Paradise Ranch : New Mexico's Gray Ranch Is 502 Square Miles Of Uninterrupted Western Vistas; For Three Years, It Was The Jewel In The Nature Conservancy's Crown Of Protected Areas, Until The Group Sold It--to A Rancher, Transforming The Way Wilderness Is Preserved.

March 21, 1993|ALAN WEISMAN |© Los Angeles Times.

This," breathed the man in the sweater standing next to me, "may be the most beautiful place on Earth."

From anyone else, it would have been a stock, cliched response to the splendor before us: a mountain range bursting from a vast golden meadow, its rhyolite faces soaked crimson in brilliant afternoon sunlight. But this was John C. Sawhill speaking, the president of the Nature Conservancy, proprietor of the largest private system of nature reserves in the world.

And this was the biggest, most costly of the 1,300 choice pieces of the planet owned by his organization, the wealthiest environmental group of all. Three years earlier, Nature Conservancy had invested $18 million, more than a tenth of its entire operating capital, right here: the mammoth Gray Ranch in southwestern New Mexico, on the U.S.-Mexico border.

For years before the purchase, whenever Conservancy computers had sifted through its database cross-referencing about 54,000 key species with sites where they might occur, the Gray always floated to the top. Nearly half the size of Rhode Island, the Gray Ranch, named for a Texas Ranger

who originally settled here, most recently belonged to Pablo Brenner, a Mexico City billionaire. In December, 1989, when Brenner suddenly offered the Nature Conservancy two weeks to come up with cash, a quick telephone poll of its board of directors was all it took. Protecting the Gray, they agreed, was crucial.

All of which begged the question that had brought me to the place: Why were Sawhill and company now planning to sell this, their biggest jewel, the flagship of their most ambitious scheme: raising $1 billion to save what they call the Earth's Last Great Places?

Moreover, why would they sell it to another rancher?

I could imagine the reaction among militant conservationists. The West is lately rethinking its cowboy mystique as generations of horseback families collide with a land rush of new, urban settlers. Their arrival, which has endowed formerly pleasant cow towns like Albuquerque and Tucson with all the vulgarities that full-blown cities offer, oddly enough has also spawned ardent environmentalism--a sense of stewardship born of an ancient, instinctive longing for the land, burbling up through a collective, college-educated consciousness. Among the most popular revisionist eco-assertions is that, for more than a century, cowboys have encouraged millions of ravenous cattle to chew their way through plains, across mountains and into vital river drainages, leaving dead native species and eroded desiccation in their wake.

Cattle are now condemned as humid-country, Old World exotics that never belonged in the arid West. Zealous environmentalists have taken to mailing cow pies found in wilderness preserves to land management officials. A proliferating bumper sticker that reads "Cattle-free in '93" refers to a particularly detested, increasingly vulnerable target: leases allowing ranchers to fence off and graze federally owned lands that amount to more than two-fifths the area of the 11 Western states. The current, taxpayer-subsidized grazing fee is $1.86 per cow per month--less, scoffed one Sierra Club official, than it takes to feed a cat for a week. Each election, panicked ranchers and determined environmentalists across the West donate money to politicians in opposite camps.

The Clinton Administration has begun discussing ways to raise fees for public land use by ranchers, miners, loggers, even hikers and hunters. During a recent tour of the West, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt told crowds, "The question is not whether there should be an increase. The question is how much."

I had my own reasons for questioning the Nature Conservancy's surprising plans. For the past few years, assignments have led me with dreary frequency to smoldering remains of tropical forests in countries like Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Brazil. Even Costa Rica, with its famed national parks, turned out to be suffering Latin America's highest rate of deforestation, its woodlands sacrificed for pasture to raise more hamburger. There are now so many cows on Earth, I was told by F. Sherwood Rowland, the UC Irvine chemist who discovered how chlorofluorocarbons eat ozone, that methane belched from their four-stomach digestive tracts has become a significant contributor to global warming.

And something else: The Gray Ranch is more than endangered ridge-nosed rattlesnakes, wild turkeys and Mexican spotted owls. It is sheer, blessed space: 502 square miles of the last uninterrupted ecosystem of its kind left in the American Southwest. From the 8,900-foot summit of the Animas Mountains (nearly the entire range lies on the ranch) down to the fabulous grassland, no so-called human improvements break nature's momentum save a few scattered cattle water tanks. The Continental Divide runs along its mountain ridgeline, forming a singular convergence of plants and animals from both the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts as well as species belonging to the Rockies and Mexico's western Sierra Madre. The landscape's unusual degree of preservation was guaranteed by its water supply--too deep and too scant to support enough cattle to overgraze.
But now, in a move that would startle environmentalists and ranchers and rechart the direction of the group's fundamental philosophy, the Nature Conservancy was about to sell its crown jewel. And to a rancher, no less, one who, despite my steadfast reluctance to eat beef and his deep satisfaction from growing the stuff on the hoof, nevertheless happened to be a friend of mine. "One of my more unusual friends," I was explaining to

John Sawhill on the evening he would actually meet Drummond Hadley, the man who Nature Conservancy believed had a plan to preserve both the West's ranching culture and the wild spaces it depends on.

IT WAS HADLEY WHO HAD FIRST BROUGHT ME TO THE GRAY, SEVEN YEARS BEFORE Sawhill's visit. I had come to interview him at his borderlands ranch where he'd lived for 20 years, in a rocky canyon that straddles the Arizona-New Mexico line, 10 miles west of the Gray Ranch. Early on, Drum Hadley had abdicated any claim to his mother's family business, the Anheuser-Busch Companies Inc., in favor of pursuing lyricism. He studied and wrote poetry, eventually coming under the tutelage of the eminent American poet Charles Olson.

But Drum Hadley's mother and his Busch uncles had also raised him to ride horses on Missouri farms near his boyhood home. As time passed, he sorrowed to see those pastures degenerate into St. Louis suburbs. He retreated into California's Sierra Nevada with poet comrades Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen. Later, he and Snyder continued this quest in Mexico. It was there that Hadley began to seek what he refers to as "something we may have lost: knowledges that were the result of men and women living in vast expanses." A few months later, he pushed his bedroll through the international fence, walked south until he reached a ranch headquarters, and signed on. He stayed two years.

He nearly forsook his own words there, preferring simply to frame the poetry he could hear in the voices of border people. The day we rode up his canyon to reach the Gray, he spoke of years spent roping and branding with men so graceful they could dance from one side of a corral to the other on the backs of milling steers. In a Missouri drawl now spiced with Mexico, he recounted the cattle drive of 1969 that ended in the border town of Agua Prieta, Sonora, when they rode their horses right into bars, where their women waited.

With tequila and corridos floating through the cantinas they forgot the dust, the wild cattle, the cold of the mornings, and changed the town to

some whirling place they didn't remember or know... Where do the nights, the long singing memories, the crossing of the valleys, and sandy rivers go? Where will those loves and her laughing black eyes go? Who are we here, wanting to know? *

For hours, our mounts had been climbing slopes dense with mesquite and juniper. Hadley, his cheeks ruddy from years of sun and wind, turned in the saddle and grinned at me through his beard. "Close your eyes for 15 seconds," he instructed, "but keep riding." I counted, then looked. The canyon was gone. The land was suddenly so flat that the horses started to lope for pure pleasure across the immense grassland, scattering a herd of pronghorn antelope. We were in the southwestern corner of the high Animas Valley, crossing a thick field of grama and tobosa grasses that was once an ancient lake bed where mastodons wallowed. Half a mile to the south, a long, straight barbed-wire fence bisected the meadow and leapt the foothills, clearing the Continental Divide and the horizon. Beyond it lay Latin America. Everything we could see to the north of that borderline, Hadley told me, was the Gray Ranch. To cattle-growing people in this remote New Mexico bootheel, it was the top of their world.

Wintering bald eagles were circling overhead, inspecting the stock tanks for Mexican mallards that would be their dinner. Beyond them rose the Animas Mountains, far from any roads, whose stream beds were home to groves of quaking aspen, seep willow, black bear, white-tailed deer and nesting elegant trogons. Above all this, cumulus clouds pounded through the sky like a wild herd, a bellowing wind driving them up from Mexico. "Even at the top of the world," noted Hadley, "something's always higher."

ONCE AGAIN, I WAS HEADED TO HADLEY'S BORDER RANCH, THIS TIME IN A FOUR-wheel-drive Suburban wagon with John Sawhill, who had been a deputy energy secretary in the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations and president of New York University, and his wife, Isabel, an economist with the Washington-based Urban Institute. With us was John Cook, the Conservancy vice president in charge of the Gray Ranch negotiations, who was not entirely certain how this gathering would result.

Our route was the old unpaved Geronimo Trail, named for the last warring Apache chief in this country. His surrender in 1886 had allowed white men finally to have their cows and ranches in this, the last untamed section of the United States. A quarter century earlier, the Homestead Act had granted 160 acres of public land to families willing to settle in the West, a figure that made sense in well-watered farmland, but not where a living had to be wrested from natural forage. To survive here, homesteaders combined their claims, either through marriage or purchase. Those lacking enough pasture to rotate herds exhausted their land quickly. Ranchers who could work several thousand acres remained. In time, a community of ranching families spread across the landscape, helping each other to brand, gather cows, protect livestock against mountain lions and wolves and build cattle tanks to water the range.

The remaining unpatented lands were eventually fenced by the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service and the states. Grazing fees were levied, making survival an even harder question. As we passed through the Coronado National Forest, where permit cattle were browsing on mountain mahogany, Sawhill commented that the Nature Conservancy recently had begun to acknowledge how much human and ecological survival were intertwined.

"It's not good enough anymore to fence nature away from people," he said. Since 1951, the Nature Conservancy has become successful doing just that: simply buying up critical habitats to preserve as ecological Noah's arks. This blunt strategy attracted donations from not only bird lovers: Many wealthy corporations approved of saving nature via competition in the real estate market. But during recent years, with world population soaring even faster than environmental awareness, Conservancy scientists had noticed that what happens around their lifeboat landscapes increasingly threatened the ecosystems they thought they had saved within.

When Sawhill became Nature Conservancy's president in 1989, he found a ripening debate under way. Should they keep sheltering living museums of primeval America, or should they try to protect entire evolving ecosystems--including the humans who lived and worked in them? Some

staff scientists questioned whether good biology could be maintained under such a grand conservation strategy. Others responded by asking whether Nature Conservancy should be in the museum business or in the life business.

After a yearlong review that Sawhill organized with his national staff and trustees from the group's 50 state chapters, a new mission emerged: They would henceforth seek to manage large landscapes that surround core habitats, accepting people as an inevitable part of the ecosystem. This policy was embodied in Last Great Places, a major Conservancy fund-raising campaign that identified, for starters, 75 vital sites ranging from Micronesia to the Gray Ranch. "Our goal is to work with partners, from developers to entire governments," Sawhill explained on our way to Hadley's. "Whoever is willing to maintain biodiversity alongside human economic activity."

As we entered the canyon where Hadley's Guadalupe Cattle Co. is headquartered, it was obvious why he was the kind of partner they were seeking. The road repeatedly crossed a switchbacking stream along a canyon bottom that made the Sawhills gasp. Towering white-barked sycamores and even bigger cottonwoods rose against red canyon walls. Tender new shoots--cottonwood, sycamore, oak, and walnut–sprouted everywhere, a sign that hungry cows were being held at bay, allowing regeneration to proceed. Like most rangeland in the West during the early part of the century, this place had been grazed bare. Gradually, ranchers understood that the land's carrying capacity had been exceeded, but hard times forced many to keep raising as many animals as possible. For years after Hadley purchased this canyon and its surrounding hills, he lowered his stocking density until the land could recover. Finally, when there was enough pasture, he ran miles of barbed wire along the ridgelines, fencing his cattle away from the stream bed along the canyon floor.

Then he waited for the cardinals, vermilion flycatchers, Cooper's hawks and golden eagles to return and nest. His efforts eventually earned him the New Mexico Nature Conservancy's Aldo Leopold Award for exemplary stewardship, which he accepted in late 1991 on behalf of responsible ranchers.

The sentiment was mutual, because Nature Conservancy's public image among local Hidalgo County ranchers had been mired in quicksand. Having saved the Gray Ranch from fatal subdivision, the Conservancy considered recouping its investment by selling it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as it had done with other properties in the past. But someone leaked the government's plans for a national recreation site that would attract 65,000 annual visitors. Neighbors protested the proposed intrusion, then turned livid when a federal official allegedly advised one rancher to sell her cows and open a motel.

New Mexico's congressional delegation got an earful, and Nature Conservancy and the government mutually backed off. Next, Ted Turner appeared in Hidalgo County, interested in adding the Gray to his growing collection of ranches. He was thwarted, however, by the Conservancy's aversion to allowing him to introduce elk and bison, historically exotic to southwestern New Mexico, and by a local tendency to refer to Turner's wife, Jane Fonda, as Hanoi Jane. It was beginning to look like the Nature Conservancy was stuck with $18 million worth of ecologically prime rangeland, until Drummond Hadley called one day. Although he had maintained a relatively simple lifestyle--he'd only recently installed electricity on his ranch--neighbors knew of the money in his background. Terrified that some environmentalist-government plot would turn the Gray Ranch into a green monster that would devour their way of life, they sent the retired county sheriff to ask Hadley if he could possibly buy it. Hadley, fully sympathetic, couldn't see how. But then his son, Seth, suggested a way that just maybe they could.

That night in the canyon with the Sawhills, around an oak table where Drum's wife, Terry, served a banquet redolent of cilantro and chili, we drank many toasts. Hadley raised glasses of single-malt whiskey to the poets, ranch neighbors and Mexican cowboys who were his teachers. He honored Nature Conservancy's courage for deciding that what people do is equally important to the activities of animals. Mainly though, he saluted the land.

Holding a candle, brushing shocks of thick dark hair from his forehead, Hadley read a poem that recalled an old vaquero whose bones they found up on a ridge one spring, followed by one about how attorneys slice up real estate into tiny parcels. "Cowboys are like bears and lions," he said. "They need a certain range, a critical mass of land in which to exist. If we preserve the ranching culture, the habitat needed to maintain cowboys and other species that belong there will never get developed."

To the relief of John Cook, the Sawhills were charmed by their new partner in preservation. For months, Cook had been helping Drummond Hadley shape Seth's idea of lumping their inheritance into a foundation, dedicated to developing a land ethic to heal declining wildlands and sustain their cultures. The first act of the new Animas Foundation would be to spend $13 million to buy the Gray Ranch. The $5-million difference from market value reflected restrictions and easements retained by the Nature Conservancy, to insure forever that the grazing practices employed there would respect the ranch's biological treasures.

Agreement among the parties was easy. Details were harder, as attorneys struggled to translate biology into legalese, finalizing the sale just last month. Cook had never doubted this would happen, since the day last summer he had traveled to the Hadley family summer place – an old Budweiser hop barn near Cooperstown, N.Y. – when Drum asked his mother, Puddie Hadley, the crucial question: Would she donate a major chunk of the family fortune to his good cause? After listening to her son recite a poem about his vision, she had only one question: "Do you have a pen that writes?"

FOR MOST OF LONNIE MOORE'S LIFE, HE'D HAD ONE OF THE MOST SUBLIME jobs on God's earth, cowpunching in the Animas Valley. He'd risen to foreman of the fabled Gray Ranch, overseeing 15 cowboys, 150 horses, and 14,000 steers. Then the Gray changed hands; to the absentee owner in Mexico City, it was just another marketable asset. Frequently, Lonnie had to host prospective buyers, like the Sri Lankan baroness who planned to escape her country's strife by bringing her entire village of

relatives. They intended to break the sod, till the valley with oxen, and plant orchards in the foothills. "Where you planning to get the water?" Lonnie had asked.

Some Hidalgo County neighbors believed she might have been preferable to the Nature Conservancy. Al Schneberger, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Assn., had been telling them that the Nature Conservancy abused its nonprofit status and coziness with government entities in order to buy up all the productive land in America for some kind of socialist Earth worship. Environmentalists had grown so cunning, Schneberger warned, that even George Bush caved in before leaving office and beefed up the Endangered Species Act. "This is the nightmare we've been waiting for. They find one protected weed in your watershed, and out go your cows," he said.

The first thing Nature Conservancy had made Lonnie do was rest the big lake-bed pasture. They didn't want cows on Animas Mountain, either, where he wintered his stock. That effectively halved the number of cattle on the ranch to about 6,000, putting a major dent in the county tax base and depressing Lonnie so much that he and his wife planned to give up and move to town. He'd even asked Drum Hadley if he had a job for him in the canyon.
At the time, Drum didn't. But now, in January, here was Hadley eating cherry cobbler in Lonnie and Mary Moore's kitchen at the Gray headquarters, explaining that his Animas Foundation was the Gray's new owner.

With him was a collection of his five-generation rancher neighbors, plus some other people he wanted Lonnie to meet. They called themselves the Malpai Group, because they'd first assembled two years earlier at the Malpai Ranch belonging to Warner and Wendy Glenn on the Arizona side, just west of Hadley's canyon. It had been Hadley's idea to bring ranchers and environmentalists together to see if there was common ground. Both sides revered the land and both had to deal with the government. Mostly, both were dead set against seeing any more great open spaces divided up into ranchettes.

They'd reached instant consensus over two despised developments planned nearby: a modern new Forest Service recreation center, and a gold mine. Joining forces, they managed to defeat both. "We're getting good at being against things," observed rancher Bill McDonald. "Now, how about the stuff we're for?"

That's what this gathering was about, Hadley explained. His foundation was buying the Gray to prove that ranchers could be good stewards of the land. "If Lonnie Moore hadn't been taking such good care of it all these years, why would Nature Conservancy have wanted it in the first place?"

One big reason, Wendy Glenn said, was that the Gray Ranch was mostly private land; when lightning started a grass fire, Lonnie could let it burn out incursions of mesquite and juniper shrubs. Nature had been cleaning house that way for thousands of years, she said, until the government invented Forest Service fire crews. "They complain about the deteriorated conditions of lease lands, but they won't let us do what's needed to fix that."

"Exactly," said Nature Conservancy range ecologist Pete Sundt, who'd been invited to the meeting. A scientific team selected by both the Animas Foundation and Nature Conservancy would be monitoring the condition of 125 sites around the Gray Ranch annually, in perpetuity. Sundt was designing the monitoring system. Fire, he said, was a natural management tool everyone approved of.

That's what Hadley intended to do. The Gray, Hadley said, was henceforth a laboratory to show how people could respect land and still make a living from it. Nature Conservancy had identified responsible ranching as a way of keeping spaces open and uncluttered, so ecosystems had room to flourish. By deed, the Animas Foundation was restricted from selling off chunks of the place. Were his neighbors also willing to put covenants on their lands against future subdivision?

"I'd like my place to be a ranch forever," Bill McDonald replied, "but we can't predict the future. What if people stop eating beef altogether? How

can we deprive our children from being able to do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means selling the land someday?"

Hadley was working on that. His foundation had accountants looking for investment funds for small ranchers, so no one would starve while they reduced their herds to restore overworked lands. "Today, banks value land that real estate people can divide and develop," he said. "Someday, though, the open spaces will be most valuable of all. If we hold on and improve what we have, I think we'll make it. And the land will be secure."

Among those listening was Arizona rancher Jim Corbett. A decade earlier, Corbett, a Quaker, had risked his own security for principle. As a founder of the Sanctuary Movement, he stood trial for guiding thousands of Central American refugees through this borderland country. Through the kitchen window, we could see into Mexico, which, along with other countries to the south, was swelling with people and their animals. Saving their lands and livelihoods was an even greater challenge, but Corbett believed that this discussion was a beginning.

Here were ranchers enthusiastic not just about personal survival but also about reintroducing condors and maybe even the nearly extinct Mexican wolves on the Gray. That day, Corbett told his surprised fellow Malpai Group ranchers that their charter was now being reviewed in the United Nations as a model for cultural and environmental preservation. "A workable land ethic can only come from the people who live on it," he said.

THE ANCIENT ART OF PASTORALISM, the taming and husbanding of useful animals, has profound roots in human psychology, as old and deep, perhaps, as our heritage of sitting around fires and telling stories. Drum Hadley has done both for some time, and the knowledges he's acquired in those processes are now converging. Just as he completes a book of poetry and prose he's been writing for 20 years, celebrating the borderland culture he cherishes, he establishes the Animas Foundation to foster environmentally responsible ranching. Exactly what defines that prompts ardent debate among Western cattlemen. Their primary concern is whether it can even be profitable, let alone which techniques might work

in other endangered world ecosystems. Nevertheless, they increasingly accept the concept, just as conservationists increasingly seek creative cooperation with groups they formerly battled. Even the National Audubon Society has started its own experimental nature preserves-cum-cattle-ranches.

The world's population will nearly double before Hadley's children, now young adults, reach his current age of 54. Arguments over how to support all those people will further pressure the cattle industry, especially over the modern practice of using feed lots to speed the fattening of cattle. Two-thirds of the cropland in the United States raises grain for cattle instead of people; Hadley and Lonnie Moore agree with environmentalists that this is unconscionable.

"Take Mexico," Lonnie told me. "They spend an extra year and grow cattle out on the range. The beef is leaner and healthier. As long as we've got the grass, we can do that."

Hadley was looking off into Sonora, Mexico, where he learned to cowboy. Now his foundation would be talking to those ranchers, too, to help them preserve their range. Even cattlemen and the Nature Conservancy are talking to each other now, he noted, each understanding that the other isn't likely to disappear too quickly.
"It's a miracle," he said, "what we are willing to do, just for the land."

* From "Song of Alma de mi Alma," copyright 1993 by Drummond Hadley. Used by permission of the author.