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Marin Voice: Time for ranchers to leave our national seashore



In this IJ archive photo, dairy cows frame the Historic B Ranch in 2012 in the Point Reyes National Seashore. . (IJ archive photo/Frankie Frost)

By **GEORGE WUERTHNER** |

June 10, 2019 at 11:27 am

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Point Reyes National Seashore was established in the 1960s by the purchase of private ranches. The public paid fair market value for these lands. Livestock operations were to be removed over a 25-year grace period. But time and again the ranchers refused to leave our property.

Surprisingly Rep. Jared Huffman, ordinarily good on environmental issues, has sponsored legislation that would make the previous owners and their cattle permanent residents of our property. It is like buying a house, but the previous owners never move out, and a Congressman is going to make it illegal to remove them from your property.

Ranching advocates claim agriculture is important to Marin County's economy. Yet it contributes to only 0.2% of the county's employment while travel and tourism accounts for nearly 20% of all employment. When you consider the tule elk and that open, unfenced landscapes are rare, there is no doubt that removing dairy farms from Point Reyes would likely increase tourism.

Think about all the beautiful redwood parks scattered up and down California's coast. Nearly all of these parklands were created by purchasing the land from private property owners, just like we the public bought the ranches that remain in Point Reyes National Seashore. Now imagine that the previous landowners not only refused to leave our redwood parks but continue to cut down redwoods even after we bought the land and trees for preservation. That is precisely what is going on in Point Reyes National Seashore.

Would Huffman be outraged if loggers were cutting trees in Muir Woods National Monument or Humboldt Redwood State Park, or Redwoods National and State Parks? I would hope so. But he doesn't seem to understand that domestic livestock is damaging our property and inappropriate in a national park unit.

Privately owned livestock pollute the streams running through our property. Indeed, the livestock-polluted waters of Point Reyes National Seashore rank in the top 10% of U.S. locations most contaminated by feces indicated by E. coli bacteria.

Privately owned livestock are spreading exotic weeds throughout our property. Ranchers plant non-native species to feed livestock, helping to erode the native biodiversity of the park further.

Privately owned livestock are spreading Johne's, a highly contagious digestive disease that spreads quickly through manure and contaminated water. It has infected park wildlife including tule elk.

Point Reyes is one of the few places where native tule elk are found in California. There are approximately 600 elk and yet more than 5,000 cows in our park. Isn't there something wrong with this picture when domestic animals outnumber native wildlife species nearly 10 to 1 in a national park?

There is no shortage of cattle/cows in Marin County nor California as a whole. More than five million cattle reside in California— fourth highest in the entire country. Why should we allow private individuals to graze domestic livestock, a commodity that is abundance on private lands throughout the state and nation, in a national park unit?

It's time to remove domestic livestock operations from our property and dedicate Point Reyes National Seashore to the principle it was purposed initially — preservation of native plants and wildlife.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist who previously lived in Santa Cruz.

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