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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

In Oregon, Myth Mixes With Anger

By NANCY LANGSTON JAN. 6, 2016

TO outsiders, one of the puzzling aspects of the anti-government militia's takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is its location. Twenty-five million birds a year visit the refuge in the high desert of southeastern Oregon, but few people have heard of it. Yet Malheur is a place of bitterly contested human histories that remain potent today.

Years ago, when I first visited the refuge, I stumbled upon five dead coyotes tossed across a trail, their necks sliced open, blood clotted on their fur, paws hacked off, entrails draining into the river. Ranchers on the edge of failure feel threatened by predators snatching away their calves, and some lash out against that threat. But these five dead coyotes signaled more than just economic anxiety — they were emblematic of past hatreds that are still a powerful force in the Malheur basin. Anger at predators, environmentalists and federal managers who threaten the mythic past of cowboys on the range is as strong there as anywhere in the West.

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, many Western ranchers, miners and loggers felt increasingly threatened, partly by globalization, which created new competition, and partly by federal regulations that seemed to value wildlife more

than people. What became known as the Sagebrush Rebellion gave locals a focus for their concern.

Environmentalists, they argued, were conspiring to destroy America, starting with rural communities. Many ranchers bitterly complained about the federal land management agencies. They felt powerless, hemmed in by policies they had little hand in shaping. They feared that economic gains were passing them by.

These complaints contain elements of truth: Rural communities in the West are poorer than urban communities, and environmental protections enacted since the 1980s have reduced grazing on federal lands. But locals told an interesting version of this history. Before the federal agencies came, they said, we lived in paradise. The grass was thick, the water was abundant and the towns were thriving. We were independent, working out our problems. When the feds came, they stole our resources, and our economies collapsed.

The implication was clear: If they got rid of the federal government, they'd have control over their land and lives again.

This version of history bears little resemblance to the actual past. Before the federal agencies came to eastern Oregon, large ranching operations from California had monopolized hundreds of thousands of acres of rangeland. Irrigation developers controlled water, cattle barons controlled the grass, and settlers were essentially locked out. Tensions were high.

During the 1890s, a populist, anti-monopolist rhetoric emerged among settlers and news editors. The local newspaper deplored the fact that the great Western ranges were passing into "the hands of a few big cattle or sheep companies," and predicted that soon "an aristocracy of range lords and cattle kings would rule our mountains and plains." In 1897, Peter French, the cattle baron who controlled the largest ranching empire in America, along the Blitzen River, was murdered by an angry homesteader. Arson, violence and grinding poverty flourished.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the conservationist William Finley paddled a little boat through the marshes of the basin and came upon a colony of

egrets slaughtered by plume hunters, the young left to starve. Out of hundreds of thousands of egrets that had once nested in Malheur Lake, only 121 were left.

Horrified, Mr. Finley did his best to publicize Malheur's remaining bounty of waterfowl, shorebirds, egrets, herons, cranes and ibises. In 1908, he persuaded President Theodore Roosevelt to designate Malheur Lake a wildlife refuge. But Congress denied any funding for its management, water rights were not granted and, as droughts hit and lake levels dropped, settlers squatted on the lake bed. By the 1930s, after four decades of overgrazing, irrigation withdrawals, grain agriculture, dredging and channelization, followed by several years of drought, Malheur had become a dust bowl.

Ranches failed, livestock starved, homesteaders went bust and the primary occupation in the valley became suing one's neighbor over water rights.

Conservationists won a major victory in 1934 when French's former cattle empire was sold to the refuge, ensuring it had the water needed to flourish. John Scharff, the refuge manager from 1935 to 1971, worked closely with ranchers to establish grazing leases that funded the restoration of former wetlands and won public support for the effort. By 1968, cattle use was nearly as intense as during the days of the cattle barons. Ranchers still imagined themselves as the rugged individualists of their romantic past, though they had become heavily subsidized, grazing their herds on refuge meadows for fees that were often lower than those on private lands.

In the 1970s, government concern grew over the effects of grazing on waterfowl, trout and aquatic health. When Mr. Scharff retired, the new refuge manager had the difficult task of restoring wildlife habitat by reducing cattle numbers. By law, on federal wildlife refuges, the first priority is wildlife. Other uses are allowed when they enhance wildlife habitat, but not when they harm it. Nonetheless, when the new manager lowered the number of grazing permits, controversy erupted over cows versus birds — anger that continues to simmer in the basin.

When mythic histories supplant the complexities of the past, the results can be lethal. Equitable futures for Western public lands won't be achieved when ideologues swagger in, brandishing guns and taking over federal buildings. Rather, they develop from the hard work of collaboration, like the 2013 effort that brought together the local community, tribes, conservation groups and the state and federal governments to develop a new management plan for Malheur. These are the efforts that best respect the region's history while pointing the way to a sustainable future.

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