is a landscape problem as well as a wildlife problem. A lot Hopi landscape resources are consumed by wild horses which have exploded in population over

the past twenty years.

Both parties acknowledge that more than half of the Hopi Reservation has been hit hard by overgrazing. With little range land left for rotation of cattle and sheep, the range has had little chance to recover.

In this altered landscape, the Hopi Tribe, BIA and cattlemen are starting to work together, both assuming some responsibility to get the land back into shape.

For an ancient tribe, land stewardship remains integral, especially in these modern times. One tribal official states, "If the land is to recover from drought and overgrazing, our range management practices must include animal reductions. We need to allow the land to build back its capacity. If the land continues to deteriorate, everyone loses over a longer period of time."

Some cattlemen, concerned about the land have begun voluntary reductions of their herds. They hope the reductions are temporary.

"If rains from El Nino continue, the land will recover. However, we need to be patient and not put our animals back on the land for a couple years just because we see grass growing. The land needs to rest for awhile. Besides, it will be nice to see our land with plenty of grass on it once again. "It use to be green out here," states one old timer on the range.



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