

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 12 *University Education in Natural Resources*

Article 26

2004

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Recommended Citation

Binkley, Dan; Moore, Margaret M.; Romme, William; and Brown, Peter (2004) "Bringing back the Kaibab deer story: A complete case study for land stewardship," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 12 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol12/iss1/26>

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Bringing Back the Kaibab Deer Story: A Complete Case Study for Land Stewardship

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The classic story of predator control, deer population explosion, and habitat degradation on the Kaibab Plateau was a cornerstone of population ecology and natural resources through the 1960s. The story has almost disappeared from natural resources, following several papers in the 1970s that questioned the quality of the evidence and the truth of the overall story. We reexamined the classic story from the viewpoint of habitat impacts of large deer populations; if the story were true, aspen regeneration should have been severely reduced in the 1920s. We also evaluated other lines of evidence, including the secondary irruption of the deer population in the 1950s. All evidence is consistent with the classic story of the role of predation in regulating deer population and limiting deer impact on vegetation. As with all complex ecological case studies, some uncertainty about causes and effects remains. The complete story of the Kaibab illustrates almost all facets of land stewardship: responsible goals, conflicts between agencies and between state and federal government, court-ordered resolutions, scientific uncertainty, long-term and spatially explicit ecological interactions, and even a cameo appearance from Hollywood and the popular press. The integration of all these themes provides both the details and the synthesis that form the heart of education in natural resources and land stewardship.

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