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Date: Sat, 14 Dec 1996 14:19:30 -0800
Subject: Cattle mutilations disturb area ranchers
Reply-to: stevevw@world.std.com
Cc: snetnews@world.std.com, skywatch@wic.net
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(The local newscast, owned by a megacorporation, ran a story about the trouble ranchers are having with people shooting their cattle. The mutilations were not even mentioned! Damage control, no doubt. --SW)

Cattle mutilations disturb area ranchers

By DAN REED
Mercury News Staff Writer
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Special to the Mercury News

This time, it wasn't rustlers poaching on John Nino's cattle. No meat was gone, only the Hereford's udder and genitalia, stripped away in a precise oval cut.

Two days later, a steer was found mutilated at a neighbor's ranch, its scrotum sliced off and carried away. On Nov. 25, a 2,200 pound bull was discovered near the entrance to the Pinnacles National Monument, its penis gone.

In the past two months, a dozen Monterey and San Benito county range cattle have been slain. Sometimes they were gutted, perhaps by poachers who were spooked before they could finish butchering. But in at least three cases, ranchers say, the livestock were oddly mutilated (--) a piece of jaw or the genitals carved away.

``I think maybe it's some sort of ritual or something,''' said Nino, a San Benito rancher who runs 1,100 head of cattle. ``I think there is a sick person (--) or persons (--) doing this.''

The local cattlemen's associations have posted a \$4,000 reward for information leading to the culprits, which may or may not be connected. There have been no arrests.

For the locals, the cattle mutilations bring home a bizarre phenomenon that for years has had conspiracy theorists convinced that the government, cultists (--) or especially (--) space aliens are butchering cows. But it also has been taken seriously enough to prompt tracking by the California Cattlemen's Association.

Overall, it's a case better suited for ``The X-Files'' than the local police blotter. Among other speculation, deputies have been asked whether el chupacabras, the mythological Latino werewolf believed to suck the blood out of goats, was responsible.

As for ranchers, angry over animal cruelty and economic loss, they're thinking of increased security. ``We don't have armed patrols (--) yet,''' said Billy Whitney, president of the Monterey County Cattlemen's Association.

Goofy explanations for the slaughters (--) which have been reported for more than 20 years in several states (--) have flourished on the Internet and some late-night radio talk shows.

Many World Wide Web pages that mention the phantom cow killers also make sober allusions to flying saucers and crop circles, elaborate designs cut into fields supposedly by otherworldly artists.

But why would super smart spacemen pick on cows?

``I don't have a clue,'' said Linda Moulton Howe, a Pennsylvania documentary filmmaker who produced a 1980 show on the phenomenon. But Howe says her reporting ``has raised the serious question that there is something non-human involved with some of these animal mutilations.''

Stumped, the state cattlemen's group began documenting the mutilations after the Oct. 16, 1995, discovery of two carved up cows in a pasture on Lassen National Forest land.

Jean Barton, who owned the cattle, said each had one eye missing. Gone also were the teats, rectum and vagina on one; the udder, rectum and vagina on the other. No meat was taken, and the blood was gone. ``It was like a laser had made the cuts, they were so smooth and straight,'' she said.

This year, two more cows were mutilated (--) also on Oct. 16 and in the same field.

Barton, former president of California CattleWomen Inc., reluctantly admits she thinks it was the work of space aliens. Her husband Bill, however, will only say that it's ``damn strange.''

Joe Nickell, a senior research fellow at the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, thinks it's all a bunch of nonsense.

He believes predators have eaten away the soft flesh, and as the dead cows bloat, the skin stretches making the ``wounds look more precise than they were.''

``This is an attempt to explain one mystery with another mystery,'' he said.

Nickell, who also writes for the Skeptical Inquirer, said the magazine earlier had debunked many of the reports, noting that the blood was either lapped up by predators, or settled low in the carcass and dried (--) but wasn't drained.

In any case, the state cattle association is alarmed enough to have recorded the strange goings on. The group has also recorded the bizarre mutilations of a 3-year-old Hereford in May in Siskiyou County, and October mutilations of two cattle in Butte County.

In Monterey and San Benito counties, suspicious killings began in March, when rancher Vern Scattini found two cows shot off Bitterwater Road.

On Oct. 18 or 19 came the discovery of his dead steer, Scattini said, its scrotum and a 12-inch circle cut off its face.

``I'm sick over it,'' said Scattini, who's lost 11 animals under suspicious circumstances during the past 18 months. ``Shoot, things are happening that shouldn't be happening. I know damn good and well it's no Martians doing this. That's silly.''

In some cases it's unclear what killed the cows. Bullet casings or holes were found only in San Juan Bautista, where two cattle were apparently shot Oct. 4.

In Monterey County, the evidence suggests nothing more exotic than

poachers. ``There's nothing ritualistic about them,`` said Lt. David Allard, who added that deputies have been questioning two possible juveniles who are known to associate with poachers.