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Traditional ranching heritage and cultural continuity in the southwestern United States

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Introduction This study , conducted among ranchers on the Santa Fe and Carson National Forests in the Southwestern United States , examines the role of ranching in maintaining traditional heritage and cultural continuity . The mainly Hispanic ranching families of northern New Mexico first came into the region in 1598 with Spanish colonization . Many of the villages received community land grants from the King of Spain and later from the Mexican government . After US acquisition in 1848 , many communities lost communal range and woodlands from their land grants . Much of the lost grant land eventually came under federal management . Descendants of grantees are now livestock permittees on national forests , with much smaller holdings encompassing remaining house lots and gardens . Some communities are almost completely surrounded by public land with no other grazing areas for the animals (Eastman et al . 2000) .

Materials and methods The project began with our attendance at grazing allotment meetings to develop rapport with the ranchers on the ranger districts of the two forests . No sampling methods were necessary because all permittees were offered the opportunity to participate in the study . The 350 permittee ranchers , who participated in the project , reside throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado . We conducted interviews using a personally administered questionnaire at a location of the respondent's choosing . In addition to gathering demographic information from the ranchers , we asked them to discuss the ways in which they use land , livestock , and ranching to teach their children heritage , tradition , culture , and values . Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS descriptive statistics ; qualitative data were analyzed using theme groupings and key words .

Results Our study demonstrates the importance of ranching to family and community . Many have resisted more lucrative work that would take them away from the ranch . They have selected careers such as teaching , health care , and work with the USDA Forest Service , which allow them to remain in the community and maintain the livestock operation . Being born and raised with land and livestock , they develop a relation to it , not for profit but for satisfaction and enjoyment . Ranching contributes to the top family goals of maintaining quality of life and traditional values (Figure 1) . They tell us that time spent in ranching provides the children with an opportunity to experience the way of life that is their heritage and strengthens family ties (Raish and McSweeney , 2003) .

Conclusions The strong feelings the ranchers have toward land and animals cause them great concern over the loss of open land for agriculture , wildlife , and other resources (Figure 2) " We value the land , the water , the way of life , and will not sell it for economics and material blessings . " The land we have has been in our family for five generations . These properties are more than just dirt . It is part of my family , just like a child and grandchild . The livestock we raise is to maintain our simple life and to teach each generation to love the land as our ancestors did . " Our work with ranchers is designed to assist land managers in interacting with local communities . It is also used to help the general public appreciate the importance of the ranching and farming way of life .

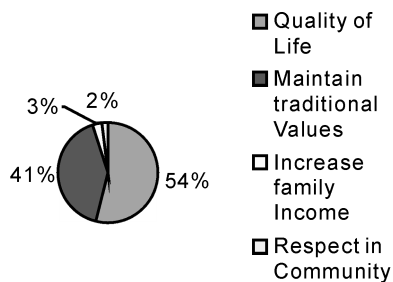


Figure 1 Family goals .

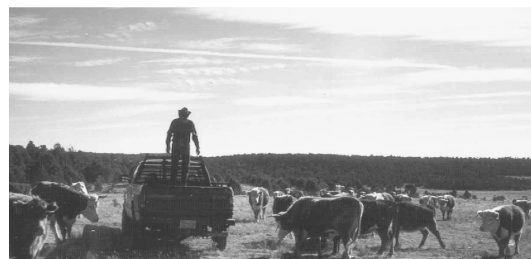


Figure 2 Feeding on the mesa .

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