

Barker: Ranchers gaining in popularity with public, poll says

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The myth of the rugged cowboy individualist standing alone against adversity is a foundation of the American story that lives on worldwide today.

It captured the nation's quest for space, freedom and adventure. From cattlemen like Charles Goodnight to presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, the allure of the open range underscored the shared values of hard work, risk-taking and fairness.

But ranchers have long had critics. In 1947, historian Bernard DeVoto decried the western ranching industry of the 19th and 20th centuries. He called early ranchers "arrogant and always deluded."

"They always acted as if they owned the public range and act so now," DeVoto wrote.

His criticism of the industry and overgrazing was embraced by environmentalists in the 1970s and 1980s. Cattle ranching opponents pointed to massive erosion and drops in streamside water tables caused by drought combined with droves of cows at just the wrong time.

The stranglehold ranchers had on Western state legislatures and Western congressmen, combined with low grazing fees on public lands, gave anti-grazing activists hope that they could make their bumper-sticker statement, "Cattle Free by '93," a reality, if not on that deadline.

Jon Marvel, the executive director of the Western Watersheds Project, has been confident that economics, combined with his group's very effective courtroom campaign, would eventually end livestock grazing on public land. But ranches are still making money when the price of beef and lamb rises.

And now a new statewide poll suggests that the view of ranchers in the state is getting better, not worse.

The University of Idaho poll found that 89 percent of Idaho residents approve of livestock grazing as a legitimate practice on public lands, and 85 percent support it as an appropriate use, along with hiking, camping, mountain biking, horseback riding, fishing and hunting.

Most important to the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, which sponsored the poll, is that it shows 86 percent of the 618 people chosen at random want public lands grazing to continue.

The public also believes that rangeland conditions are improving, with 59 percent saying that Idaho rangelands are in very good or good condition. Previously, 44 percent said that in 2001, and 45 percent in 1997.

But ranching is not easy and many children are passing up carrying on the cowboy-shepherd tradition. The cowboy lifestyle has always looked better from afar, and that isn't changing.

Read more: http://www.idahostatesman.com/2011/02/28/1545121/ranchers-gaining-in-popularity.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter#ixzz1FN9qMihO