

# Shooting Sheep to Save Sagebrush: The Violence of Habitat Restoration

**Jo-Ann Shelton**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

.....

Widely endorsed by environmentalists, shooting feral animals is a means to restore landscapes scarred by human activities. The goal of restoration is to secure the welfare of flora and fauna that existed in a region before the arrival of humans (especially Europeans) and their biological baggage. Maintaining healthy populations of pre-Columbian (pre-European) species is a major concern for environmentalists, whose sense of urgency is enhanced by the knowledge that so many species are threatened with extinction, and that severe damage can be done in a relatively brief period of time. Shooting species that were imported to an area by humans, and that now jeopardize species that have inhabited that area for a much longer period, seems like a simple and quick solution. But shooting is a violent act, and I think that it is appropriate, at a conference sponsored by advocates for peace, to ask whether violence is an acceptable means to reach an endpoint on which we all agree: the protection of a diversity of plant and animal life. The author will argue that the use of violence contravenes environmentalists' claims to respect nature because it perpetuates a philosophy that humans have the right to destroy elements of nature whenever they choose. To illustrate the argument, two examples of mass shootings of grazing animals are presented. In each case, shooters justified the killing on the grounds that the targeted species "did not fit" in the region any more. The first example is the shooting of bison in 19th century America. The second example is the shooting of feral sheep in this decade in the area of California.

The killing of bison by people of European descent occurred for several reasons: to clear the land for agriculture and herding, to profit from the sale of hides, and to have fun. The procurement of food was only one, and frequently not the primary, reason for hunting bison. In fact, very often the skinned carcasses were left where the animals had fallen. And sometimes they were not even skinned because they had been shot only for sport (Roe; Fleharty; and Danz). With the construction of railroad lines across the continent, the hunting of bison became a sport anyone could enjoy. Consider these accounts from the years 1867 and 1872

(Fleharty).

"Few lines of railway in the world offer such facilities for the sportsman and hunter as the Kansas Pacific. Where else in the world can a man recline in the luxuriously cushioned seats of a Pullman Palace car, gliding over the smoothest of tracks, and look out on the immense herds of that Monarch of the Plains -- the Buffalo -- some clumsily cantering along within one hundred yards of the train, and others still further off, watching it with a sort of lazy stupid wonder."

"Nearly every railroad train which leaves or arrives at Fort Hays on the Kansas Pacific Railroad has its race with these herds of buffalo; and a most interesting and exciting scene is the result. The train is "slowed" to a rate of speed about equal to that of the herd: the passengers get out fire-arms which are provided for the defense of the train against the Indians, and open from the windows of the cars a fire that resembles a brisk skirmish. Frequently a young bull will turn at bay for a moment. His exhibition of courage is generally his death-warrant, for the whole fire of the train is turned upon him or some member of the herd in his immediate vicinity."

Sympathetic impulses did not deter hunters, as this 1879 account reveals.

"I have killed, and seen killed, thousands of buffalo cows. They were skinned and their calves were left to starve to death or be eaten by the wolves and coyotes. ... These little calves were lying by the dead cows. We had to keep driving them away while skinning the cows. I saw some of them trying to suck the cows. After the mothers were skinned and the hides were in the wagon, the calves would follow. They could smell the hides and would follow them to the hide yard. They were gone the next morning -- back to where they had sucked the last time, either to starve to death or be killed by the wolves." (Collison).

The relentless slaughter of millions of bison posed no moral dilemma because their killers were eradicating a species that impeded human interests in exploiting the land. Buffalo occupied areas that could be grazed by domesticated animals or cultivated for crops. Consider this justification by Frank Mayer, one of the last professional buffalo hunters, who died in 1954 at the age of 104.

"The buffalo served his mission, fulfilled his destiny in the history of the Indian, by furnishing him everything he needed -- food, clothing, a home, traditions, even a theology. But the buffalo didn't fit in so well

with the white man's encroaching civilization -- he didn't fit in at all, in fact. He could not be controlled or domesticated. He couldn't be corralled behind wire fences. He was a misfit. So he had to go." (Mayer and Roth).

In an era when wilderness was a region waiting to be cultivated, grazed, mined, logged, or otherwise utilized for human economic benefit, bison had few defenders.

In the contemporary situation, we examine the shooting of sheep on Santa Cruz Island. Santa Cruz Island lies off the coast of southern California, about 26 miles south of the city of Santa Barbara. Its lengthy isolation from the mainland allowed the evolution of several species and sub-species of plants and animals. The earliest human immigrants to the Island were Chumash Indians who settled there about 10,000 years ago. Europeans reached the Island in the 18th century, and, by 1850, ranching operations had begun there. Domesticated animals -- sheep, cattle, pigs and horses -- were introduced, as well as several plant species. By 1890 the largest vineyard in the county had been established there. Several activities have altered the landscape of the Island over the last two centuries: the grazing and rooting of the introduced animals, the clearing of native vegetation to make room for cultivated plants, the cutting of trees for timber which was exported to the mainland, and the construction of roads, buildings, wells and reservoirs. Erosion has been accelerated by the devegetation of hillsides and has created several geomorphic alterations to the Island. In response to the various changes, populations of coastal sage scrub, chaparral, grasses, woody shrubs, oak and pine have been reduced or modified. Conversely, introduced plants, particularly fennel and thistle, are thriving (Brumbaugh).

By 1980, ranching operations had become unprofitable for the several private owners of Santa Cruz Island and opportunities thus arose for the acquisition of the land by groups interested in restoration and conservation (Gherini). In 1978, The Nature Conservancy, a private non-profit organization, purchased an interest in the western 90 percent of the Island, about 54,500 acres, and, in 1987, it assumed full responsibility for the management of this property. In 1997, after 17 years of difficult negotiations, the National Park Service acquired the eastern 10 percent, about 6200 acres, and incorporated it into the Channel Islands National Park that had been created in 1980. In both areas, cattle had been removed to the mainland for slaughter, but large numbers of sheep and pigs, and a small number of horses had been abandoned to free-roam and thus become feral. The goal of The Nature Conservancy is the recovery and preservation of populations of pre-

Columbian plants and animals, and the recreation of the pre-Columbian ecology. To accomplish its goal, The Nature Conservancy considered it necessary to eliminate the sheep as quickly as possible, and, in December, 1981, it therefore instituted a program of shooting them. By June 1989, over 37,000 sheep had been killed. A proposal to round up the sheep and transport them off the Island was rejected as not financially feasible. (Schuyler). While the extermination of grazing animals did indeed encourage the recovery of pre-Columbian plant species, which are again flourishing, the success of the extermination program has been compromised by some of its other effects. It has, for example, fostered the unwanted expansion of the introduced fennel, which now dominates 10 percent of the Nature Conservancy property and is spreading more rapidly than other species. One study notes that "the most important factor contributing to the recent expansion of fennel was the rapid removal of cattle and feral sheep from Santa Cruz Island" (Brenton and Klinger; Klinger, Schuyler and Sterner). The Nature Conservancy acknowledges that its removal of grazing animals may have precipitated the unwelcome explosion of fennel and it is now embarking on a trial program to eliminate the fennel by a combination of controlled burns and the use of the herbicide Garlon (triclopyr) (Burns, April 27, 1997, June 5, 1997, and May 7, 1998). The negative impact of burning and herbicides is discussed by B. A. Dash and S. R. Gliessman. These practices kill native as well as non-native plants, and the cover is replaced by other non-native species, especially yellow star thistle (Dash and Gliessman). Another unanticipated result of the killing of the sheep has been an increase in the population of feral pigs (Peart, Patten and Lohr). These experiments in restoration reveal the problems inherent in suddenly removing one species from a biotic community, and they should remind us of the complex interactions of the various elements of the present day Island ecology.

The National Park Service, the owner of the eastern 10 percent of the Island, also wishes to recreate a pre-Columbian scene. However its mandate, as expressed in the General Management Plan, is not simply to conserve and restore wilderness, but to preserve it for the pleasure of human visitors (National Park Service. p. 81-82). This mandate is flawed by an internal contradiction, because humans of European descent are an anachronism in a pre-Columbian landscape, and their camping and tramping on the Island compromise the restoration efforts. Nonetheless, the Park Service, in accordance with its charge, encourages people to enjoy the experience of placing themselves in a scene that approximates the pristine wilderness of an earlier period. The pre-Columbian scene of the Island is compromised not only by the presence of human visitors, but also by the Park Service's commitment to maintaining structures

built by the ranchers and preserving cultural artifacts of the Island's ranching history (National Park Service, p. 36-37, 41, 44-45). In any case, the restoration of the Island will always be subverted because its proximity to the mainland will produce repeated introductions of "exotic" plants and animals through the actions of winds and currents, as well as human visitors. The Park Service has no tolerance, however, for other introduced species, and had planned to shoot the feral sheep, pigs and horses once it took possession of the East End. In fact, in the days surrounding the Park Service takeover on February 10, 1997, about 1000 sheep were shot near the boundary between the National Park and The Nature Conservancy properties (Burns, March 1, 1997). The Nature Conservancy, as I mentioned above, had been shooting sheep since 1981, but in relative secrecy because access to the property was very restricted. However, the shootings in the early part of 1997, which coincided with the opening of the Park property, received wide and prolonged media attention. The public responded with outrage to newspaper reports and television. film of wounded sheep trying to crawl to safety, of lambs starving by their dead mothers, and of rotting carcasses strewn on the hillsides. Within weeks, The Nature Conservancy had agreed to suspend temporarily the shooting on that part of the Island, and the Park Service announced a plan to round up the sheep and send them to the mainland for adoption or purchase (Burns, April 28, 1997; McGregor, July 17, 1997; and Schultz, July 17, 1997). Public disapproval of the slaughter was based on two perceptions: that it was wasteful, because the carcasses were left to rot or be eaten by carrion birds, and that it was cruel, because wounded sheep and nursing lambs were left to suffer. People thus responded in much the same way that most of us do to the accounts of bison hunts that I quoted earlier. The fact that two incidents of mass shootings of grazing animals can provoke a similar negative response raises several interesting issues about our contemporary attitudes toward animals. The issue I want to explore here is whether there is a similarity between the reasons for shooting sheep and the reasons for shooting bison. Restorationists will, of course, argue "No," that bison were shot by people prompted only by their own selfish interests, whereas feral sheep are shot by people motivated by an interest in preserving bio-diversity and by a commitment to repairing the damage to the environment done by previous generations of thoughtless humans. The goals certainly seem distinct, yet there is a common denominator here: we humans make the determination that a species is unwanted, that it does not "fit in," that it has "to go," and we make this determination on the basis of whether the existence of that species conflicts with our own interests -- our interests at one time being economic expansion, at another time being the enjoyment of restored

landscapes.

During the millennia that humans have been herders and cultivators, we have prospered, both by establishing a co-dependent relationship with a few tractable species, and by eliminating any species which threatened our food supply, either by occupying land we wanted to farm, or by eating crops we planted, or by preying on our livestock. Our ancestors constructed both physical and mental boundaries between domesticated space, which was predictable and safe because humans had imposed order, and wilderness, which seemed chaotic and unsafe because it was beyond our control. Our English word "domesticated" is derived from the Latin "domus" meaning "home" or "household." A domesticated animal is one that we choose to include in our home. Our division of the natural world into two categories, domesticated and non-domesticated (or wild), is clearly an anthropocentric construct. Bison and wolves certainly have homes and a domestic context appropriate to their species, but we deny this reality in our definition. And mice and cockroaches, who choose to locate their domestic space in our homes, do so without our consent, and are therefore not considered by us to be domesticated species. In the traditions of Classical art and literature, inspiring landscapes were orchards and pastures, not trackless forests and mountains. The pastoral scene demonstrated an ideal situation where elements of nature lived together peacefully, controlled, but also protected by the pastor, which is the Latin word for "shepherd," "the man who ensures a safe pasture for his flocks." The conceptual image of the "good shepherd," which was translated into the religious metaphor of the benevolent deity, indicates that the imperative to secure pastoral regions had an ethical as well as an economic dimension.

Only recently have we begun to reconsider our place in nature and to admit that our promotion of our own species has been achieved at the expense of most other species. And, as we calculate the damage done by our exploitative practices, we have developed an appreciation for the scientific, aesthetic, and spiritual values of uncivilized areas. It is not coincidental, of course, that American society is now overwhelmingly urban, which means that we can cherish wildness without experiencing its threats directly. Bison, for example, are no longer our competitors for land use; they have now become symbols of American strength and independence. In reality, of course, they could no longer exist independent of human management plans. Having reduced their population from millions to thousands, we restrict their movement to designated areas, and we control and protect them within the boundaries we have established. The very process of managing wild species and defining preserves for them blurs the traditional distinctions

between wild and domesticated space. Consider the comments of William Cronon: "To the extent that biological diversity (indeed, even wilderness itself) is likely to survive in the future only by the most vigilant and self-conscious management of the ecosystems that sustain it, the ideology of wilderness is potentially in direct conflict with the very thing it encourages." (Cronon) Thus, in our modern post-pastoral world, we have ironically become the shepherds of wild species. Our willingness to conserve some habitat for species we have injured is certainly laudable, but, of course, it actually costs us relatively little as a society. The big losers in our restoration plans are feral animals, who have become "misfits." They no longer receive the protection afforded domesticated animals, and yet they are not accepted by us as a natural element of the landscape in which they were born and are therefore native. Although we elsewhere blur distinctions, we are still, in respect to feral animals, governed by our traditional separation of the natural world into two mutually exclusive categories: the pastoral-cultivated vs. the wild. Now that wilderness has become precious to us, feral animals are treated with contempt because they remind us of our exploitative practices and they ruin our illusion that we have recreated a wild landscape. Deep ecologists have argued that the development of agriculture initiated a regrettable separation of humans from "nature" and that domesticated animals can therefore never be accepted as a part of "wilderness." See for example, the arguments presented by Dave Foreman in *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (Foreman). Most environmentalists agree with J. Baird Callicott's derisive comment that farm animals "have been bred to docility, tractability, stupidity and dependency." They could not, he believes, exist in a wild state. If abandoned, they could not cope with freedom and would "hang around farm outbuildings waiting forlornly to be sheltered and fed. ... Most would starve." (Callicott; Warren; and Mighetto). It is curious that environmentalists (many of whom are willing to enjoy the products of the environmentally damaging and bio-uniform meat and wool industries) frequently define our obligations to animal species on the basis of assumptions about whether an animal would or would not take pleasure in being free of our control. At the same time that we yearn to soar with eagles, we confine chickens in crowded, windowless buildings and then despise them for not being free. A thoughtful discussion of the attitudes of environmentalists toward domesticated animals is provided by Karen Davis in her article "Thinking Like a Chicken." In our modern reversal of attitudes toward the natural world, we disparage the pastoral species for their presumed dependence and weakness (once a source of comfort to us), and we cherish the wild species which, until quite recently, we killed because they were "misfits" and "could not be controlled or domesticated." Many people think that sheep are stupid,

lazy and clumsy, and therefore deserving of contempt and even abuse. Note that, in the first passage quoted above, bison are characterized by the same modifiers; their killers justify the slaughter by the same untenable logic: if we believe that animals are stupid, we are justified in killing them.

And yet, the sheep abandoned on Santa Cruz Island have proved Callicott wrong. They have demonstrated an impressive capacity to survive in a harsh environment, even though their ancestors were "ruined" by millennia of human husbandry, and they deserve our respect if we are sincere in our professions of regard for natural processes. Mass shootings demonstrate no respect. Animals that were imported to areas where they have no predators endanger the existence of pre-Columbian species. Island populations, confined to a narrow range, are particularly vulnerable to introductions (Simberloff). And we cannot protect the interests of these species or promote bio-diversity unless we restrict or terminate the grazing. Nonetheless, there are less violent methods of controlling and eliminating the sheep population. One of them is chemical sterilization. Kirkpatrick and colleagues (Kirkpatrick et al.) report one promising technique. Not only would non-violent methods of animal control address the moral issues, but a gradual and phased reduction may also address the practical issue of managing the imported plants which had earlier been suppressed by grazing (Brenton and Klinger, p. 503-504).

There is a similarity between the reasons for shooting bison and shooting sheep. In both situations, the animals were shot because they violated our idea of what a particular landscape should look like, and how the land should be used. Thus, although we may believe that our attitudes toward the natural world have undergone a fundamental conversion, and that we are now more sensitive to the interests of other species, we are actually following a very old paradigm: we exterminate systematically and without moral reservation any species we determine to be a "misfit." We have changed only the definition of "misfit," not the underlying attitude. We should develop a new attitude which is truly more sensitive to all elements of the natural world.

## References

Beatty, W. and S. D. L. Licari, 1992. "Invasion of fennel into shrub communities on Santa Cruz Island," *Madrono* 39, p. 54-66.

Brenton, B. and R. Klinger. 1994. "Modeling the Expansion and Control of Fennel on the Channel Islands," in *The Fourth California Islands*

*Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara, California, p. 497-504.

Brumbaugh, Robert W. 1980. "Recent Geomorphic and Vegetal Dynamics on Santa Cruz Island," in *The California Islands*. D. M. Power, ed. Santa Barbara, California.

Burns, Melinda. "Sheep Slaughter Triggers Dispute," *Santa Barbara News Press*, March 1, 1997; "Island Faces New Natural Challenges," *Santa Barbara News Press*, April 28, 1997; *The Independent*, Santa Barbara, June 5, 1997, p. 17, and *The Independent*, Santa Barbara, May 7, 1998, p. 31.

Callicott, J. Baird. 1980. "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 p. 311-338.

Collison, Frank. 1963. *Life in the Saddle*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman and London. p. 56-57.

Cronon, William ed. 1966. *Uncommon Ground. Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, second edition. New York. p. 81-82

Dash, B. A. and S. R. Gliessman. 1994. "Non-native Species Eradication and Native Species Enhancement: Fennel on Santa Cruz Island," in *The Fourth California Islands Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara, California. p. 505-12.

Danz, Harold P. 1997. *Of Bison and Man* University of Colorado Press, Boulder. p. 92-114.

Davis, Karen. 1995. "Thinking Like a Chicken" in Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds. *Animals and Women*. Durham and London. p. 192-212.

Fleharty, Eugene D. 1995. *Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman and London. p. 29-30, 255-256.

Foreman, Dave. 1991. *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*. New York. p. 69.

Gherini, John. 1994. "Santa Cruz Island: Conflict in the Courts," in *The Fourth California Islands Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara,

California. p. 165-170.

Kirkpatrick, J. F., J. W. Turner, I. K. Liu, R. Fayrer-Hosken. 1996. "Applications of pig zona pellucida immunocontraception to wildlife fertility control." *Journal of Reproduction and Fertility. Supplement* 50. p. 183-189.

Klinger, R. C., P. T. Schuyler and J. D. Sterner. 1994. "Vegetation Response to the Removal of Feral Sheep from Santa Cruz Island," in *The Fourth California Islands Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara, California. p. 341-350.

MacGregor, Hilary. 1997. "Great Sheep Roundup Begins," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17.

Mayer, Frank H. and Charles B. Roth. 1958. *The Buffalo Harvest*. Sage Books, Denver. p. 27-28.

Mighetto, Lisa. 1991. *Wild Animals and the American Environment*. Tucson, Arizona. p. 107-118.

Peart, D., D. T. Patten, and S. L. Lohr. 1994. "Feral Pig Disturbance and Woody Species Seedling Regeneration," in *The Fourth California Islands Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara, California. p. 314-322.

Roe, Frank Gilbert. 1970. *The North American Buffalo*, second edition. University of Toronto Press, Toronto. p. 429-430.

Schultz, Chuck. 1997. "Head'em up! Move'em out!" *Santa Barbara News Press*, July 17.

Schuyler, Peter. 1993. "Control of Feral Sheep on Santa Cruz Island," in *The Third California Islands Symposium: Recent Advances in Research on the California Islands*, edited by F. G. Hochberg. Santa Barbara, California. P. 443-452.

Simberloff, D. 1994. "Conservation Biology and Fragility of Island Ecosystems," in *The Fourth California Islands Symposium: Update on the Status of Resources*, edited by W. L. Halvorson and G. J. Maender. Santa Barbara, California. p. 1-10.

U. S. National Park Service. 1985. *General Management Plan, Channel*

*Islands National Park*. U.S. Department of the Interior / National Park Service. Volume 1, p. 6-10, 36-37, 40-41, 44-45, 81-82

Warren, Mary Anne. 1983. "The Rights of the Non-human World," in Robert Elliot and Arran Gare, eds. *Environmental Philosophy*. University Park, Pennsylvania. p. 109-131.

Jo-Ann Shelton, <[jshelton@humanitas.ucsb.edu](mailto:jshelton@humanitas.ucsb.edu)>, Department of Classics, Environmental Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA.