

AS A PIONEER OF THE CABLE TELEVISION industry, billionaire John Malone earned a reputation as a hard-headed deal maker—the so-called Cable Cowboy.

But there's a lesser-known Malone who could be called the Cowboy Conservationist. A former board member of the Nature Conservancy, he still works with that organization and is involved in collaborative projects with the Land Institute and other groups to improve agricultural sustainability. "I have a little green in me," says Malone.

He is the largest landowner in America, holding title to 2.2 million acres in Colorado, Florida, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska and New Mexico. His ownership and management of that land is all about preservation. It's a strategy he started putting in place decades ago, when development began to alter the face of the West. As Malone built his Colorado-based national cable empire, he and his wife needed no scientific reports to alert them to the threat to nature.

"You don't realize what a precious commodity

MALE

America's largest landowner tries to balance carbon, cattle and people.

CONSERVATIONIST

Conservationist

land is until you see it disappear in front of your eyes. When Leslie and I first moved to Denver 50 years ago, we fell in love with the vistas of the Rockies, the clean air and the freedom of the West. Three times we moved because we felt the city encroaching on us."

Malone's view of a preserved Earth is a productive Earth, one that produces crops and livestock in a way that's profitable, sustainable and protective of the elements. Protective of something else, too: "The culture of the West," says Malone.

Besides conscientious management, he's invested in research toward finding high-tech, high-yield, low-impact ways of farming and ranching, and toward reducing carbon overall. He's investing in technology such as GPS cattle collars for "fenceless grazing," experimental new species of perennial wheat grass, carbon-capturing techniques that leave the land healthier, the soil rich with native flora and fauna.

One dramatic effect of the Malone preservation strategy is visible on the 70-mile drive between Denver and Colorado Springs. Concerned that one of the most beautiful drives in the West was giving way to strip malls and developments as the suburbs of those cities grew toward each other, the Malones

LEADER PROFILE

JOHN MALONE



bought the Greenland Ranch, the only natural buffer affording uninterrupted views of the snow-capped Front Range of the Rockies to the West. Working with state and local groups, the 21,000-acre open space, supplemented by adjacent landowners, is now in a conservation easement, and can never be developed.

Often Malone parleys his land purchases in coordination with others, and sometimes the Malones simply save a beautiful spot in the line of a developer's bulldozer. In 2007, for example, a 600-acre thoroughbred farm in Maryland that was on track to becoming a residential development was purchased by the Malones and put in a conservation easement. Today Riveredge Farm is a world-class sport-horse training facility used by the US Equestrian Federation, among others.

Malone first took to ranching soon after he moved to Denver in 1973 as an Ivy-League educated 31-year-old, trained at Bell Labs, to help a nearly bankrupt cotton-seed broker, Bob Magness, run a cable company called Tele-Communications, Inc. Under Malone, TCI would become the largest cable operator in the US.

For decades, TCI owned Cow Creek Ranch, a 22,000-acre spread due north of the Colorado border in Wyoming, a working cattle ranch that doubled as a destination for meetings with TCI's biggest investors. When Magness passed, and TCI was sold to AT&T for \$48 billion, Malone bought the land.

He continued to accumulate more land "mostly just to save it" and by 2011, he surpassed his fellow billionaire friend and cable-TV pioneer Ted Turner, who had held the title for the previous 15 years and is now the fourth largest individual landowner in the US.

At 82, Malone remains the sagacious chairman of Liberty Media, which has controlling investments in Discovery Warner Brothers, SiriusXM, Formula One racing, the Atlanta Braves baseball team and Liberty Global, one of the largest providers of phone, internet and TV service in the world.

As the owner of the fourth-largest cattle operation in the West—his lands also produce timber—Malone is well aware that some environmental leaders believe that preserved land should be free of man, cattle and sheep. Malone disagrees, pointing out for starters that about 50 million buffalo grazed on the America that Europeans "discovered."

Globally, livestock contributes around 15% of greenhouse gases according to a recent UN report. Malone points out that livestock producers "are doing a reasonable job right now satisfying the

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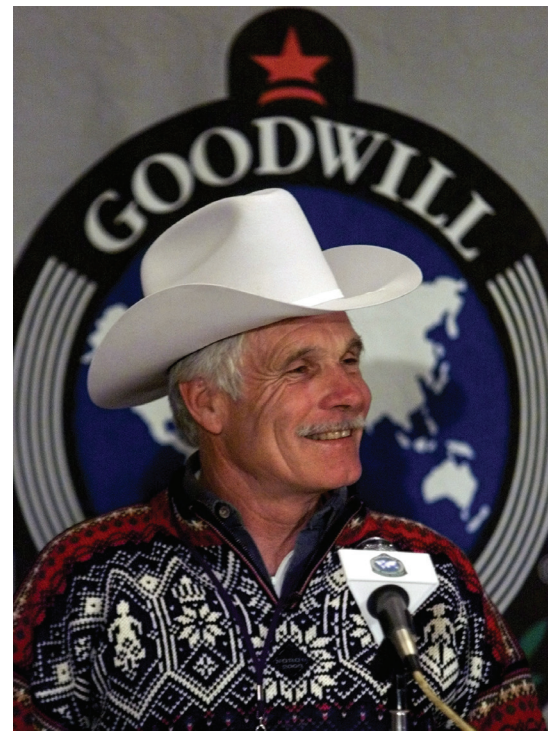
To become the nation's largest landowner, Malone surpassed his fellow cable cowboy Ted Turner. Both cable titans remain committed to preserving their titanic ownership of the American West.

needs of 8 billion people on the planet. If you're going to start changing these systems for some longer-term, more sustainable goals, we have to think it all through. You can't just say, let's throw a switch."

A big challenge Malone and other large ranchers face is overgrazing, which contributes heavily to erosion and carbon consumption. One solution Malone has experimented with at his 70,000-acre Red Top ranch in southeastern Colorado involves global positioning satellites and high-tech cow collars. Much like an "invisible fence" used by pet owners, the cows are given audible warnings, and a tiny, tingly charge if necessary, when they approach a border of the virtual pen created by the rancher, whose coordinates are locked into GPS satellites 12,000 miles overhead in space.

With this technology, ranchers can essentially rotate grazing areas without the need to drive the cattle or use fencing. Working with the Nature Conservancy and Colorado State University, along with other groups, the goal of Malone's team is to help researchers better understand why cattle make the choices they do about where they graze. Knowing this, ranchers can either suppress or enhance what's growing. "It's another tool," said Malone.

In Ireland, where he owns a horse farm, "twice a year we bring in dense flocks of sheep, and they eat everything down to the ground, and that aids the native grasses. It turns out, the horses are very selective in what they graze. They'll eat the grasses



PHOTOGRAPH: RUETERS PHOTOGRAPHER/RUTERS/REDUX

they like and avoid the plants they don't like. The sheep will come in and eat everything. And if everything gets eaten down to ground zero, it aids in the regrowth. Otherwise, only the undesirable or noxious or invasive weed becomes dominant with no competition from the natural grass."

He has studied the holistic grazing techniques advanced by Allan Savory, who has generated attention, and some controversy, with his non-intuitive theories that increasing livestock grazing can improve rangeland health and actually help reverse climate change.

At Malone's Silver Spur Ranches, in Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado and Nebraska, it's a constant effort for ranch manager Thad York to ensure sustainable grazing, protect healthy native grasses and prevent erosion. "We're trying to optimize productivity and sustainability," said Malone, a challenge in dry, arid country dotted with sagebrush.

So Malone has leaned on the Land Institute, which is gaining traction in the field of perennial agriculture. With plant breeders and ecologists in partnerships around the globe, the group is creating diverse, perennial, regenerative agriculture at scale that mimics natural systems.

Unlike annual crops, perennials don't require reseeding every year, plowing, mechanical weeding or herbicides to flourish, all of which prevents soil erosion, improves the structure of the topsoil and sequesters carbon.

"Perennial grains can grow deep roots," says Malone, sounding every bit like the professor he could have been. "They're capturing carbon from the atmosphere, and creating organic compounds that are going deep into the soils. The depths of the roots protect them from drought. And if you can get it to take, the cost of production in the long run should be much lower."

Since grains make up over 70% of global croplands, transitioning to a perennial model is one solution that could help spread sustainable, regenerative crops globally.

After 40 years of testing, the institute recently introduced its first commercial grain, trademarked Kernza, a "domesticated wild grass—intermediate wheatgrass—that has a long, slender head that resembles wheat seeds." Described as sweet and nutty, it is now being made into a cereal and beer, and it touts "superior grazing performance" because the herd can graze it like winter wheat, and the grainless stalks can still serve as fodder for livestock.

Malone is but one landowner in the global

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cooperative effort on perennials trying to figure out how to produce more food with fewer chemicals and less damage to the environment. The institute is also experimenting with perennial rice, sorghum and legumes.

Atop the peaks of the forests of Malone's land in Maine, dozens of windmills generate electricity, built by a wind farm that leases the land in exchange for which Malone gets a percentage of revenue from the sale of electricity.

"Ted and I have had this debate, too, about solar or wind energy—what's the best use of your land? I believe its worth exploring what resources a landowner should be willing to see exploited—within reason—to help sustain and improve it."

Turner's view was more "primitive" said Malone, and on one of his larger ranches in Montana, "he's taken every sign of human habitation and stripped it off."

"I'm not as pre-Columbian as Ted is in his view of land ownership. I'm trying to figure out how to enhance the productivity of farm and ranch land, for multiple purposes, including the sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere, which is important to me."

Malone also grows trees in Maine to cut them down—and then replant strategically to grow more—because in his eyes it's a form of sustainable, long-term agriculture with a "crop" useful to humans. Healthy forests reduce greenhouse gases by absorbing carbon dioxide, which remains stored even in products made from wood. The US timber industry has been considered a sustainable, renewable resource for years. Roughly 80% of US hardwood forest land is controlled by private landowners; in the last 50 years hardwood forest acreage in the United States has increased by 18%.

"I'd like to see this done in a way in which the land, because of our care, can produce more of whatever it does year in and year out without degrading the environment. So in a forest, we're taking steps to make sure there's more diversity to support wildlife rising over time." Meanwhile, in an old Maine tradition, he has largely kept the land open for public sports and hunting.

Malone is convinced that being a good steward of the land is among the noblest of pursuits. "The environment that we say grace over needs to be managed in a way that is productive, sustainable and enhanced over time," he said. ♦

MARK ROBICHAUX is a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and author of *Cable Cowboy*, a book about John Malone and the rise of the cable-TV business.