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My eclectic personal blog about anything that provokes me to write.

Tag: fossil fuels

My blog posts about the use of fossil fuels for energy production.

What Would Tony Merten Think About Our Situation Today?

On Saturday, March 2, 1996, I was surprised to receive a large, padded envelope in the mail. The return address showed it had been sent from New Mexico by someone named Tony Merten. I didn't know who that was until I opened the envelope and found a bright red t-shirt with a large black graphic on its front. The image was a copy of the famous 1886 photo of the hostile Chiricahua Apache leader [Geronimo](#) and three of his warriors, taken in Cañon de los Embudos in the Sierra Madre Mountains in northern Mexico during their peace talks with U.S. General [George Crook](#). There was also some text surrounding the image on the t-shirt that read, "MY HEROES HAVE ALWAYS KILLED COWBOYS."



Chiricahua Apache leader Geronimo and three warriors, 1886 ([Wikipedia](#))

There wasn't a note in the package, but the t-shirt reminded me that I'd met Tony at an environmental workshop on [public lands grazing](#) at Arizona State University a few weeks earlier, the first weekend of February. The event was sponsored by the

Arizona Grazing Clearinghouse, a loose consortium of local public lands grazing activists. I was a founding member of that group and had been one of the featured speakers at the workshop. Prior to that event I'd never met or heard of Tony, but he came up to me after I finished my bit and introduced himself. He complimented me on my presentation and also said that he appreciated all the articles I'd written on the topic and was glad to finally meet me in person.

It wasn't the first time I'd been recognized for my work. In 1993 I'd been chosen by the [National Wildlife Federation](#) as Arizona's representative to go to Washington, D.C., for several days as part of a campaign to lobby Congress for public lands range reform. And I was one of the local environmentalists selected to sit on the panel with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in 1994 when he visited Phoenix to discuss his [Rangeland Reform '94](#) proposals. But it was quite memorable to have a stranger seek you out at a crowded meeting to shake your hand and compliment you in person.

Several days after receiving the t-shirt I was shocked to learn that Tony had been found dead at his remote home in rural southern New Mexico from an apparent suicide. The [news story](#) said that Tony had been under suspicion by local authorities for shooting about a dozen cattle grazing on public land near his house, and that he'd recently sent letters to friends implying that he was going to kill himself. One of those folks had notified the Luna County Sheriff's office and on February 28 they discovered Tony was sitting dead in the greenhouse behind his house with a pistol in his hand and a bullet hole in his head. He'd obviously been dead for several days. I realized that sending me the t-shirt was one of the last things he'd done, but more importantly, I couldn't understand why he had killed himself. I decided to keep the t-shirt to remember him.

I wasn't the only one that couldn't understand why Tony had killed himself. One of his friends, Will Baker, was a writer. He was so puzzled by Tony's suicide that he published a book about it in 2000 titled *Tony and the Cows*. The book included more details about the official investigation into Tony's death. The effort to identify the killer of the cattle began on February 15 when their carcasses were discovered. Investigators visited the few homes in the area later that day to ask if anyone had seen or heard anything, and Tony's house was one of them. Tony denied any

knowledge of the shootings. The investigators found more evidence the next day and it seemed to point to Tony. They stopped at his place to talk to him again, and were soon joined by the rancher who had owned the cattle. Tony became defensive and the conversations ended.

The following day, February 17, Tony penned the letter to his friends wherein he wrote that humans were destroying the Earth's ecosystem and he saw "no hope" for the planet. "It is better to check out now than sometime later," he explained. "Tell everyone I loved them all." Tony may have killed himself later that day, or another day afterwards, but the official date on his death certificate is February 27.

A few days ago I was cleaning out my dresser and at the bottom of one of the drawers I came across [the t-shirt](#) Tony had sent me. I noticed, for the first time, that it's size was extra large, which made me think that Tony had probably worn it, as he had been a large, athletic man.

Finding the t-shirt also renewed my bewilderment about why Tony had killed himself. Baker suggested in his book that Tony had been very lonely because he lived out in the Chihuahuan Desert by himself and hadn't had a girlfriend in more than a year. But I decided I would use modern information technology to search through public records online for more information about Tony.

I discovered that his given name was George Anthony Merten. He was called Tony because his father's first name was George too. He was born in 1952 in Los Angeles and grew up in West Covina, a suburb of LA. He had two brothers and three sisters, and was a star wrestler at West Covina's Edgewood High School. He subsequently wrestled for the University of Redlands, in nearby San Bernardino County. My online research also discovered that Tony was divorced, and had no children.

On April 12, 1980, a group of 37 people left San Francisco with the intent to backpack across the entire U.S. They traversed 13 states before finishing at Delaware's [Cape Henlopen State Park](#) on May 27, 1981. Tony was one of the hikers interviewed

there by a newspaper reporter covering the event for the *The Baltimore Sun*.

“I wish it could go on forever,” he told her. He said that he’d left the U.S. Army, where he’d achieved the rank of lieutenant, in order to join the hike.* “I have achieved autonomy in my life,” he explained, and said that the hike had given him freedom from “boredom, routine, and authority.” Financial solvency was the key, he told her, and he explained he’d achieved it by saving most of his Army pay.



Tony Merten, May 1981 (Marce Guerrein)

When Tony died he was a leader of the Southern New Mexico Group of the of the [Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club](#), and an active member of many other environmental groups. Perhaps environmental activism had become the most important thing in his life, and when it looked like it was going to be taken away from him, he decided to end it? But part of his decision to die obviously came from his belief that humans were irrevocably destroying the Earth’s ecosystem. So, in honor of Tony, let’s compare the current situation with the way things were back in 1996.

In regards to the specific issue of livestock grazing on Western public lands, today’s situation isn’t great, but it’s better than the bad old days, when public land managers routinely ignored environmental laws in favor of the ranchers. The fees ranchers pay to graze their cattle on public land were never increased to match the rates paid for private grazing land. But due to the steady pressure applied by local grazing activists, accompanied by lawsuits from conservation groups like [Center for Biological Diversity](#) and [Western Watersheds Project](#), existing environmental laws were finally applied to many grazing allotment management plans – despite strong opposition from ranchers.

In Arizona, for example, many perennial streams on public land have been protected from livestock damage and forage utilization rates on numerous upland pastures have been limited to conservative levels. Public land managers have also started

admitting that some areas, like [hot deserts](#), aren't suited for grazing. And conservation groups have "bought out" ranchers holding grazing permits for public lands that needed to be permanently retired from grazing.

But these days it's costing the taxpayers more than ever to subsidize public lands ranchers because millions of dollars are now available to them through [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) grants. And well-intentioned but misguided people are still promoting the junk science of [Holistic Resource Management \(HRM\)](#) grazing schemes. Furthermore, there's a persistent, but small, number of right-wing kooks, like Nevada rancher [Cliven Bundy](#), that are ideologically opposed to the concept of public lands, and think they should be [turned over to the states](#) or local governments.

Overall, however, there have been significant improvements in livestock grazing management on the nation's public lands, especially those with sensitive resources. This was accomplished by a generation of dedicated Western environmentalists. Some of the major contributors, like [Tom Lusting](#), [Joe Feller](#), and [Bob Ohmart](#), are already gone. Their achievements are significant because livestock grazing is the most pervasive use of our public lands, with about 27,000 permittees grazing livestock on about 270 million acres.

But these improvements in the management of livestock grazing on public lands are threatened, like so much other progress, by the anti-environmental agenda of the Donald Trump administration. Since he took office in 2017 some Forest Service staff in Arizona have arbitrarily classified controversial livestock management decisions as categorically exempt from the National [Environmental Policy Act \(NEPA\)](#) public review process. And the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is proposing a [national pilot project](#) that turns livestock management over to grazing permittees, without any public input, in order to give ranchers more "flexibility" because they know "better than anyone" what to do.

If Tony were alive today I presume he would want to oppose Trump's regressive environmental policies. Maybe, however, he would think activism is entirely futile now because there's no hope for the planet because human caused climate change from the burning of [fossil fuels](#) is accelerating in alarming ways that weren't

predicted. I wish he was still here though, so that we could try and convince him to help us fight.

* According to the National Personnel Records Center at the National Archives, George Anthony Merten served in the U.S. Army Reserve from 06/24/77 to 06/23/80, achieving the rank of 1st Lieutenant.

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