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She's Darth Vader to cattlemen

FOR THOSE who wonder if one person can make a difference in this world, meet Johanna Wald, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco. Her fine career is a positive, singular example.

Wald pioneered in the Wild West an area of law that protects the federal public lands, one third of the nation, from abuse by special interests. For the past 17 years, she has filed and won lawsuits, especially against the Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency that is responsible for keeping an eye on the lands ranchers lease from the U.S. government. Because of her efforts, she has earned the highest respect of her peers and made a difference in the quality of about 175 million acres of public grazing lands.

Although I have known Johanna Wald for years, I didn't appreciate her stature in this field until last year. At a national conference of environmental law professors in Oregon, a panelist responded to a question about public land law with this preface: "It's too bad Johanna Wald isn't here, that portion of the law is hers. It should be named after her."

THE PROBLEM as Wald grasped it nearly two decades ago was that the vast stretches of grazing lands were being eaten away by cattle, which led to the decline of the lands' productivity. The owners — the nation's taxpayers — were being cheated out of the value of those lands as a

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result. Partial blame went to some of the cattle-raising enterprises. In a giveaway of public wealth, they were handed the opportunity to annex neighboring public grazing lands through a cozy lease arrangement with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The ranchers could graze more cattle — too often more cattle than the land is capable of feeding — while paying ridiculously low rents. So low that the government was losing money on each steer on the land. Blame

lasting because she deals with policy, not just project. She takes on an issue as a cause, not just a case. As a result of her first big suit against the bureau, the agency is now required to document the condition of the lands it is responsible for, prior to deciding on grazing permit renewals. She watches, and has filed other suits when the law has been violated.

HER PERSISTENCE has earned her the nickname of Darth Vader by the cattlemen, but she wears the white hat, not the black and sinister one. Wald is actually more like the maverick Hans Solo in Star Wars. She has a quick smile and charm, which add to her effectiveness. She is also quite courageous. Wald's opponents are not gentle souls when it comes to defending what they have claimed as their rights. Physical threats are common in this area and she has had her share. Yet she worries about her adversaries, because she knows the evolving public awareness is bringing changes that will be economically painful for those cattlemen.

When responding to my question about her impact on the BLM and America's public lands, Wald said that even if she were to rest her case, the die is cast. In the case of the grazing industry, it still has a grip but it's slipping. "I believe that the public is becoming less and less tolerant of the abuse of public resources," she said. "The exploiters are on the way out. A hundred years from now the public lands will be in much better condition."

Johanna Wald is an inspiration and her work is one reason for the growing effectiveness of the environmental movement.

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therefore also belonged to the BLM, which didn't make sure the ranchers were protecting the lands from over-grazing in return for the bargain.

Wald and NRDC went after the Bureau of Land Management in court for not carrying out its mandate from the Department of the Interior to protect the public grazing lands. Armed with a sharp mind and high principles, Wald beat the entrenched system.

Johanna Wald's work will be