

10 Facts About Grazing



To clear up confusion and further counter myths that downplay environmental impacts and overstate benefits, here are 10 key facts about grazing to help put things in perspective.

Fact 1. Cattle Grazing Harms Wildlife.

Wildlife are harmed and displaced by even the best-managed grazing systems. The absence of cattle can be a much more effective conservation tool than the presence of managed cattle. A [meta-analysis](#) of 109 studies found that across all animals, livestock exclusion increased abundance and diversity.

Fact 2. “Marginal” Lands Are Wildlife Habitat.

The phrase marginal lands is an economic term, not an environmental one, rooted in an extractive approach. Such ecosystems are often home to some of the most biodiverse and climate-resilient wildlife and natural habitats, many of which are essential for healthy life on Earth. Between 2001 and 2015, the conversion of forests to pasture resulted in five times more deforestation globally than for any other leading [deforestation-driving commodities](#), with the bulk of forest replacement by cattle occurring in [tropical forests](#).

Fact 3. Cattle Grazing Is a Leading Source of Conflict With Wildlife.

Cattle ranching is responsible for the direct killing of vulnerable wildlife like grizzly bears, gray and Mexican gray wolves, tule elk, black-footed ferrets and many other species, often through the USDA’s Wildlife Services program or legislative influence over wildlife-killing policy.

Fact 4. Cows Are an Inefficient Way to Feed People.

Compared to plant proteins such as beans, peas and lentils, beef requires six times more water, 20 times more land, and emits 20 times [more greenhouse gas emissions per gram of edible protein](#). One [liter of cow's milk](#) emits three times more GHGs than one liter of soy milk and requires more than 22 times more water and 12 times more land. The amount of land conversion, habitat loss, water use and feed it takes to produce even a small amount of beef and dairy is not environmentally sound.

Fact 5. Cows Contribute to Climate Change.

All forms of cattle grazing result in substantial net increases in GHGs, particularly methane (which is 86 times more potent than CO₂ in the short term) and nitrous oxide (which has almost 300 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide). Increasing cattle grazing outweighs any atmospheric GHG reduction resulting from soil carbon sequestration.

Fact 6. Cows Are Not Bison.

Bison graze differently from cattle under natural conditions, seldom regrazing the same site for long periods of time and do not cluster around water the way that cattle do. Bison were managed by natural predators in regular life cycles and regenerated into the soil.

Fact 7. Cattle Harm Grasslands.

Grassland ecosystems are important carbon sinks, helping to mitigate climate change, and are home to countless endangered and vulnerable species. Cattle are non-native species that did not evolve with the vegetation and ecosystems of the West and do tremendous damage to them.

Fact 8. Cows Damage Nature.

Grazing cattle destroy native vegetation, damage soils and stream banks, and contaminate waterways with fecal waste. Once-lush streams and riparian forests have been reduced to flat, dry wastelands; once-rich topsoil has been turned to dust, causing soil erosion, stream sedimentation and wholesale elimination of many aquatic habitats; overgrazing of fire-carrying grasses has starved some western forests of fire, making them overly dense and prone to unnaturally severe fires.

Fact 9. Cows Are Not Necessary for Healthy Ecosystems.

Grazing cows do not provide the same important ecosystem services that native ungulates like deer, bison, elk and antelope provide or once provided through natural herd movement cycles. Cows harm biocrusts resulting in increased erosion, reduced soil fertility, and non-native and highly flammable weeds. Livestock grazing frequently compacts soil, reduces water infiltration, and increases runoff, erosion and sediment yield.

Fact 10. Cows Degrade Public Lands.

In the arid West, cattle grazing on public lands comes with extensive ecological damage and is the most widespread cause of species endangerment. Despite these costs, cattle grazing continues to be promoted, protected and subsidized by federal agencies on about 270 million acres of public lands in the 11 western states.