

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY RANCHING? AN INTERVIEW ON THE HIGH DESERT

WITH
DOC & CONNIE HATFIELD*

BY
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The following is an interview with Doc Hatfield about his views on raising cattle and his association with Oregon Country Beef, a cooperative organization that his wife, Connie, helped start in 1986. Doc was on his cell phone while we talked, as he and Connie were on their way to Portland from their High Desert Ranch in Brothers, Oregon to give a talk to an agricultural group. Connie was driving while Doc and I spoke. They have a rule against driving and talking on the phone at the same time. I agreed that was probably a good policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Doc and Connie Hatfield have four hundred mother cows on their twenty-five thousand acre ranch in Brothers, Oregon. Twenty thousand acres of their land is privately owned. The other five thousand acres is used under a grazing permit from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM.) The Hatfields started ranching in 1966 with four head of cattle in the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. In 1976, they traded that land for their present Oregon ranch. Located forty-three miles east of Bend, it is in the high desert in the middle of the state. Though Doc's great-great-grandfather arrived in western Oregon in 1847, Doc's ranch is a different piece of land than the original homestead, operated under a very different philosophy.

When Doc was practicing large animal veterinary medicine in western Montana in the 1960s and early 1970s, he became frustrated with the practice. In his opinion, he was constantly treating animals for symptoms arising from having the "wrong [animal] in the wrong place." The ranchers he worked with grew feed to meet the needs of their animals, instead of raising animals to meet the needs of the land. Recognizing that this was ecologically unsatisfactory, Doc and Connie

* Telephone interview with Doc Hatfield, Oregon Country Beef (Mar. 6, 2000).

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were inspired to leave Montana and return to Oregon to raise cattle in harmony with the land. However, at the time, he would not have thought of himself as an “environmentally conscious” rancher.

II. OREGON COUNTRY BEEF’S PHILOSOPHY

In addition to their ranching enterprise, Doc and Connie are in charge of marketing for Oregon Country Beef, a cooperative of twenty-seven ranches totaling 1.5 million acres and twenty thousand mother cows. When the cooperative was founded in 1986, there were fourteen family ranches committed to a philosophy that cattle should be raised in harmony with the land. This “community of shared values” is a basic tenet of the cooperative. While the ranchers do not proselytize their philosophy, they believe that it makes good sense. Not everyone agrees, however. While the cooperative gets along “alright” with the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, the Hatfields are viewed as operating on the fringe, but not as outcasts. Although the Cattlemen’s Association is not opposed to the Hatfields or the cooperative, professional organizations thrive on maintaining the status quo. Anyone who changes things, or does things differently, is perceived as a threat.

A. *A Free Range Lifestyle*

Oregon Country Beef is a cooperative of like-minded ranchers. Arguing that no human food could otherwise be raised on the high-altitude, low-moisture rangeland comprising the cooperative, the Hatfields believe that raising cattle is the only way to secure a food source on the semi-arid landscape. However, the animals on the High Desert Ranch are not treated in a typical manner. The ranchers of the cooperative believe that it is unconscionable to raise a ruminant animal on feed that humans can eat. While most people living in cattle rangeland hold a similar view, feed lots disagree.¹ What do the range land cattle of Oregon Country Beef eat? Primarily, the cattle are vegetarians, eating bunch grass (a perennial grass that grows in low rainfall, arid environments). Even without the growth hormones typically ingested by animals in large feed operations, the grass provides an adequate diet. The grass diet also means that the cattle do not stand around and have feed hauled to them; rather, they must work to eat. In addition, the cattle have to walk a mile for water. The resulting exercise the animals receive leads Doc to believe that his cattle are “athletes.”

¹ For more information about how animals are raised in feedlot operations, see Factory Farming.com, *Factory Beef Production* (visited Mar. 21, 2000) <<http://factorydfarming.com/beef.html>>; Factory Farming.com, *Factory Milk and Veal Production* (visited Mar. 21, 2000) <<http://factorydfarming.com/beef.html>>.

B. *Animal Welfare Issues*

Doc and Connie firmly believe that their cows are a precious and integral part of a total system, what environmentalists or scientists would term the desert ecosystem. The Hatfields respect their cows and they believe that their cows respect them. Their cattle are selected to function in tune with the land. The Hatfields do not aspire to having bigger cows. Rather, they want their cows to be part of the countryside, somewhat like deer or elk. In addition to broader environmental concerns, Doc and Connie are also concerned for their animals' welfare while on the Desert Ranch. In fact, as Doc stated, "I know my animals are happy . . . if I were a cow, I'd like to live on our ranch." In Doc's opinion, the cattle are treated ethically because they have the opportunity to graze, roam, and do the things that cows do. There are large pastures for the cows to calve. Once the mother cows give birth, the calves are run to yearlings, staying with their mothers from six to nine months. Of course, operating a ranch, the Hatfields' cows are eventually killed for human consumption. When asked about how his animals feel about being killed, Doc stated that he hopes that when his time comes, death is as kind and gentle as how his cows are killed. However, the Hatfields have a different opinion about the veal industry. When asked about the manner in which the veal calves are raised and slaughtered, Doc stated that raising veal cannot be done in harmony with the land. As such, the ranches of Oregon Country Beef do not engage in veal production.

As cattle ranchers, the Hatfields maintain ownership of the cow from the time the animal is calved through its slaughter and sale to retailers. Since the Hatfields retain ownership of the cows during slaughter, they control the method of the animals' death. The Hatfields prefer the modern method of slaughter, refusing to allow their cattle to be slaughtered in the kosher tradition, which can often result in a slow, painful death.

III. THE FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND RANCHING

A. *Economic Sustainability*

The cooperative is sustainably profitable. So much so, six young couples have recently returned to ranching. Oregon Country Beef is primarily sold to the natural foods industry, including: Nature's in Portland, Oregon; Wholefoods Market in San Francisco, California; and Puget Consumer Co-op and Queen Anne Thriftways in greater Seattle, Washington. Much to the Hatfields' satisfaction, their business is rapidly increasing and expanding. An illustration of this success is that the fastest growing department in natural foods stores, specifically Wholefoods Market, is the red meat department. Doc attributes this phenomenon to his belief that few practice vegetarianism for a lifetime because "it requires too much commitment and energy." Thus, Doc believes that many of his buyers are former vegetarians, or what

he calls, "recovering vegetarians." These consumers are attracted to the hormone-free beef and the environmentally friendly manner in which the cattle are reared.

B. *Environmental Sustainability*

The Hatfields believe that their value to society is not in the beef that they produce, but rather is in maintaining large areas of open space, habitat for wildlife, and keeping watersheds intact. While the world could get along without their beef, if the range cattle were eliminated or removed, the land would not lie fallow. Every ranching family in the cooperative has experienced some pressure to sell their land for other purposes. Thus, range cattle ranching is one way to keep the land mass intact. That, he believes, is the benefit to society his operation provides.

The Hatfields maintain a holistic approach to farming. This belief exemplifies the idea that the land, the people, and their money need to operate in harmony. The unwritten goal of this approach is to link the rancher with the consumer for the benefit of both. Oregon Country Beef has been successful in meeting that goal. Although raising animals in harmony with the landscape is not the majority practice, or even widespread, the Hatfields definitely see it as a growing movement. The goal of ranching, as it relates to the treatment of animals, is to ranch in harmony with the land so that nothing needs special treatment. The animals and the land "live off" of each other, without unnecessary interference from the rancher. This is not only profitable, but also sustainable. Considering the success of Oregon Country Beef's philosophy, there is every reason to believe that more ranchers will endeavor to imitate their practices.

C. *Relations with the Environmental Community*

Doc and Connie are more than marketers and ranchers. The two have worked with the Isaac Walton League, the Oregon Environmental Council, and the Sierra Club. Doc has also had cordial communications with major environmental groups who are working to rid the West of cattle, including discussions with such activists as Andy Kerr² and Bill Marlett.³ Doc and Connie are not all talk, however. They currently work with environmental groups to build an understanding of a common goal for the lands of Central and Eastern Oregon. Connie illustrates this point with a story.

About fifteen years ago, the Hatfields wrote an editorial for the Sunday edition of *The Oregonian* commenting that abusive practices in the range cattle industry were no longer a widespread problem. To

² Andy Kerr is on the Board of Directors of Alternatives to Growth Oregon. *Alternatives to Growth Oregon* (visited Mar. 14, 2000) <<http://www.agoregon.org/index.htm>>.

³ Bill Marlett is the Executive Director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association. *Oregon Natural Desert Association* (visited Mar. 14, 2000) <<http://www.teleport.com/~onda/index.htm>>.

prove their point, they invited anyone interested to visit their ranch to see for themselves that not all ranches were run badly. The Isaac Walton League decided to visit. Despite their offer, the Hatfields were scared, fearing the response from this "radical" group from the city. However, when representatives of the group arrived, the Hatfields discovered that they were nice, reasonable people who just happened to care about the land. As the group looked around the ranch, the members of the League came to a pond where there was a duck. Upon seeing the animal, someone in the group asked how many baby ducks the Hatfield's had on the ranch. Connie told them that they never had any baby ducks. Once articulated, this piqued Connie's interest, and she started wondering why they never saw baby ducks. Connie called the local BLM office and asked the wildlife biologist on staff why her Cinnamon Teal ducks never have babies. The response she received changed their grazing practices. Connie learned that Cinnamon Teal ducks nest in May under sagebrush next to ponds. Doc and Connie realized they had been grazing their cattle next to that pond every May, and quickly deduced that this was probably the reason there were no baby ducks on the ranch. As a result, they changed the season of year when they grazed the pasture that has the pond. The next year, two clutches of baby ducks lived in the pond.⁴

IV. CONCLUSION

To this day, the Hatfields' ranch is home to many baby ducks. Doc believes this story illustrates the bottom line: all ranchers can learn from environmental people and all environmental people can learn from ranchers. We just have to learn to listen to each other.

Editor's Note: The foregoing does not represent the views of Animal Law and is not an endorsement of Oregon Country Beef, the natural food stores mentioned herein, or any particular lifestyle choice. We would like to thank Doc and Connie Hatfield for taking the time to express their views on ranching, its impact on the environment, and animal welfare issues as they relate to their cattle. No matter how ranching is viewed, it is of vital importance for environmental and animal advocates to keep an open mind when meeting people who live and espouse different views. While it is hard to quantify the impact ranch practices such as the Hatfields' have on the environment, there are a handful of ducks that are very thankful for the Hatfields' vision and recognition of the importance of natural processes. There is indeed a lot we can learn when we listen to each other, to animals, and to the land.

⁴ The average clutch size for Cinnamon Teal Ducks is six to twelve eggs. Oakland Zoo, *Cinnamon Teal* (visited Mar. 14, 2000) <<http://www.oaklandzoo.org/atoz/azcnteal.html>>.

