

The legacy of past land abuse and resultant deterioration in overall productivity has important implications for contemporary management: It has made remaining healthy riparian areas both more valuable and more vulnerable.

Their relative scarcity enhances the value of riparian areas for livestock forage, for fish and wildlife, and for regulating the seasonal timing and quality of water yielded from watersheds.

Deteriorated riparian areas are more vulnerable to the increased stress of concentrated and accelerated runoff from degraded uplands. Depleted upland vegetation furthers the natural tendency of livestock to concentrate in riparian areas.

Even riparian areas in good condition are susceptible to damage by concentrations of livestock at the wrong time, in too great a number, for too long, or any combination of these factors.

Moist soils are susceptible to compaction which reduces water infiltration and plant growth. Stream-banks can be broken down and eroded. Vegetation critical to the soil's ability to resist erosion and hold water, to slow and filter upland runoff and to provide food and cover for fish and wildlife can be drastically reduced or eliminated by improper grazing.

When riparian areas are in a deteriorated condition they are far more sensitive to improper livestock grazing. Unless the season, duration and intensity of grazing are controlled, damage can be severe, long-lasting and in some cases, irreversible.

Proper grazing management can restore the long-term productivity of most riparian areas and associated uplands. However, grazing tradition, the vast geographical extent of the problem, and the gap between short-term costs and long-term benefits of improved management, all present significant obstacles to the necessary changes in grazing practices.



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