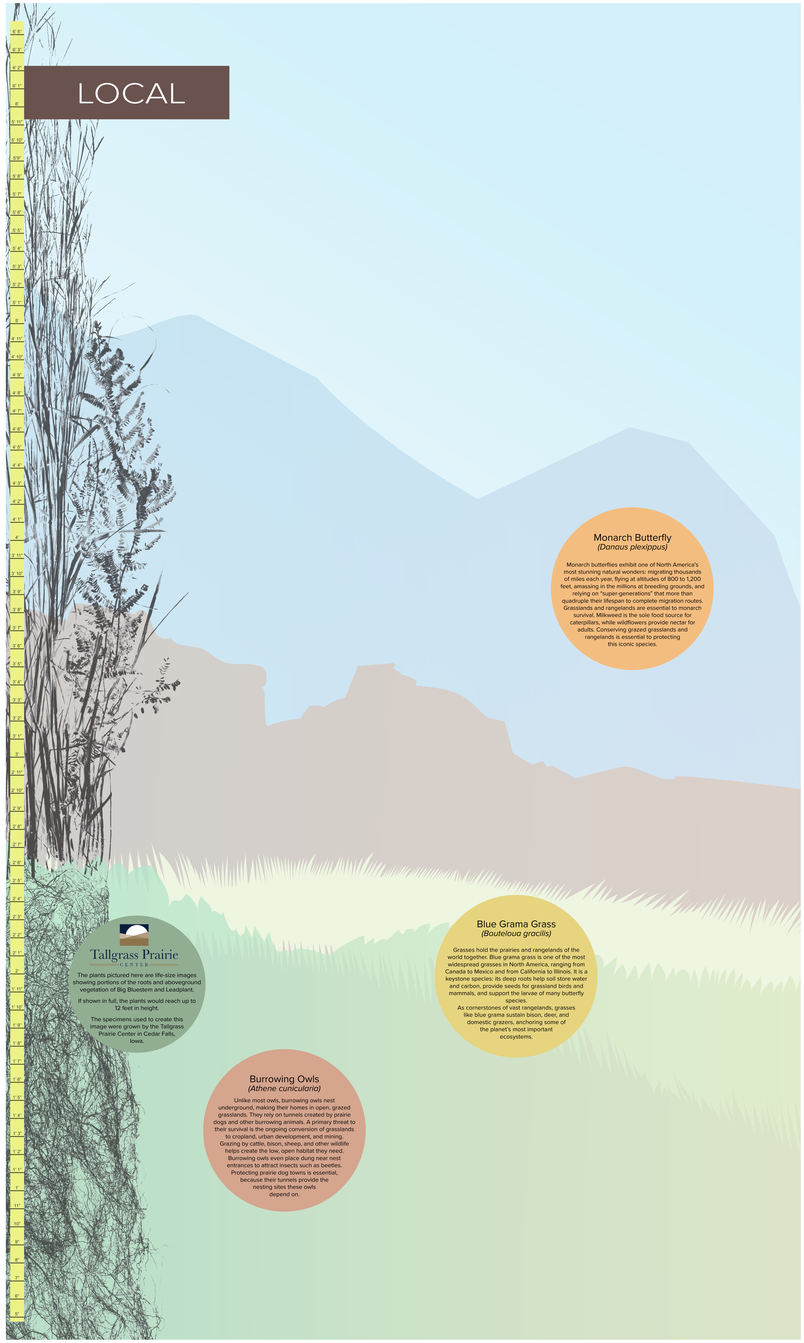
LOCAL



NORTH AMERICA

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WHY ARE GLOBAL RANGELANDS THREATENED?

Rangelands and grasslands today are under growing pressure from many directions. Pastoralists, such as herders, shepherds, and ranchers, are finding it harder to sustain their livelihoods, and in many places rural communities are being reshaped by urban migration. Biodiversity is declining, with grassland bird populations rapidly decreasing. Climate change, including prolonged drought, is accelerating large-scale impacts across these landscapes. Invasive and encroaching species are displacing native plants and wildlife. At the same time, perennial grazing lands are being converted to annual row-crop agriculture or fragmented by energy and mining development.

These lands, and the people, livestock, wildlife, and cultures that depend on them, are at a critical moment. But this is not a story of loss alone. It is also a call to care, learn, and act.

1 Rangelands Overview

Grasslands and rangelands are rich with wildflowers, wildlife, butterflies, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and more. Yet they are often defined by what they are not—places without trees or wetlands. Visit a grassland near you and you'll see why that framing misses the point. Rangelands are ecosystems in their own right. In fact, they cover roughly half of the planet's ice-free land area. Sadly, they are disappearing rapidly, with up to 80 percent already lost in some countries.

2 Land, Mobility, and Water Scarcity

For people who depend on rangelands, access to land, water, and movement is essential. Across North America and around the world, common or collectively used grazing lands sustain livelihoods. Traditional herders, shepherds, and ranchers rely on seasonal movement of herds and flocks, through practices such as transhumance and nomadism. A central goal of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists is to secure the rights of these communities to grazing lands and water.

Keeping migration routes free of barriers also benefits wildlife. Yet many pastoral communities face land grabbing for mining, large-scale agriculture, and other competing land uses. These practices undermine both livelihoods and long-term ecological health.

3 Economics and Livelihood

Grasslands and rangelands provide meat, milk, hides, fiber, and manure. Globally, one in eight people earns a livelihood from rangelands, and in some countries as many as one in three. In the United States alone, grazing lands support approximately two million jobs. For food security, one in four people worldwide depends on rangelands for their primary protein sources.

Beyond food production, grasslands offer enormous ecological value. In regions too rocky, cold, dry, or high-elevation for crops, pastoralism provides resilient livelihoods. During times of crisis, pastoralists and ranchers draw on deep knowledge of landscapes, seasonal movement, and cooperation with neighbors. In the U.S., ecosystem services such as wildlife habitat and recreation contribute roughly $24 billion annually, about one-third of total rangeland economic value. Although often undervalued next to industrial agriculture, pastoral systems are ecologically efficient, locally adapted, and remarkably resilient.

4 Climate Change and Resilience

Rangelands and pastoral systems are powerful climate solutions. These ecosystems store roughly one-third of the Earth's soil carbon, with enormous potential for additional storage across the world's approximately 12 billion acres of grasslands. Improved grazing practices could offset a meaningful share of global human-caused carbon emissions. Unfortunately, grasslands are often overlooked in climate strategies, which tend to focus on forests and wetlands. In some regions, trees are even planted where grasslands naturally belong.

Protecting and strengthening existing rangelands is one of the most effective climate actions we can take. Carefully managed herding, locally adapted livestock breeds, and perennial plant systems enhance carbon storage, improve water retention, and reduce emissions. Pastoralism also offers social resilience. In many countries, livestock function as a form of capital and a safety net during droughts and floods. Traditional ecological knowledge, including weather forecasting, landscape monitoring, and flexible herd management, will only grow more important as climate conditions become increasingly unpredictable.

5 Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

When people think of biodiversity, they often picture tropical rainforests. But the world's rangelands, including grasslands, shrublands, savannas, and deserts, are among the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth, often matching rainforests in number of species per unit area. These landscapes support wildflowers, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals that depend on open light, seasonal grazing, fire, and natural disturbance to maintain habitat.

Rangelands are shaped by cycles of grazing and rest that allow plants and soils to recover. Pastoralists, including herders, ranchers, and other land stewards, play an essential role in sustaining these systems. By working with ecological processes rather than against them, pastoral communities help maintain biodiversity and ecosystem health.

6 Sustainable Rangeland Use and Restoration

Pastoralists are stewards of rangelands, making them productive even under harsh conditions, not only for livestock, but also for activities such as beekeeping, hunting, gathering, tourism, and conservation. The greatest threats to rangelands are conversion to other land uses, especially crop cultivation, along with mining, infrastructure development, and settlement expansion. These pressures are accelerating land degradation worldwide.

Globally, an estimated 18.5 percent of rangelands are degraded, with even higher rates in some regions. Protecting intact rangelands is critical, but restoration is also essential. Severely degraded areas may require active interventions such as reseeding and erosion control. Other areas can recover through adjusted grazing rotations, longer rest periods, strategic use of fire, and reduced livestock concentration near water sources. These approaches are more affordable but depend on strong governance and secure land tenure.

American bison, Badger–Two Medicine Area, Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Northwest Montana. Photo: © Tom Bynum

Ground Sandpiper (known as Upland Plover) and other Indigenous names, Manitoba, Canada. Photo: © Christian Artuso

Lark bunting, Ferndale, California. Photo: © Jill Hacker

A Navajo shepherd moves her sheep and goats across the desert plains to the Chuska Mountains for summer grazing. Navajo Nation. Photo: © Michael Benanav

Grassland wildflowers, Badger–Two Medicine Area, Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Northwest Montana. Photo: © Tom Bynum

Gathering cattle, Sierra Valley, California. Photo: © Dominique Bourdy

The chainmakers: cows, soil, and life rebounding. Durango, Mexico. Photo: © Agustín Paredes

GLOBAL

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR RANGELANDS & PASTORALISTS

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF RANGELANDS AND PASTORALISTS 2026

HELP US OUT! Tell us what you learned and what is most important to you. www.slido.com #IYRP2026

HOW WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As part of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, this exhibit contributes to a global effort to build understanding, visibility, and care for rangelands and pastoral communities.

We invite you to experience these landscapes through their sights, sounds, textures, and stories. Use the QR codes to learn more about the people and places represented here. Your reflections help extend this work and reach others.

7 Infrastructure and Services for Pastoralists

Many pastoral communities lack basic services such as clean water, healthcare, veterinary support, and education, challenges that intensify during seasonal migrations. These conditions are solvable. Creative solutions include mobile schools, improved digital connectivity, voting access for remote populations, and new approaches to water infrastructure along migration routes.

Education remains a particular challenge. Pastoral knowledge is traditionally passed down through generations, but when youth leave and new generations are not trained, that knowledge is at risk. At the same time, people without pastoral backgrounds increasingly seek to enter the field. New herding and ranching schools, especially those supporting conservation grazing, can help meet both needs. Supporting access to infrastructure, healthcare, training, and technology strengthens pastoral communities and the landscapes they manage.

8 Indigenous and Local Knowledge, Culture, and Innovation

Across the world, many rangeland cultures maintain deep ecological knowledge built over centuries, including knowledge of fire management, livestock breeds, native plants, seasonal grazing routes, ethnoveterinary medicine, and more. This living heritage remains vital, yet increasingly threatened. Seasonal movement itself is a form of knowledge. UNESCO recognizes transhumance as Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Protecting this heritage requires recognizing and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural traditions, and community leadership. When pastoral knowledge is valued and integrated into land management, it strengthens both ecosystems and cultural resilience.

9 Benefits to Society

Pastoralism provides healthy food, rural employment, sustainable fiber such as wool and cashmere, biodiversity conservation, and climate benefits. These systems support humane livestock production that keeps animals in natural grazing environments while maintaining wildlife habitat.

Although livestock production is often criticized for its environmental impacts, pastoral systems differ fundamentally from industrial farming. They rely on natural pastures and native grasslands, producing food and fiber in regions where crops cannot grow. By working within ecological limits, pastoralism delivers a wide range of benefits to society.

10 Pastoralist Women

Women and girls play essential roles in pastoral communities worldwide. They care for livestock, produce nutritious food, pass on ecological knowledge, conserve biodiversity, and support families and markets. Yet they often lack equal access to land, resources, leadership opportunities, and services.

These challenges can be addressed. Supporting women-led organizations, expanding access to healthcare and education, strengthening leadership pathways, and ensuring equitable land rights all help build more resilient communities. Cultural exchange, crafts, storytelling, and regional gatherings further amplify pastoralist women's voices in shaping decisions that affect their lives and landscapes.

11 Pastoralist Youth

With pride, recognition, training, opportunity, and appropriate technology, young people can build meaningful futures in rangeland communities. Yet many pastoralist youth today face barriers that push them to leave, resulting in abandoned lands and lost knowledge. This reflects not a lack of interest, but a lack of support.

Around the world, communities are revitalizing pastoral education through innovative training programs, new schools, and policies that improve land access and market opportunities. Youth are also leading innovation, developing digital tools, advocating for cultural traditions, and creating knowledge-sharing networks. They are central to shaping the future of rangelands.

12 Innovative Solutions for a Sustainable Future

Pastoralism and sustainable ranching are not relics of the past. They are pathways to the future. Innovation blends time-tested traditions with new tools, including renewable energy, telehealth, virtual fencing, satellite monitoring, and climate-responsive herd management. These technologies strengthen resilience while honoring deep cultural knowledge.

Pastoral communities have always adapted to change. Today, their ability to integrate innovation with tradition offers a powerful model for sustainability, respecting deep roots while embracing the future.

Graphic Design © Maria del Carmen Aranguren

A veterinarian prepares an injection, Huancayo Region, Peru. Photo: © Hernán Ortiz Pinto

Herders hold traditional knowledge handed down for millennia. Carpathian Alps, Hungary. Photo: © Balázs Mohai

A herder and cheesemaker, Dents du Midi, Switzerland. Photo: © Nicolas Bollard

Youth are the future of rangelands. Indian Himalaya and the United States. Photo: © Michael Benanav, Gloria Flora

Camels are herded with water from a solar-powered well built by a Grameen Help. Abu Dhabi, Emirates. Photo: © Mehmet Bozkaya

Milking a Yak, Mongolia. Photo: © Petra Dolezal

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USDA

Material: Digital Print onto 10mm Xanita Board

Panel Sizes: 42”x72”

Quantity: 30 (sets of 3)