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## The Next West

### Crossing the Divide in Malta

Ranchers, ecologists join forces to preserve economy, ecology in the coming 'Age of Consequences'

By Courtney White  
for Headwaters News  
March 20, 2007

A few years ago, while speaking to a roomful of ranchers in remote Malta, Mont., I was struck by the issue of bridging divides.

It happened during the roundtable discussion that followed the presentations. The first divide was a logical one – the ranchers' concern for the next generation. They said their children felt an irresistible pull and an undeniable push – the pull of better pay and different careers in big cities, as well as the push of diminishing prospects at home.

The list of challenges confronting the next generation was a familiar one: the rising costs of production; decreasing opportunities for off-ranch jobs; the commodity beef "bottleneck" created by the near-monopoly of the national meat packing corporations; and a low-grade conflict between the "Old" and "New" West as the homes of urban emigrants began dotting the rolling hills south of town.

This last topic led to the second divide discussed that day: how to reach across the widening gulf between urban and rural populations.

The workshop speakers, who were there to present new ideas in land management, had some suggestions: consider direct marketing niche livestock products to urban residents; explore the social and ecological benefits of watershed-scale collaboration, which would include new neighbors; examine the new toolbox of restoration and other innovative land management practices; and try to figure out a way to get urban folks to compensate rural landowners for ecosystem services.

As I listened, I realized that another divide was being crossed. Ranchers and ecologists were talking about the same thing. One of the principal characteristics of healthy rangeland is its capacity to conserve essential resources locally, including soil and water.

Without these resources in place, the ability of the land to recover from disturbance and degradation diminishes substantially. Its resilience, in other words, declines.

For the ranchers in the room that day, the essential resources to be conserved locally are children and hope. Without both in place, along with the soil and water, the capacity of the community to survive troubled times diminishes, possibly past the point of recovery.

But there was one more divide being crossed, though it took me a while to see it – the divide between the 20th and 21st centuries. What worked last century isn't going to help very much in the coming decades as the world begins to feel the deleterious effects of energy instability, food shortages,



Courtney White presents his view of "The Next West."

Headwaters News created the **"A West That Works"** to showcase columns by White that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

**The Next West** will take a more national look at issues as fossil fuels become more scarce, and will examine not only collaborative efforts that have succeeded in solving problems, but will also look at challenges facing the nation and what it may take to confront and overcome those challenges.

Readers respond:

#### Not all ranching benefits the Western landscape

Mr. White, I enjoyed your column of March 20th.

I've followed the Quivira coalition and admire the work you all have accomplished.

I feel that in your column

fresh water scarcity, and global warming. Business-as-usual isn't going to cut it in an upcoming century of possibly profound change. The coming Age of Consequences, as I've started to call it, will bite hard.

But I wasn't thinking about the ranchers – I was thinking about my fellow conservationists in the room.

## Bison?

Seated in the discussion circle were representatives from two environmental organizations dedicated to transforming a large swath of northeast Montana into a "buffalo commons" – a dream first popularized by two Princeton University professors way back in the 1980s.

Recently, one of the organizations had taken a step toward making this dream a reality by purchasing a ranch in the Malta area and converting to a bison preserve. The nonprofit and its partners are upfront about their intentions: to gobble up ranches (from willing sellers), kick out the cows, and enlarge the preserve as much as possible.

The key selling point is tourism – specifically the business of "wildlife recreation." People will come long distances, goes the argument, to see the buffalo home on the range again.

I heard the same pitch in Nebraska a year later, where two well-meaning conservationists insisted that the answer to the endemic "poverty" of the Sand Hills area was to get the ranchers to convert their land to a bison preserve and embrace the munificent benefits of tourism that would inevitably follow. The ranchers told me privately that they had a different definition of "poverty." In fact, they considered themselves quite wealthy.

Recently, the "wildlife recreation" argument has been touted by a small cadre of conservation biologists as a justification for an even more ambitious (and controversial) plan: to rescue elephants, lions, cheetahs, and other imperiled species from Africa and Asia and place them in a "Pleistocene park" somewhere in the Great Plains.

Naturally, the cattle would have to go.

There are three objections to these plans, as I see it. First, they employ the Edward Abbey-era belief that conservation can only advance as far as cattle retreat. A recent article in a [Orion](#) magazine promoting the bison preserve near Malta was explicit on this score: "If grazing is the problem," wrote Hal Herring, "stopping grazing, at least intensive grazing by beef cattle, is part of the solution."

The trouble with this argument, of course, is that it has been demolished by the progressive ranching movement. The only issue that remains, as far I can tell, is whether bison and cattle can actually coexist side-by-side somehow – which is a question for veterinarians.

Second, the bison preserve idea unfairly penalizes good stewardship. The message it sends to ranchers is this: "thank you for taking good care of this land, now leave." Furthermore, it adds to the very damaging belief among the general public that human activity and nature are mutually incompatible.

Why not put the bison someplace else? When I asked the Nebraska conservationists why they weren't proposing to buy up hundreds of thousands of acres of industrially-exhausted corn, wheat, and soybean land in their state and convert it back into native prairie for a 'buffalo commons' instead of leaning on the Sand Hills ranchers, I didn't really get an answer.

you took a quote from my [Orion](#) story, out of context.

"If grazing is the problem," wrote Hal Herring, "stopping grazing, at least intensive grazing by beef cattle, is part of the solution."

Perhaps I should have written "overgrazing" there instead of "grazing." However, the lands purchased by the prairie foundation are indeed overgrazed, and a century's worth of grazing there on those cold, dry and marginal lands is indeed, a problem.

I don't care how you look at it, a lot of that grazing land is hard hit.

The idea that a willing buyer would come in and find a willing seller and take the land out of cattle production for awhile and let it recover, is a good thing.

Not every landscape on earth has to be strictly devoted to the material needs of mankind, especially not if there is someone who has the money to buy some places and let them be used for something else.

Willing buyer-willing seller, private property, with leases on public that are going to be allowed to recover some of their former "high, wide and handsome" grass.

Why that should strike fear into anyone is a matter for conjecture.

Ranching is a fine use of private lands, can be good on some public lands, and it's a good lifestyle for the ranchers. Sometimes I wish that economics would be kinder to the trade.

But it has caused a lot of problems too, and unquestioning, take no opposing view- advocacy for ranching is as ill-advised as unquestioning advocacy for any other trade.

Thanks.

**Hal Herring,**

Third, the Achilles heel of the Pleistocene park concept is its dependence on tourism. If gasoline goes to \$6-dollars-a-gallon, or more, someday – as experts say it will – then long-distance recreation begins to look like an unsteady house of cards. If you think that gas prices will never go that high, or that some miracle technology will come along just in time to rescue the internal combustion engine, all I can say is this: Don't bet on it. More specifically, don't bet your economy on it.

But, there's a fourth, and much more important, reason why displacing ranchers for a 'buffalo commons' is a bad idea – unless we're willing to eat wild bison – and that reason is FOOD.

This is where the 21st century comes in.

### 50 Million More

In 1993, the U.S. Census dropped its long-standing survey of farm residents. The farm population across the nation had dwindled from 40 percent of households in 1900 to a statistically insignificant 2% by 1990, chiefly as a result of the rise of industrialized agriculture and the advent of globalization. The Bureau decided that a farm survey was no longer relevant.

This is worrisome news for two reasons. The first was identified by Aldo Leopold nearly 60 years ago when he cautioned us in *"A Sand County Almanac"* that "There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from a furnace."

The second comes from [Richard Heinberg](#), a professor and widely published author on peak oil, who cautions us that in the not-too-distant future we will need all those farmers back again – not to tend bison for the pleasure of tourists, however, but to avoid famine.

Not only is the global population of humans projected to grow by a third in the next 40 years, he writes in a recent paper, but the upcoming decline in the availability of cheap fossil fuel means our ability to grow food at current rates (and low costs) will decline as well.

In other words, there may be a "peak food" crisis to go along with "[peak oil](#)" in coming decades.

We have to start imagining a life post fossil fuel right now, says Heinberg. "It will take ten years to begin to prepare the infrastructure so we need to start preparing now," he warns. "This is something which is going to dominate our lives over the coming decade."

As an illustration of the challenges that lie ahead, Heinberg points to Cuba in the early 1990s which suddenly lost its source of cheap oil with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuba's agriculture system, which was heavily based on petroleum, faltered. To avoid famine, Cuba switched rapidly, and with great difficulty, to a more localized, labor-intensive, and organic mode of production.

Among many changes made in Cuba:

- The Cuban government broke up state-owned farms into small private farms, farmer co-ops, and farmers markets;
- Farmers began breeding oxen for animal traction;
- People adopted a mainly vegetarian diet, reducing meat consumption to twice a week;

### It's time to end the tradition of subsidized ranching

I enjoyed the thoughtful comments made by Courtney White regarding the "New West".

A friend recently gave me an article discussing what I see as a metaphor for some of the issues raised by Courtney.

It seems an American was watching war games being put on by the British Army. The artillery battery was firing with a two-man unit working in a professional, well-oiled, manner. Over to the side stood two other men at attention. Wondering why two were working so hard and two were not working at all, the American inquired for this peculiarity. After a brief pause, his guide to the games explained that those are the horse holders.

It seems that at a time when artillery was moved by horses there was a need for people to hold the skittish steeds while the units fired.

Even though the need for horse holders had long passed, the army continued the precedent.

This is not unlike railroads continuing to have fire men aboard trains long after the need for someone to stoke the boilers long passed, or oil companies continuing to hire pumpers even though the need for daily maintenance on "one-lunger" oil rigs has long passed.

It seems the same here. The need for cattle ranching, especially on public lands has long passed, but the tradition of subsidizing cattle operations continues.

The need is for unspoiled open space with access to high protein low-fat meat producing opportunities.

- Vegetable production increased while wheat and rice production decreased;
- Urban gardens were encouraged to go into production – and today they produce 50-80% of all vegetables consumed in Cuban cities.

The Cuban experience is not without precedent, Heinberg notes. Something similar happened in the United States and United Kingdom during WWII when fuel supplies became rationed. By the end of the war, 40 percent of vegetables in both nations were being raised in what were called 'Victory Gardens.'

But the main lesson from the Cuba experience is this: to be truly self-sufficient, and avoid famine, a nation needs 15-25% of its population to be producing food.

"Do the math for yourself," Heinberg writes. "Extrapolated to this country's future requirements, this implies the need for a minimum of 40 to 50 million additional farmers as oil and gas availability declines."

How soon will the need arise? "Assuming that the peak of global oil production occurs within the next five years," he continues, "and that North American natural gas is already in decline, we are looking at a transition that must occur over the next 20 to 30 years, and that must begin approximately now."

Heinberg cites four reasons why we should take famine seriously:

- (1) looming fuel shortages – which is being stoked by the current swap of food for fuel (ethanol) under way;
- (2) a growing shortage of farmers – not just quantity, the vital knowledge of HOW to farm is also disappearing;
- (3) an increasing scarcity of fresh water; and
- (4) global warming, which will adversely affect water availability and food production.

The answer is to completely rethink how we do business, including conservation. This means building stronger bridges among seemingly disparate groups, not pushing them farther apart.

"What I am proposing is nothing less than a new alliance among environmental organizations, farmers, gardeners, organizations promoting economic justice, the anti-globalization movement, universities and colleges, local businesses, churches, and other social organizations," he concludes. "This is clearly a tall order. However, we are not talking about merely a good idea. This is a survival strategy."

Which raises an important question: is it prudent to remove ranchers and take their land out of production – whether for a subdivision or a bison preserve – when we will need more of them over time, not less? Doesn't that make us less resilient, even in remote Malta?

Malta needs to feed Malta and southern Phillips County first and foremost. Building bridges can help.

So can economics. Gary Nabhan and Ken Meter recently wrote in The Quivira Coalition Journal that of the \$11 million in agricultural sales that took place in Coconino County, Ariz., in 2003 only .5% went directly to local consumers. At the same time, Coconino county consumers purchased

Raising buffalo, not as we have traditionally raised domesticated cattle, but as buffalo thrive, is the way of the future and we need to quit coddling the horse holders and get on with business.

**Rod Profitt,**

### **White's right on bison, but takes a wrong turn on energy**

I happen to agree with Courtney White that the Buff Commons concept doesn't consider a gritty reality: The proponents all seem to be urban, well-fed, well paid, and feel themselves isolated from the tawdry ups and downs if the energy that runs the modern world scarcifies.

That, I guess, tends to happen with elites, such as the foundations that fund most of this stuff.

Trouble is, the cubicle farms that potential Buff Commons visitors dream of escaping will shut down if it turns out there is no demand for the "product"...or if our lives pinch down to the point where food and housing is the end-all and be-all of existence.

There will be dang little left over for eco-tourism, but there MIGHT be jobs as scythe drivers.

That said, Courtney was doing fine until he jumped into Heinberg's theories.

I don't agree with Heinberg's primitivist proclivities. After poking around in his various publications, it seems the guy wants us all to read Plato by fat-lamp-light after a hard, fulfilling day of growing legumes or other such.

Yes, we need farms and farmers, not eco-parks. And we will have them, we will allocate the energy needed to food production, et cetera.

It may very well be that energy supply is going to dwindle...but I don't think it will be very drastic.

\$37 million in meat, poultry and dairy products – virtually all of it shipped in from outside the county.

Nabhan and Meter estimate there is nearly \$700 million of potential wealth in three counties – Coconino, Navajo, and Yavapai – that could be captured by local ranches and farmers, but is currently drained away to other regions. This trend, they wrote, needs to be reversed.

It needs to be reversed in Malta – and not just Malta. It needs to be reversed all over the 21st century.

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Headwaters News is a project of the  
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at the University of Montana.

For one, nuclear energy lends itself nicely to centralized power production, as does coal, AND hydro, and the fact is that only about 20 percent of our energy use goes to transportation.

The rest is fixed-location use for manufacturing, cooling, heating, and other non-motive uses.

The bottom line is energy will drive some choices over time, mainly to eliminate trivialities and nonessentials...but we'll still be modern.

**Dave Skinner,  
Whitefish, Mont.**

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