



Embracing Endangered Species

This long-time California ranch family has been proactive and public about their conservation efforts.

by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

Is having an endangered species on your property a blessing or a curse? Some landowners view it as a negative for fear they are going to be told how to manage their land and livestock, and in a manner that may not fit with their livestock objectives.

Yet Darrel and Karen Sweet encourage landowners to try to take a different perspective. They operate Sweet Ranch near Livermore, Calif., and they've embraced the fact that their land is home to the last remaining habitat for some endangered and special creatures. Sweet Ranch provides valuable habitat for four endangered species:

the California tiger salamander, the California red-legged frog, the Western burrowing owl and the San Joaquin Kit Fox.

Important habitat

The Sweets' cow-calf and stocker operation includes homeland settled by Darrel's great-great-grandparents in 1868. Darrel and Karen have two adult children whose families represent the sixth and seventh generations from the ranch. Melani lives in

Colorado with her husband, Brian, and son, Riley; and Eric and his wife, Michelle, live on the ranch with their children, Blake and Audrey.

They operate a commercial-Angus cow herd, with calves born each fall, cows grazing on the open range, and weaned calves sent to the nearby Harris Ranch feedlot for finishing to supply high-quality beef to hungry consumers.

Their proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area also makes Sweet Ranch unique. Most noticeable is their gorgeous view of the Livermore Valley. Their ridgeline is the top of the Alameda Creek and the San Joaquin Valley watersheds with spectacular views

showcasing the interconnected urban and rural region.

Equally important is the habitat the Sweet's rangelands and riparian areas provide to an array of wildlife — birds and even amphibians. Sweet Ranch is in the center of the Altamont Wind Resource Area, a major foraging area and flyway for raptors and other birds. It's also in the Diablo Range Wildlife Corridor, which is home to numerous mammals, the largest population of golden eagles on the continent, other raptors, amphibians and native plant life.

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On their own land

Through partnerships and communication, the Sweets have been able to continue operating and managing their cattle ranch as a "non-invasive" use of land that is part of the very important rangeland ecosystem to those endangered species and to other common species of plants and animals.

As one example, working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service

(NRCS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the California Coastal Conservancy, the Sweets repaired a livestock pond specifically to maintain habitat for tiger salamanders and red-legged frogs, which also benefit from cattle grazing. They worked with the California Department of Transportation to create a separate mitigation pond for the amphibians, and once the pond held water, the amphibians moved in.

From their experiences on the land and with endangered species, Darrel and Karen say the most important lessons they've learned are that they have been ranching correctly to sustain and enhance the ecosystem of the ranches, and that they must

continue their grazing management regime to maintain it.

The Sweets point out that successfully combining cattle ranching and wildlife stewardship is common throughout California — and other states — and this fact is compelling and should be shared with the media and conservation organizations. They share the Sage Grouse Initiative as an example of the most recent and largest statement of conservation success.

Additionally, they encourage and celebrate other landowners' voluntary enhancements and conservation of habitat in a way that also sustains the ranch and works with others that respect and acknowledge rancher stewardship.

The Sweets note that in California, where the majority of endangered species call private rangelands their home, the Endangered Species Act can help protect millions of acres of private rangelands by directing significant mitigation funding toward conservation and agriculture easements.

They say, "We feel that this is a much better choice than the checkerboard purchase of small plots of land for wildlife that we see today under Habitat Conservation Plans. We highly encourage Endangered Species Act stakeholders to better understand and support private working rangeland and rancher-stewards as the long-term keys to ecosystem sustainability. This is the best way to survival for many endangered species across the West."



Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a cattlemoman and freelance writer from Whitewood, S.D.

Advocacy and education

Because of the special ranch environment of which their family has been caretakers for nearly 150 years, Darrel and Karen Sweet have taken an active role in working to ensure that California ranchlands like theirs will remain intact for future generations of people, cattle and wildlife.

To that end, Darrel was a founding director who helped establish the California Rangeland Trust through the California Cattlemen's Association in 1998. He credits the Rangeland Trust for "bringing the ranching community to the table with the environmental community." He also likes to point out, "We can't just sit at home on the ranch and assume everything is going to be okay. We have to be at the table communicating with them every step of the way."

Through proactive concern for future rangelands, many of California's ranchers have voluntarily placed conservation easements on more than 285,000 acres of their privately owned rangelands that are held by the California Rangeland Trust. Plus, there are currently another half a million acres on the Trust's easement waiting list.

Additionally, Darrel and Karen Sweet are huge proponents of communicating with the public, explaining what ranchers do and why. Thus, they have a philosophy that there's "no substitute for getting people out on a ranch to see what it really is." As a

result, they've opened their ranch to the urban public, tourists, government officials and the media.

Darrel and Karen are also active in serving their industry through leadership roles on various boards and in a variety of organizations. Additionally, Darrel and Karen provide consultation services for other ranchers, academic and conservation organizations.

Whether talking to fellow ranchers or the urban public, Darrel and Karen often remind people that caring for natural resources, including wildlife and plant life, is not only necessary to protect and enhance the ranch enterprise resources — it's the right thing to do.



Darrel and Karen Sweet