

[This is a column I wrote for The Quivira Coalition newsletter from June 1997 to April 2006]

## *The Far Horizon*

**June 1997 (no. 1)**

*“You cannot save the land apart from the people or the people apart from the land. To save either, you must save both.” – Wendell Berry*

Why the Quivira Coalition? Why try to bring environmentalists and ranchers together in an attempt to resolve our long-running dispute over the role of livestock grazing in the American West? Why not continue the slugfest, especially now that the bout is in the late rounds? Why not keep the punches coming until only one combatant, battered and bloody, remains standing?

**Because it serves no one’s long-term interest to continue brawling. And because there is an acceptable alternative – something we are calling the “New Ranch.”**

As everyone is well aware, the West has changed dramatically over the past decade. A wave of immigrants from large urban centers has flooded into the West’s cities and towns. Wealthy retirees, big city refugees, the technologically liberated self-employed, the quality-of-life starved, and other denizens of the “new” West have also filled up the nooks and crannies in the countryside. The rural West, once the province of cowboys and Indians, now teems with a lively cornucopia of new faces.

Some of these new faces will move on, but many will stay. Either way, they have brought with them new values, new politics, and new hopes for their adopted home. Although most work in the cities, they play in the country and have developed, as a result, a strong sense of ownership over the land, especially federal land. As their numbers have swelled, their influence, as well as their needs, has risen proportionally. They have fundamentally affected the economic and social foundations of the region. The West will never be the same again.

### *The Big Hurt*

Unfortunately, this latest transition from “old” West to “new” (it has happened a number of times before) has been a very rough one. In the beginning, attitudes on the part of the ‘locals’ were stubbornly opposed to change in any form. Occasionally, this stubbornness erupted into anger and hostility; sometimes it was expressed in the shape of an ambitious, but misguided legal scheme to assert “local” control over federal land. Always, the feelings of outrage and pain were genuine.

The attitude of environmentalists, many of them newcomers, was no less passionate. A desire to correct both long-standing and more recent mistreatment of the land grew into a bright flame. Putting an end to clearcutting, overgrazing, and bad mines became a cause for many activists, and they advanced this cause no less strenuously than did their antagonists defending their lifestyles. Environmental abuse, however, was plain to see and activists demanded a resolution that favored conservation. Nothing less would do.

Thus the battle between environmentalists and ranchers became a conflict of values as intense as the infamous Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century. Neither side understood

the other's viewpoint. Old-time rural residents fought like hellcats to maintain a doomed status quo, while the conservation community would give no quarter to their enemies. Casualties began to mount; a native species went extinct here, a ranch was subdivided there. Like a bad television movie, both sides struggled with each other at the edge of a deep precipice while everyone in the audience held their breath.

To no one's surprise, exhaustion, not extermination, appears to have triumphed. The Wise Use movement, while still ornery and active, has exhausted most of its appeals. Its Armageddon-ish 'War-on-the-West' rhetoric failed to move the masses and may have done more damage than good to its interests. After all, 700 million day-visits were made to our national forests last year; and they weren't made to check on cattle, or shop down trees. People love their public land and will no longer tolerate its abuse.

Similarly, the general public has not embraced Chicken Little environmentalists and their 'Sky-is-Falling' predictions. While public support remains strong for clean air, clean water, and healthy land, as evidenced by the resounding populist rejection of recent Congressional attempts to roll back basic environmental laws, it has never accepted the extreme solutions offered by some conservation organizations. And it probably never will, especially if these solutions harm lives and homes. People don't like to see other people hurt. That is a fact of life some environmentalists forget.

### *Why Quivira?*

Why should environmentalists care? Why should they support the efforts of The Quivira Coalition and its promotion of scientifically supported, ecologically sensitive ranching, which we are calling the New Ranch? Why not simply push ranchers off the precipice and be done with it?

Because the New Ranch addresses nearly all of our concerns. On the ecological front, it: (1) abolishes overgrazing; (2) ensures the protection of streamsides and wetlands; (3) allows native grasses to return and flourish; (4) provides the proper habitat for endangered species; (5) maintains "wildlands" corridors for native wildlife; (6) increases biodiversity and biomass on the land; and (7) admits that some lands are not suitable for any type of grazing.

The New Ranch also helps us meet concerns on the social front, which include: (1) accommodating recreational use of the land; (2) encouraging the economic diversification of ranches; (3) blocking the spread of subdivisions and sprawl; (4) ensuring, through use, that public land will remain in public hands.

What the New Ranch does not do is throw cattle off the land – the only acceptable alternative to some environmentalists. To those who believe that ranching has no place on public lands at all, I can only ask: why? What are your objections, really? If they are ecological, nearly all of those concerns are addressed by the New Ranch. If they are nutritional, well the New Ranch is not in the morality business. However, if the issue is simply bad blood and a desire to punish ranchers for decades of bad management with extinction (be honest), then the time has come to put hard feelings aside. We should work together toward common interests, not exploit our differences.

Buying grazing allotments (with what money?) and "retiring" the land, as some environmentalists demand, is not only impractical but it may be ecologically suspect as well. Scientific evidence indicates that rangelands need the occasional attentions of hooved

creatures to help stir things up. As an experiment, “resting the West” may or may not be a bad idea ecologically; there is little doubt, however, that it is a bad idea culturally.

### *Helping People*

I intentionally chose a quote from author and farmer Wendell Berry to start this essay. At the heart of all his work is a central question: how can we respect the land, and all the living creatures on it, without also learning to respect each other? Caring for the land and caring for people arise out of the same impulse. Affection, as he calls it, is a universal emotion. It should be applied equally to all things, organic or not. Its opposite, selfishness, is simply another form of self-destructiveness.

Ranching involves people, people who have deep ties to the land, both historically and emotionally. We should learn to respect those ties and learn to think anthropologically; ranching, after all, is a distinct culture. How can environmentalists fight for the rights of indigenous cultures around the world and then turn a blind eye to rural cultures in our own backyard? Respect has to be applied fairly and evenly.

On the other hand, the “right” of rural people to their culture does not give them free license to abuse the environment. Respect is a two-way street. Ranchers must learn that saving themselves means saving the land, as Berry says. It is time that ranchers become the environmentalists they keep insisting they already are. And it is up to us to help. There simply is no other choice.

At the same time, environmentalists need to put people back into their equations. The movement was founded not on ecological principles but humanistic ones. John Muir exhorted us to go into the mountains to “get their glad tidings,” not to chain ourselves to a tree, or chop it down. We need to rediscover our “humanness” and fight for the things that help reestablish our humanity.

A good place to start is with affection. We love the land, but so do ranchers, and for reasons that are more similar to ours than we suppose. Each of us loves the open space, the blue skies, the wild critters that live there, and the feeling of a fresh breeze in our face. Going outside is going home, as Muir said; and it is a home that we all share. It is also a home increasingly in peril from the steamroller of the global economy.

The time has come to explore a resolution to this crisis. And that time is now.

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### **November 1997 (no. 2)**

*“Men who look on nature, and their fellow-men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the somber colors are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts. The real hues are delicate, and need a clearer vision.” – Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*.*

What do environmentalists want? Concerning the grazing debate, a few years ago, I thought the answer was easy: Kill the Cow. Rest the West. No Moo in 2002.

I learned this answer in 1993 at an “anti-grazing” conference in Albuquerque one fine fall day. I sat in the dark, transfixed by colorful slides of lunar landscapes that had once been healthy green pastures, naked and starving streams, which looked like the victims of

medieval torture, and a parade of endangered species that had been pushed to the edge of extinction by the unfeeling bovine. The environmental destruction I saw shocked me.

At lunch I went outside with my fellow environmentalists and sat on a cement curb. As I chewed my vegetarian sandwich thoughtfully, I peered at a nearby throng of people wearing cowboy hats and carrying handmade signs. They milled sullenly around a black coffin that had the word “RANCHING” stenciled on its side. I listened impassively as one cowboy stoked the crowd electronically with declarations of ranching’s immortality. When I finished my sandwich, I raised my hand and confidently waved ‘goodbye’ to the throng.

Why not? We were right and they were wrong. It was as simple as that. The color slides did not lie. Cattle had nuked the West’s environment to the point of no compromise. The land was “cowburnt,” to use Edward Abbey’s famous phrase, and had to be healed with emergency action.

The answer, everyone said, was the extermination of the cow and the cowboy. Now.

### *Having Doubts*

My comfortable ride took a rocky turn when I elected to take a tour of Jim Winder’s ranch. Increasingly suspicious of bumper-sticker solutions to environmental problems, I was curious about Jim’s talk of progressive ranching techniques. He told anyone who would listen, which wasn’t many, that a healthy ecosystem was compatible with ranching. I found that hard to believe.

When I met Jim he sat on the Executive Committee of the Rio Grande Sierra Club. What, I wondered initially, was he doing there? Were we out of our minds? Ranchers were our sworn enemies. A book I was reading at the time declared ranching to be “the West’s most environmentally destructive land use, and one of the rural West’s most economically, politically, and socially harmful influences as well.” But there was Jim, talking about sustainable ranching. So who was telling the truth? I took a tour to find out.

What I saw opened my eyes. I saw healthy grass, I saw running water in a previously dry streambed, I saw wildlife. I listened to Jim talk about herding his cows up, rotating them through small pastures, and grazing the land during the dormant season. He said positive things about biodiversity, about coyotes, Mexican wolves, and termites. He talked about managing his land for ecological and economic health simultaneously. He said bad management was the problem in the West, not the cow.

Although I liked what I heard, I had to admit that I knew little about the ecology of rangelands. I, like many environmentalists, could not tell the difference between black grama grass and tabosa. What did I want the land to look like, asked Jim? I said I wanted clean and abundant water, loads of diverse wildlife, natural grasses, and the protection of open space. Jim said he did too.

The answer to the grazing debate, I suddenly realized, was a complicated one.

The trouble was I had been indoctrinated into the doom-and-gloom school of environmentalism. The goals of our movement are mostly punitive – close that bad mine, stop this awful clearcut, clear the air, clean the water, sue the bastards. As it should be. The Big Stick should never be put away, at least not until people begin behaving better. But this gloomy approach precluded clearer vision; we were spending all our time whacking the bad guys and not spending any time encouraging the good ones. There was a critical shortage of

hope out there, which blocked creative solutions. There was little education, and no dialogue among combatants. Meanwhile, the land kept deteriorating.

### *Trust*

Shortly after the tour of Jim's ranch, I read Dan Dagget's book *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict* which profiled ten ranches around the West that managed their land in a style similar to Jim's. In each case the twin goals of ecological restoration and economic growth were approached or achieved. Jim's method was not as mad as it first appeared; others were doing it too.

Dan's book tells the story of ranchers who "changed their grazing practices and reversed the loss of riparian habitat, biodiversity and recreational opportunities on public lands." Success is measured in improved wildlife habitat AND economic returns. "We have come to know and respect communities and individuals around the region that grew up ranching – and loving – the same lands we do. We've discovered that neighbors don't have to agree on everything to work together when there is some common ground."

The key is trust. Progress in the grazing debate will not be possible without the establishment of a dialogue between reasonable players. Ranchers, environmentalists, land management agencies, and others need to open lines of communication to one another. It can be as simple as meeting for coffee around a kitchen table, or taking a tour. Of course, dialogue is the first step toward building trust.

As Jim and I, and eventually Barbara, talked we began to see that an organization would be required to encourage further discussion. We proposed a big tent, under which any person with an open mind could gather to exchange ideas, learn things, and make friends. There is no "one way" to graze properly while restoring ecosystem health, we realized. Rather, there are many ways, though most point in a similar direction.

In June we founded The Quivira Coalition as our big tent. My personal odyssey from bumper-sticker activist to tent builder took less than three years. In the past four months, the Coalition has been swamped with positive press and very favorable newspaper editorials from around the state, indicating that we have struck a nerve. All sorts of people have said kind things, and they are walking into the tent.

Slowly but surely, trust is beginning to grow.

The question remains, however – what do environmentalists want? As Jim often asks "What does an environmentalist want my ranch to look like exactly?" It is a very good question.

Take riparian areas, for example. This complex nexus of land and water is the source of much debate, and litigation, in the arid West. If environmentalists could communicate clearly their conception of healthy riparian zones, and if ranchers would resolve to protect these areas, then much of the contention in the grazing fight would be greatly reduced.

We know that a healthy riparian area, full of native grasses and trees, provides critical habitat for wild fish and animals; slows floods and retards erosion; ensures the high quality of drinking water; reduces sedimentation that can shorten the life of a lake or reservoir; enhances the aesthetic experience of a hiker or fisherman; and contributes vitally to the overall ecological health of a region.

We know that by stripping riparian zones of their vegetation, overgrazing causes ancient topsoil to be washed away; downcut erosion to accelerate dramatically; water

temperatures to rise unacceptably; sediment loads to increase substantially; native grasses to be replaced with sagebrush; and wildlife to become threatened and endangered.

We want the damage to stop, and the healing to begin. How EXACTLY that is to be accomplished is why we have built the big tent. We need the advice of good science, the experience of good land stewardship, the example of good livestock management, and the help of good environmental guidelines.

I know it can be done – because it has already begun.

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### **March 1998 (no. 3)**

*“All great truths begin as blasphemies.” – George Bernard Shaw*

Fortunately for progress, human beings never stop questing. If we did, we would stop learning, and the day we stop learning is the day we stop being human. The key to progress, both materially and intellectually, is education; without it we are stuck in stalemate. This is one of the reasons why we chose a newsletter as a primary vehicle for the Quivira Coalition – to educate, and be educated in turn.

The importance of looking and learning was driven home with force to me in early December while touring the Arroyo Chico, a tributary of the Rio Puerco, in the desiccated country west of Cuba, New Mexico. In less than ten hours I learned a lesson about the tyranny of false expectations and the value of an open mind that I feel compelled to share.

It was a hard lesson; one that rubs against conventional thinking about repairing landscapes degraded by grazing. It is a lesson that some of my fellow environmentalists will find difficult to swallow, especially since it contradicts the rising trend toward bumper-sticker cure-alls to pressing environmental problems. At the same time it reinforced my belief that the ecological impact of grazing in the West is a complex problem that requires complex solutions, none of them easy. Relinquishing cherished preconceptions is painful, I know. So is change.

#### *Taking a Tour*

On a cold, but crystal-clear winter day, Jim Winder, Dr. Kris Havstad and I, representing The Quivira Coalition, together with environmental historian Bill deBuys and Forest Service grazing specialist Jerry Elson, inspected the Arroyo Chico at the invitation of Steve Fischer, watershed team leader for the BLM’s Albuquerque office.

We were joined in the truck by Orlando Lucero, the grazing permittee whose allotment embraced the Arroyo Chico and its tributaries. An affable and open-minded fellow, Orlando sought advice from us, mostly on how to improve the land and his bottom line simultaneously. We were happy to help.

We also went because Quivira was invited by the BLM to look for another riparian demonstration project. Based on our experience at Macho Creek, we wanted to find a degraded riparian area, change the grazing management strategy there, and scientifically monitor the results. We believe that progressive cattle management and ecologically healthy riparian zones are compatible, and intend to back up that belief with data.

Steve thought the Arroyo Chico, which pours nearly 30% of the sediment load into the Rio Puerco, was a likely candidate. He was eager to have Quivira's help, especially our scientific knowledge. The Rio Puerco watershed has been the subject of much attention in recent years, culminating in the establishment of the multi-party Rio Puerco Watershed Management Committee (of which Quivira is a member), whose mission is to heal land with innovative management strategies.

Healing has already begun. Over the past few years, the BLM had fenced out cows from the Rio Puerco itself and most of its tributaries – all except the Arroyo Chico. A well-known environmental group, based in Santa Fe, had leased some land from the state along the Puerco and “retired” it from grazing. A prohibition on all cows in all riparian areas seemed to be the only acceptable answer to the problem. Or was it?

### *The Arroyo Chico*

We drove across the Chico, which was wider and held more water than I expected, and parked on the opposite shore. We climbed out of the truck, stretched our backs, and looked around. Tall, ugly, eroded banks greeted us impassively. It was a familiar sight in the Puerco drainage – the dramatic downcutting of loose silty soil.

Jim and Kris wandered off by themselves. Shortly afterward, they were involved in a great deal of finger-pointing and stooping to inspect the vegetative cover near the stream edge. A small herd of cattle shuffled away from their gesticulations, as if afraid of what they might overhear.

I wandered over, with a frown on my brow. “It looks good,” Jim said to me unexpectedly, with a smile. “Everything I see here is on an upward trend. Orlando's doing a good job.” Jim pointed to the ground beneath our feet. “Look at the toe of this bank,” he continued, “it's stable, reclined, and well-rounded.” It was also covered with grass. The tall, eroded banks behind us, in other words, were artifacts from an earlier age, not the results of recent grazing.

As we walked, Kris pointed out other indicators of riparian health – there was abundant western wheat grass, a perennial which cows normally eat to the ground, as well as salt grass and sacaton. There were coyote willows everywhere, very few of which showed any signs of being clipped by cows. The place was bursting with regeneration.

Jim said the uplands looked good too. On the drive in, he saw lots of species diversity among the plants (not to mention the two large elk herds we spooked). He pointed back down at the ground. “Soil is being captured here,” he said, “which is big news considering how highly erodible this stuff is.” Kris concurred. Orlando's allotment was definitely on an upward trend.

There was one sign of trouble: a conspicuous lack of cottonwood regeneration. Orlando led us to one big tree, where we looked around for shoots, without luck. Kris pointed to a patch of alkali sediment on the Chico's bank. “Perhaps that's the culprit,” he said. Jim pulled off a small branch of the cottonwood, sharpened it with his knife, and pole planted it in the ground. “Got to get it started sometime,” he said with a smile.

Jim and Kris's recommendation to Orlando and Steve? No fencing on the Arroyo Chico, at least not here. “Think about the message fencing send,” said Jim. “It says that management is the problem and that the only solution is keeping the cows out. That's the wrong message here. Orlando's doing a damn fine job.”

No fencing along a riparian area in the Rio Puerco drainage? It sounded like heresy. Steve said came on the tour fully expecting to fence *something*, and the BLM will likely present that option as one of its management alternatives. But here were Jim and Kris, talking about good cattle management in a riparian area which has reversed the downward spiral of soil erosion and vegetation degradation and recommending that cows be allowed to remain. That was quite a message indeed.

To be sure, Orlando's system needed to be tweaked. He grazes the Chico only during the dormant season (winter) with a relatively small herd. But he keeps his cows in the riparian area too long. Jim said he should move them out at the first sign of spring budding among the plants. That way, the vegetation gets a full growing season to do its thing.

There were other recommendations, but none changed the simple truth that Orlando, by grazing lightly in the dormant season and by moving his cows around on a regular basis, had allowed the riparian area along the Arroyo Chico to recover.

There is a good chance that Quivira will still establish a riparian monitoring project along the Chico. However, instead of documenting the resurrection of degraded land by a change in management style, we will be monitoring health, and the tweaks that are necessary to make land healthier. We will be monitoring hope, in other words.

### *Lessons Learned*

For years, I have listened to the steady drumbeat of "kick the cows off" as the only solution to the deep damage in the Rio Puerco watershed. I mostly believed it, especially when I learned that the BLM, over the past few years, had fenced cows out along the Puerco's length. Rest, I knew, was certainly required in the riparian areas – possibly permanently.

Orlando Lucero's work along the Arroyo Chico, however, muted the drumbeat. Certainly, significant portions of the Rio Puerco are degraded to the point that fencing is required to help the land recover, and certainly there are poor cattle managers out there who deserve to have their cattle fenced out. But as Orlando's example demonstrated, bumper-sticker solutions to this environmental problem will not work.

Ranchers in the Puerco watershed could learn from Orlando's example. He is still in business, his cows have access to water, and there is plenty of forage for cow and wildlife alike. The land is healthy, the family traditions continue, and open space is protected. It is very beautiful country – an enterprising real estate speculator or two could make a killing here. If we let them.

These are important lessons for environmentalists too. Killing the cowboy is not necessarily a good thing, and may, in fact, be detrimental to our goals in the long run. The lesson learned on this tour focused on the dangers of looking at the world in black-and-white. "I win and you lose" will sink all ships. We need healthy land and we need healthy stewards to watch over that land. It is not an impossibility, not if we try.

Re-examining our preconceptions is the first step.

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**May 1998 (no. 4)**

*"Where there is life, there is hope."* – Cicero

It is always dangerous to talk about history before it happens.

Heedless, a veritable industry of prognostication has sprung up in recent years, full of pundits, talking heads, analysts, and experts babbling on about the profound import of this or that minor event. With so many people talking at once, it is a wonder history happens at all.

Most talking heads, of course, are not actual players in any drama and are often disdainful when the players speak up.

Nevertheless, a perceptive actor should be able to articulate the deeper themes of a play. He or she may not be able to deviate from the script, or change the ending, but the general flow of a production should be clear. And I think the drift of the western drama called “grazing” looks promising.

### *New Ideas*

This thought came to me one day while I sat in an old opera house in Socorro, New Mexico, listening to a panel discussion about the future of organic farming in New Mexico. The workshop was entitled “Growing Your Farm/Ranch Into the 21st Century” and it was put on by a group of farmers and ranchers who are determined to see their livelihoods survive into the next century, at least.

The threats are urban development and the spread of monopolistic agribusiness – threats which, according to one speaker, will result in “the end of the rural West and wide open spaces we grew up with. Nobody who loves the West benefits: rural community character and values are lost, wildlife habitat suffers, and our nation’s ability to grow its own food continues to erode.”

In other words, it was a workshop of new ideas and new hope.

Topics included the high value of conservation easements to ranchers, the economics of organic farming, strategies for keeping the family in the family ranch, and private land trusts. One rancher was so motivated by the discussion that he went off and held his own workshop a month later. Now he is starting his own non-profit land trust.

What I heard encouraged me. People from diverse backgrounds, with diverse goals, were linking hands and mulling new ideas for preserving open space, rural communities, and small businesses. To me, it sounded like history.

At the risk of sounding like another talking head, I believe the intense social and political changes that have rocked the American West since World War II have brought us to a fascinating, and critical, juncture. The fires of conflict, fueled by the friction created when the irresistible force of change rubs against the immovable obstacle of tradition, have cooled down somewhat in recent years, creating an opportunity for hope.

Despite the steady rain of lawsuits, the occasional flash of hot rhetoric, and the familiar rumble of angry thunder through the woods, the land and the populace appear ready for reasonable solutions to age-old debates. The extremes have succeeded brilliantly in discrediting themselves and now the “radical center” holds the stage.

Judging from the strong positive response we have received, the timing of the Quivira Coalition was perfect. No entrance could have been possible five or ten years ago; and if we had waited any longer it might have been too late. The “radical center” wants dialogue, collaboration, and new ideas, and we are laboring mightily to deliver them.

We are not alone, fortunately. We fit into the broad sweep of events washing over the West, as individuals and organizations begin to use their brains and their hearts, instead of their fists, to solve problems. This is exactly what the Socorro farm/ranch workshop was all about—innovation, cooperation, and motivation.

Perhaps what is most intriguing about this broad turning of the tide, if I may be so bold, is its populist foundation. The debate about the future of the West is being taken back from the small, and shrinking, pool of gladiators and given to cooler heads. Suddenly, people see a role for themselves in shaping their home and are enthused again.

I see it happening with the Quivira Coalition. People from all over the region, and from all walks of life, have called, or sent money, in support of our efforts. These are good people too, without axes to grind, or chips to knock off. As the word spreads, and it is spreading quickly, the foundation of good will grows bigger and more impressive. This positive populist expression, especially in these days of intense commercialism and deep cynicism, makes my heart glad.

It proves that we are still a democracy and the public is still judge and jury.

### *Northern New Mexico*

A good place to watch the turning of the tide is in the mountains and valleys (and cities) of northern New Mexico. The site of effigy-hanging acrimony between environmentalists and natural resource users, the region has cooled off somewhat as reasonable people begin to explore new ideas to old conflicts.

The grazing debate is a good example. In June a group of ranchers, conservationists, scientists, forest service employees, and members of the public will meet in Peñasco to listen to common-sense solutions, including development of a grassbank, the reintroduction of fire into the ecosystem, and the thinning of the forests—solutions that are cooperative and benefit everyone's needs.

It is an opportunity and a challenge for everyone, including the Quivira Coalition. The economic, ecological, cultural, and governmental differences between ranching in the northern and southern parts of New Mexico are profound. Ideas that work well on a large, dry ranch may not be terribly useful on a 600-acre ranch near Tierra Amarilla, such as the one owned by John Roybal and his father.

On the other hand, riparian areas still need to be fenced, dormant season grazing still needs to be tried, cows still need to be herded together and moved around regularly. The basics of the “New Ranch” sometimes transcend many cultural and environmental particulars and sometimes dovetail.

For example, what is the 21,000-acre Ghost Ranch, with its 900 head of cattle belonging to 55 local ranchers, and its holistic style of management, but as an ejido – or traditional commons land? Isn't a grassbank a form of ejido as well? These are new ideas with an old purpose.

The past, as Faulkner once observed, is never very past, especially in northern New Mexico.

My hope is for an economic, environmental, and cultural renaissance in the north. Let's help the organic farms get on their feet, let's help people find a way to use their forests sustainably, and let's find innovative ways to keep the family in the family ranch.

The potential exists for “Vermont-style” economic development – family farms and ranches producing high quality food through co-ops and other associations for markets in Santa Fe, Taos, and points beyond. A “Grown in Northern New Mexico” label, assisted by skillful advertising, could very be popular – and profitable.

The return of economic vitality to the villages of the region would stabilize eroding cultural traditions. Kids might desire to stay on the farm, or work in the woods, or raise a cow. The pressure to sell property might be alleviated; and the need for a city job might be reduced. People could get reacquainted with the joys of knowing the land again.

A healthy environment would lift all boats. Holistic ranch management, organic farming, forest restoration, and the availability of grassbanks, all work toward the economic and cultural advantage of every community. And that’s just for starters. There are many other environmentally sensitive strategies that work harmoniously with economic goals. We just need to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

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### **September 1998 (no. 5)**

*“The central thesis of game management is this: game can be restored by the creative use of the same tools that have heretofore destroyed it – axe, plow, cow, fire, and gun. Management is their purposeful and continuing alignment.” – Aldo Leopold, Game Management*

Ignorance is killing us. It is killing the environment too, and all the wild creatures that depend on it. Just look around you. Decisions are being made in courtrooms and meeting rooms without an adequate foundation of facts; and the consequences of these decisions are ruining us.

Ignorance rules because no one looks at land anymore. Land managers can’t because they are chained to their computers responding to lawsuits; environmental activists can’t because they’re buried too deeply inside concrete jungles (or too busy rushing in and out of courthouses); ranchers can’t because they’re too focused on their animals (and on survival).

This is a crime because the answers to our questions can be found on the land – how it looks, how it is eroding, how it is healing. We must understand how an ecosystem properly functions before we can do anything else. We must understand how water cycles, how energy flows, how minerals work their way up to the surface of the ground. We must comprehend how a plant functions before we can preserve it – or eat it.

It is time to get out of our chairs, off of our political agendas, and away from our know-it-all confrontational posturings. It is time to go outside and *look* at the real world. We might be surprised at what we discover.

Nowhere is the need for looking and learning from land more critical than with the issue of threatened and endangered species. The bad blood between environmentalists and ranchers, which has come to the boiling point in recent months over the protection and management of these rare creatures, has completely obscured any messages land might be sending us. Even land management agencies have lost track of the facts.

It has become painfully clear to me that this fight is hurting the chances for some species to recover. When a rancher in the boot heel of New Mexico recently decided to shoot a rare jaguar with his camera instead of a rifle, he was rewarded for this brave act of

stewardship with a lawsuit from an environmental organization. Now the rancher is angry that he tried to help.

A handful of environmentalists is pursuing a political agenda in court that has very little to do with real world biology, and they should admit it. Conversely, some ranchers are using endangered animals as a club to fight to maintain political control over public land, and they should admit that, too.

Meanwhile, the imperiled creatures continue to suffer. This isn't right. All creatures, big and small, should have an inalienable right to life and liberty. No species should be allowed to go extinct, unless we can prove unequivocally that it did so as a result of a "natural" process (if such a thing even exists anymore in our increasingly "unnatural" world).

We should stop threatening species and start saving them – *really* saving them. This won't happen with lawsuits or regulations. At best they are stopgap measures whose benefits are often neutralized by the hard feelings they engender. Long-term environmental health will not arrive until we get out onto the land and learn, as Aldo Leopold urged us to do so many years ago.

We should go directly to the homes of the Mexican Wolf, the Spikedace Minnow, the Spotted Owl, and the Willow Flycatcher and ask them what they need, rather than revel in our destructive ignorance from afar.

### *Rest*

One of the first things you learn when you actually get out on the land is how limited "rest" can be for restoring ecological health. This is big news because retiring land from livestock grazing, or "unranching" as some call it, is the mantra most often chanted by environmental activists, especially in regard to endangered species protection. Kick the cows off, they say, and Eden will be restored.

The truth is somewhat different. It is true that short-term rest can have a tremendous beneficial impact on an ecosystem, especially if the land has been overgrazed. Like a coiled spring, hammered land will often rebound energetically when released from year-round grazing. The results are often as dramatic as they are substantial.

But long-term rest often has deleterious consequences for land. Ecosystems require disturbance to "stir" things up periodically, either through fire, or animal impact, or hydrologic event. Nature was never "preserved" in its original state. It was constantly subjected to the forces of change, including the grazing of bison, elk, and deer. Human beings have been impacting "wilderness" for nearly 30,000 years in North America.

To tell the public, as so many activists do, that "Resting the West" will automatically restore endangered species is misleading at best. Instead, the public must learn that "rest" is only one tool in the tool chest; others include fire, technology, money, people, and, yes, grazing. Each piece of land will require different combinations of different tools.

In dry environments, such as the Southwest, "rest" often results in ecological stagnation. The absence of water will cause plants to wither and turn gray without decaying significantly. As a result, nutrients and minerals will remain trapped in each plant until a disturbance of some sort occurs, such as a wildfire.

When the "tool" of grazing can be carefully controlled and selectively applied, it can be very beneficial to the proper functioning of an ecosystem. Grazing animals help recycle plant material both by defecating and by pressing seeds into disturbed soil with their hooves.

Besides, who said “rest” was “natural” anyway? Certainly not an ungulate.

The consequences of “rest,” both positive and negative, are readily apparent to anyone who has walked across grazed land with their eyes open. “Rest” has its benefits, but so does progressive grazing management. The results don’t lie.

### *Status Quo?*

It is critically important for ranchers to look beyond the avalanche of lawsuits. They need to look beyond beef production as well. They need to look long and hard at what is coming next.

Jim Winder likes to tell people that any rancher who thinks he’s going to be only in the beef production business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be out of business very soon. Ranchers need to look at their whole ranch, including potential conservation, recreation, and other economic values. They need to become “resource managers,” in Jim’s terms, not just livestock operators. (One term I have heard is “Multiple Objective Ranching,” or MOR.)

A good place for ranchers to start is by restoring ecological health to their land. This will not only help with the lawsuits (the appearance of an endangered species on a ranch should be a *good* thing), it will help with the bottom line as well. More grass means more forage; more plant diversity means more wildlife; more wildlife means more hunting and more bird-watching (you would be surprised what people will pay for recreation). More environmental health means more economic health.

The trick is to turn problems into opportunities, as Dan Dagget says. Don’t treat an endangered species as an obstacle, for example; tackle it instead as an opportunity, as Jack Turnell did on the Pitchfork Ranch. Make allies with friendly environmentalists (there are lots of us out there!). Get them to help you build a fence, or pay you to scout for birds. Turn the tables. Marginalize the extremists by shaking hands with the friendlies. Look for opportunities and test new ideas.

New thinking, however, requires new looking. This is why the Quivira Coalition has begun a series of Outdoor Classrooms, starting with two on recognizing Rangeland Health. Do environmentalists know what health really is? (Hint: it has nothing to do with a judge’s ruling or grazing fees.) Do ranchers? (Hint: it has nothing to do with ear tags or AUMs.) Could they recognize rangeland health if they saw it? Could you?

Eventually, we will expand our offering of Outdoor Classrooms to include sessions on riparian function, ranch/resource management, monitoring, and the effects of fire. We might even have one on the needs of endangered species. We will continue to include ranchers, environmentalists, public land managers, academics, and others in our Classrooms so that everyone has the same opportunity to look and learn.

We will learn, as Aldo Leopold instructed us 55 years ago, that we already have the tools we need to solve our problems. They are the same tools that created them, of course. We just need to use them differently. It starts with looking, listening, and asking questions. I invite everyone to join us.

Learning from the land is our only hope for the future.

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**January 1999 (no. 6)**

*“What a young American coming of age confronts now is not a limitless potential, but developed power attended by destruction and depletion. Though we should have recognized the land as a living organism demanding care and stewardship, we have treated it as a warehouse, and now it is a warehouse half emptied.” – Wallace Stegner, American Places*

What do we lose exactly, when we lose open space?

This question confronted me a few years ago while spinning through Phoenix, my hometown. Bent on nostalgia, I drove my wife through a cavalcade of former homes, schools, and other childhood haunts, eventually aiming the truck toward what had once been the edge of town. To my dismay, there was no edge; subdivisions rolled on and on without pause.

We prospected for an apparition from my childhood entitled “Powderhorn Ranch.” It wasn’t much of a ranch, even in my memory. It had been a collection of rambling corrals, full of weeds and manure. There had been a small headquarters, a mobile home, and lots of open space. Our only neighbor had been a mysterious, dilapidated palm tree nursery.

My father had rented the “ranch” for a few years, mostly to get out of the office. We hired a wrangler, installed a handful of horses, and spent nearly every weekend there, fixing things. I remembered the smell of the horse feed, the look of the crooked fences, the freedom of the long trail rides. I remembered trying to build a miniature golf course among the anthills and creosote.

I also remembered living on the edge of a vast desert wilderness.

*Sign of the Times*

We drove back and forth among unfamiliar boulevards looking for a sign of the past. We eventually found it at a generic street corner: “Powderhorn Ranch,” the subdivision.

As my wife and I stared at the vast cement holocaust, we wondered out loud what had happened to the desert. Its only visible vestige was a strip of open space beneath the massive electrical towers that marched across the shattered landscape like steel kachinas.

Where did the coyotes go? Or the cactus? Or the other animals? I remembered riding a horse across an endless horizon of living land. I remembered the scant evidence of human impact – an occasional jeep track, an old stone home, a prehistoric canal. But mostly I remembered mile after mile of life.

I also remembered the signs. Driving back and forth to the ranch from our home downtown, I had spied real estate signs stuck into the desert like spears. Most had been defaced with a simple spray-painted message: SAVE OUR DESERT. I remembered cheering the vandal silently.

Now the desert was gone.

Physically, Phoenix has become the largest city in America. In 1995, the Phoenix metro area occupied nearly 1000 square miles of former desert; it consumed open space at the rate of 24 acres per day; and it added 230 people to its population every 24 hours. The numbers can only be bigger today.

Some environmentalists write off cities like Phoenix, preferring to vent their outrage at smaller, more tempting targets, like the family rancher. Tackling sprawl requires financial

and emotional resources that many environmental organizations do not have. It also cuts a little too close to home.

However, the metamorphosis of Powderhorn Ranch told me unequivocally we are losing our desert ecosystems at an unacceptable rate – an acre every hour of every day of every year.

Losing land is only the beginning. The loss of open space also increases the urban dweller's estrangement from nature. As society's cement cocoon expands daily, we push nature farther and farther away until it exists mostly as an abstract ideal on the periphery of our lives.

City folk still adore nature, perhaps even treasure it; but it is a leisurely love, conducted on weekend trips to the mountains, or a dayhike in the desert. Nature has become a pastime for most Americans, something remote and sanitized.

Meanwhile, our children are growing up without the feel of dirt under their fingers, the smell of wet creosote in their lungs, the sight of a sunrise on the hills in their eyes. There is nothing abstract about nature, not if you feel it, live it, and see it on a daily basis. Nature cannot be intellectualized; it needs to be felt.

I learned this as a child at Powderhorn. During our brief, but intimate, existence on the edge of the desert, I learned the timeless value of contact with nature. I began to detect why human beings have spent millions of years evolving in a very tight bond with wild things – a bond that defines our “humanness” as much as our ability to make music or fly to the moon.

Yet, standing in the middle of that asphalt wilderness, I also learned that in only a few years we have badly damaged this bond, and we have done so with gusto.

### *Losing Memory*

We are also losing our memory when we lose land. Not only childhood hopes and dreams are lost, but larger dreams as well. Liberty, for example, has been historically bound up with open space. Go West young man, and be free. In the late nineteenth century, a famous historian postulated that the very essence of American democracy was dependent on the availability of open space.

We lose touch with our roots when we pave over paradise. We lose touch with our parents, and their parents; we lose our connection with the lessons of nature; and we lose our center as human beings.

Who has not returned to a cherished childhood landscape only to be shaken at the sight of new construction? A favorite field lost, a secret arroyo exposed, a sacred fishing hole desecrated. All of these represent ties to the past that are damaged or severed, with important consequences for the future.

Progress can be measured as the sum of experience and ingenuity. What is experience, however, but memory? If we lose touch with our past, with our families, or our ideals, then we jeopardize our ability to build a sustainable future.

My father died a number of years ago. Now the Powderhorn Ranch that I knew and cherished is gone too, and with it went another tether to my roots. How many memories can we cut before we become unmoored?

We need to redouble our efforts to save open space because it protects ecosystems, keeps us connected to the land, and encourages memory (and puts food on the table).

Protecting land is also a necessary act of defiance against the destructive powers of our society. Nothing is inevitable, even sprawl – not if we put our shoulders into the task.

Hope is our most precious resource.

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### **March 1999 (no.7)**

*“Stewardship: the individual’s responsibility to manage his life and property with proper regard for the rights of others.” – Webster’s Dictionary*

So much to do, so little time.

In February, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released alarming numbers from a census of farms and ranches in New Mexico. According to a news release, between 1992 and 1997 the total acreage of farms and ranches in the state declined by more than **a million acres**, mostly lost to development. In Arizona during the same period, **eight million acres** of farm and ranch land went out of production.

A million acres in New Mexico! By my math, that’s a rate of almost 550 acres per day.

To producers, that’s a million acres no longer available to maintain an agricultural way of life; to consumers, that’s a million acres no longer available to grow food for our tables; to environmentalists, that’s a million acres no longer available for maintaining wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

There is little doubt that this rate will continue into the future, and possibly accelerate, as the long arm of urban expansion continues to consume land.

Not even public land is immune; as private land is lost, pressure will build for the disposal of public property for private use. Various attempts along this line have been tried in recent years in state legislatures and in Congress. You can bet that well-heeled development interests will try again.

The loss of private land to development will also increase pressure on wildlife populations. According to one estimate, 65% of all endangered species exist on private land, mostly in riparian areas. The loss of this habitat raises the specter of extinction.

In other words, time has become our most precious commodity.

### *Our Mission*

Over the past six months, there has been a steady increase in requests to the Quivira Coalition for our assistance. The variety of these requests speaks eloquently to the crisis confronting all of us.

Some requests are for help in arranging a conservation easement on a ranch. This is a legal agreement by which a nonprofit organization buys the “development” rights to a piece of land owned by a private individual. It means the landowner may never subdivide, or otherwise develop, his or her property – ever. The ranch remains a working ranch in perpetuity, and the landowner earns a substantial tax break in the process.

It’s a great idea, and one that is catching fire across the West, especially since it protects private property rights while conserving the environmental value of the land. It’s a job for land trusts, however, not the Quivira Coalition.

Some people have suggested that we become involved in the free market side of conservation ranching. This includes the promotion of organic beef, the certification of “predator-friendly” meats, and the development of niche markets for products created in tandem with progressive ranch management.

These are great ideas, especially since they allow the public to vote with their pocketbooks for good grazing management. It is not, however, part of our current mission statement.

A few people have asked that we use our skill at bridge-building to help them facilitate or mediate agreements between hostile camps. This is important work too, but we are not a consensus group. We don’t search for “middle” ground; and we don’t use the word “compromise.”

There simply isn’t enough time.

### *Stewardship*

Our focus is on land, and on the people who are its stewards. Our work is aimed at restoring rangelands, protecting open space, encouraging ecologically sensitive ranch management, acting as a resource for other innovative ideas, and working as a catalyst for change.

This is important because so much of the grazing debate in the West, when you look at it closely, is not focused on stewardship.

For example, anti-grazing activists regularly deride government assistance to ranchers as subsidies for “welfare cowboys.” Recently, a long litany of complaints against the “special treatment” afforded the cattle industry by “cowed” state and federal governmental agencies was published on the Internet. Not once does this document mention the issue of good stewardship.

Similarly, the agitation by the ranching community over private property rights, custom and culture, and federal oppression has little or nothing to do with conditions on the ground. Even the struggle over the reintroduction of the Mexican Wolf has more to do with power and politics than biology.

Another good example involves grazing fees. Combatants on both sides of this debate use the price the federal government charges for grazing animals on public lands as a club on the American public. What, however, do grazing fees have to do with stewardship? The answer: almost nothing.

It is important to recognize that most of the grazing debate in the West is political, not environmental. That is why so much confrontational energy is being spent in the courts and in Congress, rather than in dialogue out on actual land.

There are many reasons why this brawl became political – lack of communication, conflicting economic concerns, ideological rigidity, even bad manners. One reason stands out, however: desperation. Both sides feel that time is running out, and they’re right.

We are losing our cultures and our habitats, 550 acres a day.

The answer, of course, is to get back to the land and start a discussion about stewardship. What should land look like? How does it function properly? What sorts of human activities are sustainable? And how do we work together to achieve common goals – before it’s too late?

This is why herding is so attractive. By congregating cattle together and moving them every day, either under the watchful eye of a professional herder, or by some other stratagem, overgrazing is easily avoided. Under holistic principles, herding can be a tool to restore rangelands to health.

For ranchers, herding relieves the pressure from fence building, low weaning weights, hungry predators, declining forage, conflicts over riparian areas, and seasons being shortened because of a lack of spring grazing. Herds could even increase in size, if environmentally sustainable, with obvious economic benefits.

Herding is an old idea whose time has returned. Great herds of bison and other ungulates roamed the range for hundreds of thousands of years. Pastoralism, or the human-directed herding of domesticated animals, is at least ten thousand years old, and deeply embedded in cultures around the world.

The trick is to look at herding with modern eyes. For example, we need to better understand how an ecosystem functions, and what role grazing animals play in that system, before we can create a sustainable herding program. Water, soil, plants, sunlight, wildlife, fire, disturbance, and the timing, intensity, and frequency of cattle grazing are all interconnected.

Science is critical to everything. Long-term monitoring of the effects of herding on the land should be a key element to any effective program. Ignorance is not bliss; we need to understand a resource before we begin to restore it. That means getting back to the land.

And we had better hurry. Time is running out.

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## **June 1999 (no. 8)**

*“I don’t like work, no man does, but what I like is in work – the chance to find yourself, your own reality – what no other man can ever know.” – Joseph Conrad*

It is a standard belief within the environmental movement that recreation is preferable to grazing on our public lands.

I encounter evidence of this belief every time I open the mailbox. On the one hand, I receive countless magazines from environmental groups filled with glossy stories extolling the liberating virtues of recreation. On the other, groups solicit my membership by attacking nonrecreational use of the land as universally destructive.

The supposition that recreation is a benign activity has permeated nearly every level of the debate over the purpose of public lands. The press accepts it uncritically, environmental leaders tout it as an acceptable alternative to “exploitation,” and public land managers bank on it.

As a hiker and camper, I want to believe it too. But something always nagged me about recreation; and it wasn’t just the trash I saw in the overused campgrounds, or the off-road vehicle damage I saw on the hills.

What bothers me is the implication that work is always “dirty” and destructive; our public lands always prosper as playgrounds; and the axiom “recreation good, grazing bad” is always true. It isn’t.

*Over One Billion*

According to public records, over 800 million day-visits were made to our national forests last year. Combine that figure with the nearly 300 million day-visits to our national parks during the same period and you have over *one billion* trips by people to their public lands every year. (That total doesn't even include BLM land.)

And they didn't go there to chop down the trees or graze cattle.

One recent scientific study identified recreation as a greater threat to endangered species on public lands than grazing. I find this news astonishing and significant. And yet, how many lawsuits have been filed by environmental groups against the government over recreational damage to the land? I can't think of a single one.

Why have environmental groups not made "overrecreation" a priority? The impact of one billion people on our public lands must be tremendous. How could it not? But where is the national call to action? Where is the demand for scientific research?

A cynic might say that environmental groups are not about to bite the hand that feeds them. I think the problem is different. Many environmentalists that I know are genuinely concerned for the health of the land; they will chart a fair and constructive course of action once they are properly informed. But they need to have *knowledge* first.

And that means chopping down a few hardy paradigms.

### *Let The Land Lead*

We need to look and listen to the needs of land first and foremost. Demonizing ranchers while turning a blind eye to the deleterious effects of overrecreation will not in the long run help restore or maintain ecosystems.

Does an overgrazed plant care what animal bit it? Can a meadow tell the difference between damage caused by too many hooves, tires, or vibram soles? Does an endangered species care if it is being pushed to the brink by too many cows, campers, or off-road vehicles?

Of course not. But in a world gone mad with finger-pointing, few people seem willing to listen to the land anymore – or each other. This is the tragedy of the grazing debate. The investment in conflict overrides the needs of land or people. There are plenty of answers to grazing-related problems, for example; but few eyes want to see.

Meanwhile, the land, and the life it supports, continues to suffer.

Demonizing recreationists, of course, is not the answer either. While we need to acknowledge the environmental costs of overrecreation on public land, we should resist the temptation to indulge in another round of "us vs. them" rhetoric.

Let the land be our guide. When damage occurs, let's correct it. Let's get control of the cows, the recreators, the elk, the cars, the smog, and all the other sources of environmental degradation. Let the land rest when it needs it; let it burn when it requires it; let it be used when it can sustain it.

### *What About Work?*

By demonizing ranching and championing recreation as a "benign" alternative, environmentalists diminish the value of working with the land. This has two unfortunate consequences.

First, it fails to distinguish between work that restores and maintains rangelands in an ecologically sensitive manner, and work that does not. There are plenty of examples of the former; but we can't encourage their proliferation if we don't recognize their benefits. If we categorize all ranch work as destructive, we punish those stewards who are trying to do a better job.

The only way to ensure real range restoration is through the application of a ton of elbow grease. Many ecosystems are too much out-of-kilter to be restored simply by kicking the cows off the land (what about ozone depletion and CO<sub>2</sub> buildup, for example?). Resting the West was never the answer; rolling up our sleeves is.

Who, however, is going to do all that work? Our public land managers? I don't think so. Agency budgets and staffs are shrinking, not expanding. Work gangs? Maybe, but I doubt Congress is willing to pony up the necessary money right now. Volunteers from the environmental community? Possibly, but there is an awful lot of work to be done many miles from urban centers.

I have an idea – what about the folks who already live, and work, on the land? Second, replacing labor with recreation further estranges us from nature. Under the recreational paradigm, the land becomes something “out there,” precious and remote. We love the land, we seek its pleasures, and we delight in its aesthetic qualities, but we don't really know it in detail. Not anymore.

When we lose intimacy with the land, we lose knowledge; and when we lose knowledge, we begin to make flawed decisions. Evidence of this abounds at almost every level of the debate over the role of public lands. For example, someone told me recently that there is a shortage of trained botanists available for work. They said it was verging on a crisis. There is certainly no shortage of lawyers.

Of course, work is only one way to gain an intimate knowledge of land; scientific study is another. There are others, but the question remains: do we really want to replace work with recreation on our public lands? Isn't there room for both?

It is my profound hope that, if we can tear down the false wall that separates recreation from grazing, we can make real progress toward sustainable use of our public lands. The first step on this road is to stop the finger-pointing. The second is to listen to the land. The third is to get to work.

It's not as crazy as it sounds.

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## **November 1999 (no. 9)**

*“Off with their heads!” – The Red Queen, Alice in Wonderland*

I really hate bumper-sticker environmentalism.

On October 4th, while traveling to speak at a conference honoring the legacy of Aldo Leopold, I innocently bought a copy of the *New York Times*. I opened it only to be confronted by a full-page advertisement entitled “*End Welfare Ranching.*”

The ad was the fourth in a series on the “*Extinction Crisis,*” paid for by an organization called the Turning Point Project. It contained the customary shock rhetoric about beer and oil barons feeding at the federal trough while their cattle denuded the land.

The standard catalogue of ills associated with overgrazing were reiterated, along with the requisite “before” and “after” photos of a healthy stream vs. one nuked by cattle.

The ad’s authors even had the audacity to cite an article in *Bioscience* in support of their position – without stating one of the article’s conclusions, that recreation posed a greater threat to endangered species than grazing. I wondered if the next ad in the series would be “*End Welfare Recreation.*” I bet it won’t.

In addition to the usual suspects, the list of sponsors for the ad included, to my surprise, Earth Island Institute, Friends of the Earth, U.S. Public Interest Research Group, Wild Earth, and Defenders of Wildlife (a co-sponsor of the Leopold conference!). I was appalled, to be frank. We all understand that overgrazing is a huge problem that needs immediate attention. Livestock grazing in the American West, however, incorporates a complex web of ecological, cultural, historical, political, and commercial concerns; to wave the “magic wand” of abolition over the problem is not a viable solution.

In fact, of all the issues on the “To Do” list of environmental activists, grazing reform should be one of the most resistant to bumper-sticker sloganeering. So why is this train gathering speed?

### *Why Now?*

Lately I have wondered aloud to friends and neighbors why so much momentum is building to extinguish public lands ranching. Why now, when so much scientific evidence points at decades- old overgrazing as the primary culprit in the poor condition of some rangeland? Why now, when the numbers of livestock on public lands are at historic lows (and going down)?

Why now, when the economics of the cattle business already have ranchers on the ropes; when the status quo, traditional ranching paradigm is crumbling before our eyes; and when a progressive ranching movement is beginning to make a difference?

Why now, when public land management agencies are giving greater weight than ever to ecological values as part of their “multiple use” mandate; when new ideas in land stewardship, particularly livestock and wildlife management, are beginning to take root among agency decision-makers; and when scientists are stepping up to the plate in increasing numbers to help solve environmental conflicts?

Why now, when urban sprawl, often implemented at the expense of private farm and ranch land, has become a major concern of environmental organizations (fighting sprawl is one of four long-term national campaigns being conducted by the Sierra Club); when industrial-strength factory farms threaten our land and water; and when wildlife habitat is being fragmented by subdivisions across the West, sometimes at the rate of an acre an hour?

Why now, when our food supply is increasingly centralized in the hands of a very few corporate conglomerations; when the demand for organic food is on the rise; and when biochemical companies and feedlot operators insist on injecting meat with a widening array of genetically altered, technology inspired supplements?

Why now, when the corporate globalization of our economy threatens to wipe out the last vestige of our family-scale agricultural heritage; when indigenous peoples around the world are fighting to maintain their integrity and identity; and when collaborative efforts between rural and urban activists (who often share similar goals) are beginning to blossom?

Why now call for the end of public lands ranching? Why now, when solutions to problems so plainly exist? Why?

### *Trouble with Priorities*

Much like the grazing debate itself, there is no simple answer to this question.

Mounting frustration by environmental activists at a conspicuous lack of progress on key issues, such as wilderness designation, is one partial answer. An embedded, and souring, “us vs. them” paradigm is another, especially since so much of the debate over the environment has shifted into the political arena. Ignorance, I’m sorry to say, is another explanation, as is anger.

A current event illuminates my concern. This summer, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt proposed the creation of a 450,000- acre National Monument in the “Arizona Strip” country, north of the Grand Canyon. He called the land one of Arizona’s “last best places” and urged that it be preserved by an act of Congress. Conservation organizations immediately demanded that the ante be upped to one million acres.

A few years ago, I would have energetically applauded both proposals. Today, however, I have decidedly mixed feelings.

Babbitt made his proposal in order to “protect” the land. But protect it from what? Not from livestock grazing, since that use will be grandfathered into the legislation. Not from residential subdivisions, since most of the land is public, and very remote. Not from the destructive attention of a foreign-owned mining company, since the area is not minerally attractive (the threat of a coal mine was the catalyst for the creation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument across the border in Utah).

The Secretary cited concerns about potential oil-and-gas development and off-road vehicle use. Doubtless these are legitimate threats to the area’s integrity, but I wonder if the benefits of their exclusion will be offset by the rise in tourism and other recreational pressures that will inevitably follow in the wake of the Monument’s designation? I, for one, am tired of seeing our “last best places” turned into playgrounds.

The point is this: our priorities are upside down. Damage is damage, no matter what, or who, causes it. We should work from the ground up. We should embrace complexity, not fight it. Preservation, as we have defined it for nearly a century, may not actually preserve much of anything anymore. Drawing a line around one million acres of land may no more guarantee its “preservation” than kicking all the cows off public land will guarantee long-term environmental rejuvenation.

As John Muir correctly observed, the universe is a complex system of interlocking parts, each one affecting the other. To pull on one is to pull on the whole; nothing can be, or should be, separated and isolated. Reductionism is as dangerous as absolutism. Of course, John Muir never saw a bumper sticker.

### *Restoration*

I believe the environment, especially public land, is in dire need of restoration, not just preservation.

I’m not a scientist, but it doesn’t take a Ph.D. to know that things are seriously out of kilter across the West. Overgrazing, overlogging, overmining, overrecreating, and many

other forms of overuse (as well as neglect) have imperiled many of our natural systems. Throw global warming, the carbon dioxide buildup in our atmosphere, and population pressure into the pot, and you have a recipe for a crisis.

The goal, it seems to me, is to solve these problems. The debate should move back to issues surrounding the basics of environmental health – what some call “proper functioning condition.” Values, such as grazing, mining, recreation, and preservation, should be secondary to function. Get the system to working properly first, then let’s have a debate about which value we wish to see occur there.

This isn’t rocket science; we already know how to restore many natural systems to functionality, and how to do it in an ecologically sensitive, self-sustaining manner. What we lack is the willingness to pull the debate out of the political arena and back into an environmental one.

This doesn’t mean turning over the keys to scientists. What it means is an energetic debate about environmental and economic health that engages the expertise of all the players. It means education, dialogue, cooperation, patience, respect, and trust – all of which are sorely lacking in the current debate over the future of our public lands.

It means the creation of more organizations like the Quivira Coalition. It means rolling up our sleeves, shaking hands, and getting to work on the real grassroots.

By that I mean the grass and the roots.

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## **February 2000 (no. 10)**

*“The most significant weakness of the conservation movement is its failure to produce or espouse an economic idea capable of correcting the economic idea of the industrialists.”—*  
Wendell Berry

Recently, a member of my wife’s family asked me what I did for a living.

I hesitated before responding, perhaps for a beat too long. He greeted my answer, that I directed a non-profit organization that was trying to influence the grazing debate, with a silent nod. Either he didn’t give a damn about cattle, or else he did and didn’t want to cause a stir.

My hesitation intrigued me, however. What I really wanted to say was this: I am a professional saboteur. I should have told him that everyone involved with the Quivira Coalition were saboteurs of one sort or another. Like our European predecessors, who protested the Industrial Revolution by throwing their wooden shoes (*sabots*) into the machines that were replacing them, we are protesting the expanding machinery of corporate globalization.

Education is our Molotov cocktail. While some choose to blockade streets with their bodies, or break the windows of multinational shopkeepers as a way of protest, we prefer to fight back by provoking a dialogue about land, local economies, communities, grass, trees, wildlife, and dirt. Our sabotage is aimed at a remote and humorless industrial economy that is consuming souls as efficiently as it is chewing up open space.

Our *sabots*, in this case, are ideas.

*The 2nd Industrial Revolution*

One can hardly open a newspaper or turn on a television today without being bombarded with evidence of what some are calling the Second Industrial Revolution. Between the expanding influence of the Internet, the globalization of the economy, the megacorporate mergers, unprecedented wealth creation, and an addictive dependence on technology, we are creating an awesome corporate machine, one that grows bigger, faster, and hungrier by the day.

By now, it should be clear who the victims of this Second Industrial Revolution will be – endangered species, rural communities, open space, air, earth, and water. We are a nation beset by materialism and commodification; and nowhere is this more apparent than in our evolving attitudes toward nature. Technological “advances” combined with expanding global demands for raw natural resources have placed an unprecedented stress on our ecosystems. At the same time, the recreation industry has commodified nature into a playground for fun and profit.

Meanwhile, the environmental crisis continues to build, as does the need for protest and action. Unfortunately, the response of some environmental activists to this global turn of events is an attempt to separate the “social” from the “environmental” and focus strictly on the latter. They call it “pure environmentalism” – i.e., do whatever is best for the critters and the trees, and damn the consequences for people. Ironically, their hero is John Muir, despite his famous observation that “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”

Like a virus, “pure environmentalism” has injected itself into many ongoing national environmental campaigns, including the “zero cut” and “zero cow” movements. It has created its own illness in the process, however, in the form of cascading litigation and bad blood, without affecting the industrial sickness that is besieging world health.

The appeal of absolutism is obvious, as is its desperation. It does not tolerate shades of gray, or moderation. It is a blunt instrument, being used purposefully and indiscriminately by certain environmentalists in the struggle against the hegemony of the industrial economy. Their anger and frustration are understandable, though their double standards, and their misanthropism, are not.

Their blows, however, either by accident or design, have fallen mostly on rural people, not corporations. That’s because their goals, when you look closely, are primarily political, not environmental. Which is why, as an act of resistance, “zero cut” and “zero cow” are doomed to failure.

Meanwhile, the global economy rolls on.

### *Radical*

Absolutism is not the answer, but collaboration might be. If a broad alliance of diverse, yet like-minded dissidents heaved their sabots into the machine all at once, it might make a difference. It is certainly worth a try.

Chief among the dissidents is a farmer, Wendell Berry. In books, essays, and lectures, Berry has been imploring conservationists, rural people, city people, all people to heed his advice that the “social” and the “environmental” are inseparably intertwined. The key link, he insists, is economics.

“You cannot specialize the work of conservation,” writes Berry. “You cannot save the land apart from the people or the people apart from the land...to save both the land and the people, you need a strong rural economy.”

Land, he observes, is always in use by somebody, even wilderness. The goal of conservationists should not be an attempt to eliminate use, as the absolutists insist, but to demand that land be used sustainably. “A good...land-based economy,” says Berry, “would aim to join the local human community and the local natural community or ecosystem together as conservingly and as healthfully as possible.”

Berry cites two principle reasons for the ruination of land: ignorance and economic necessity. They are often connected. People have ruined land, says Berry “mainly by overusing it...And behind this overuse, almost always, has been economic need.” Too often, this “need” is nothing more than greed (if you have a million dollars, for example, do you “need” another million?).

Berry blames the economic exploitation of our natural world on an industrial economy that exists solely for its own enrichment, and for the impoverishment of the countryside. “The era of cut-and-run economics ought to be finished,” laments Berry. “Such an economy cannot be rationally defended...the proofs of its immense folly, heartlessness, and destructiveness are everywhere.”

The answer, he says, is the development of a community economy whose “aim is generosity and a well-distributed and safeguarded abundance.” To do this, we must do nothing less than rediscover our humanity. “In order to preserve the health of nature,” concludes Berry, “we must preserve ourselves as human beings – as creatures who possess humanity not just a collection of physical attributes but also as the cultural imperative to be caretakers...to one another and to the other creatures.”

Within the modern environmental movement, that is truly a radical idea.

How can the environmental community assist local communities to build self-sustaining economies (as an act of sabotage)? I have four suggestions:

1) **Create alliances.** It is time to drop the “us vs. them” mentality toward rural people that has dominated so much of the struggle to preserve our natural heritage. Our fight is with the corporate economy, not with the family farmer or rancher. We should be allies, instead. Mom-and-pop, agrarian-based capitalism is a powerful countervailing force to global industrialism. It should be supported by conservationists, not destroyed.

2) **Participate in local economies.** Vote with your checkbook, especially when good land stewardship is involved. There is a renaissance of small-scale, sustainable, ecologically sensitive economic activity going on out there – organic farms, holistic ranching, farmers’ markets, predator-friendly beef products, and certification programs. Best of all, not only are the products of these activities good for the land, they’re good for *you*. They taste better too (compare an organic steak to a non-organic one sometime!).

3) **Get out on the ground and ask questions.** How do ecosystems actually function? What role do grazing ungulates play in the maintenance of rangelands? What plant is that? Why is there a subdivision here? How can I help? Information is the foundation to knowledge and action. Of course, this applies to rural people as well. They need to ask questions too, such as: why *is* that species endangered? What can I do to help it recover?

4) **Work in the radical center.** Stop supporting absolutist organizations and causes that purport to help the environment, when, in reality, all they do is give aid and comfort to the industrial economy. Instead, support local and regional efforts that build alliances, engage in education, and work to establish sustainable local economies. There are more “centrist” organizations out there than you might realize; and more are being created every day. At the same time, we should encourage the national environmental organizations to work in the radical center too.

Grab a *sabot* and join us.

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## May 2000 (no. 11)

“*The times they are a-changing.*” – Bob Dylan

The War for the West is over. And the environmentalists won.

That’s the thrust of a frontpage editorial by Ed Marston in the April 10th issue of *High Country News*, which he publishes.

“The war between extractive interests and the environmental movement for control of the Interior West’s public lands is drawing to a close,” he writes. “The timber era, the cattle era, the mainstream big-dam era, the wiseuse era are ending. An immense landscape is going from one set of uses to another...in an astoundingly short time.”

As evidence of the environmentalists’ triumph, he cites the successful reintroduction of the wolf, the rapid rise of recreational use on public lands, the failure of a Newt Gingrich-led Congress to roll back any significant environmental law, the diminishing economic impact of the extractive industries (with a corresponding decline in political muscle), and the impunity with which Secretary Babbitt is steamrolling new national monuments across the western landscape.

The struggle, Marston suggests, was always about sovereignty. Rural westerners viewed their home as a region apart from the rest of the nation, a private domain for use as they saw fit. Environmentalists, on the other hand, insisted that public land belonged to the whole public, from sea to shining sea. And the jury, says Marston, has delivered its verdict: the West belongs to America, now and forever.

### *What Next?*

If Marston’s observation is accurate that the struggle for the West is in an endgame, what happens next? Who or what steps into the breach to pick up the pieces and restore order? Who will come to the negotiating table to discuss a peace treaty?

Marston suggests the business of peace-making is already underway. As an example, he cites the “patchwork quilt of watershed, consensus, collaboration, community- forestry and range-restoration efforts that have appeared everywhere in the West, as if by magic.” He also cites the efforts of western state governors to reassert some semblance of order through a collaborative project called *Enlibra*.

Many of these attempts at collaboration and problem-solving have caused a certain amount of hand-wringing among national environmental organizations. They’re worried,

they say, about a loss of command-and-control over public lands management. They are also suspicious of any process that engages their former enemies in dialogue.

Frankly, I think they don't know how to respond to victory.

What I see is this: in the wake of its success, the environmental movement needs to adopt a new approach to public, and private, land activism. Having fought and won at a national scale, the focus now needs to turn to the ground – to watersheds, to restoration, to dialogue and cooperation.

If the national organizations are unwilling or unable to do the hard work of restoration, then they should get out of the way and let local and regional groups give it a try.

Many of these local groups are taking their cue from the organic farming movement, which is succeeding in ways that should make national environmental activists turn green with envy. The key to the farmers' success is their belief that everything starts with the soil; healthy soil means healthy plants, healthy plants mean healthy animals, including people; and healthy animals mean a healthy world.

The local conservation groups are focusing on soil, sunlight, trees, grass, and roots. They are reacquainting themselves with the fundamentals of ecosystem health – water and mineral cycles, the dynamics of plant and animal communities, and the energy flow between sunlight, soil, and plants. They are striving to understand how aquatic and terrestrial systems function properly, and how to recognize the indicators of environmental health (or lack thereof).

This knowledge does not require a Ph.D. in Ecology or years of field experience. The basic principles can be learned in a weekend, especially if the training actually involves getting out on the land. All one really needs is a capable instructor, a pair of eyes, and a willingness to look and listen.

Take soil, for example. Is compacted or crusted soil a sign of a healthy system or not? What role do minerals play in plant vigor? How do minerals get to the surface? How is the organic content of soil replenished? What role do insects and animal dung play in maintaining health? What about decay? Water? Wind? It is at this soil-level scale that many of these new conservation groups start.

### *Hands-On*

The new conservation movement is willing to roll up its sleeves.

The days of long-distance public-lands environmentalism are winding down. Roughing up federal land managers through the courts or the press or even the NEPA process can no longer guarantee preservation or restoration of natural and cultural landscapes. The idea that an overworked, understaffed, malnourished, and much maligned federal government can do the hard work of good stewardship all by itself is a fallacy.

The same can be said of the legislative process. The motivation of so much arm-twisting these days in the halls of Congress and state capitols has become punitive, retributive, and exclusionary – on both sides. It's all about power – who has it, who lost it, and who wants it back. Fighting is inevitable, I suppose, and necessary at some level; but we are not making progress in the meantime, and in danger of backsliding in many areas.

Politics is effective at the broad gesture, such as authorizing the construction of a massive dam, or its removal, but it can no more ensure the proper cycling of nutrients through soil than a lawsuit can.

For example, the old movement's reliance on legislation, politics, and media pressure exposes one of its greatest failings: to affect significant change on private land. A recent science article stated that only 12% of all endangered species exist exclusively on public land. If nature does not recognize the difference between private and public land, why do conservationists? It's because their toolbox lacks critical tools.

The new conservation movement adds cooperation to the toolbox. It believes long-term ecological and economic restoration will only take place when humans agree to change their behavior peaceably through the cooperative effort of many hands. This means working with landowners one-on-one. It means travelling to ranches, both public and private, and volunteering to help. It means getting **involved**.

This is not as difficult as it sounds. Many observers have pointed out that land managers, environmentalists, and rural residents have much in common. The biggest stumbling block is trust. Once the ice has been broken, however, the potential for progress is huge.

### *No Compromise*

The new conservation movement considers education a two-way street. Its leaders are willing to accept the ideas and wisdom of people different from themselves, particularly from people who don't live in asphalt jungles. They are willing to take the time to read the scientific literature, tour a progressively managed ranch, or attend a workshop.

At the same time, they are willing to share what they know with other open minds. A rancher may know a lot about a certain soil type or a particular plant, but may not know that streams need sinuosity to be healthy. A federal land manager might know how to read a vegetative transect, but might not know how to calculate "Animal Days Per Acre" or understand its usefulness. An environmentalist may know how to determine the "proper functioning condition" of a riparian area but not know how it can be grazed by cattle in the dormant season without harm.

A great place for education to start is in the marketplace because the easiest way to influence human behavior is to tie it to economic self-interest. Demonstrating how healthy economics flow from healthy ecosystems is one of the best tools for change, including getting paid, if you are a rancher, to do conservation work. Or go organic.

The new conservation movement does not use the word "compromise." It searches instead for innovative solutions to complex problems that aim at simultaneous economic and ecological self-sustainability. It does not mediate or facilitate extremes; it works in the "radical center" using common-sense ideas. It does not file lawsuits to achieve its goals. It has no need to compromise its ideals.

The new movement steps out of the political, legislative, and judicial arenas, leaving the combatants to duke it out. Instead, it studies soil, identifies plants, herds cattle, raises water tables, shakes hands, makes a profit.

The war is over. Let the healing begin.

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### **August 2000 (no. 12)**

*"What the public domain needs is just one good rain."* – Dr. S.W. McClure, 1936

Rising from the ashes of the recent forest fires and the dust of the drought is a central question: do humans have the right to manage nature? And if so, what sort of management, and for what purpose?

It is a question that lies at the very heart of the grazing debate, as a new book demonstrates. In fact, whether nature should be “managed” or “left alone” has become a Great Divide for the public lands wing of the environmental movement in general, as well as the fuel for the bonfire of lawsuits and the call for “zero cow” policies.

The new book is *The Western Range Revisited: Removing Livestock From Public Lands To Conserve Native Biodiversity* (University of Oklahoma Press), by Debra Donahue, a law professor at the University of Wyoming.

The ostensible goal of the book is to catalogue the sins of traditional ranching; but its ultimate objective is to make a case for “unmanaged nature.” As such, it is a useful illustration of the philosophical forces at work within the environmental community, as well as the tensions.

It also gives us a chilling look at the dangers of absolutist thinking.

### *Old News*

Ms. Donahue’s thesis is straightforward: “Livestock grazing is incompatible with preserving landscape-scale native biodiversity on western ranges averaging 12 inches or less of annual precipitation.” Which just happens to be most of the West. When it rains.

She considers ranching to be an irredeemable activity. “Livestock grazing is simply not ecologically sustainable,” she writes, “at least on a scale that is economic . . . Merely curtailing livestock use will not achieve the goal of preserving and restoring arid land biodiversity. Evicting livestock will be essential.”

She rips traditional ranching on political, economic, and social grounds as well. She even dismisses as “plainly speculation” the threat of sprawl and habitat fragmentation as a result of private lands development on former ranches. “The prediction of more real estate subdivisions is seldom supported by the facts,” she writes.

She closes her book with a cold-blooded summation: “Eliminating grazing in arid regions of the West would offer tremendous potential benefits while imposing very few costs. The economic impact would be minor . . . and the cultural concerns overblown.”

Unless, of course, you are the one being eliminated.

The first problem with *The Western Range Revisited* is that it is packed with old news. Her litany of outrage is all too familiar: historic overgrazing tremendously damaged rangelands; ranchers have enjoyed a cozy relationship with federal overseers for generations; ranching is an economically marginal activity; overgrazing continues to affect biodiversity; ranchers exert disproportionate political power in excess of their numbers; the cowboy myth is largely a creation of Hollywood; and federal subsidies to ranchers explode the image of self-sufficiency.

As an argument for a judgment of execution, however, *The Western Range* falls flat. That’s because the second problem with the book is more consequential – it is out of touch with current events.

### *Biodiversity*

The fatal flaw in Professor Donahue’s argument is easy to identify. It’s called the Empire Ranch. And Ghost Ranch, the Tipton Ranch, the Gray Ranch, the Deseret Ranch, to name only a few ecologically oriented “New Ranches.” The omission of holistic ranchers like Sid Goodloe,

Jim Winder, Roger Bowe, Cathy and Mike McNeil, Terry Wheeler, and many others, is significant, and damaging.

That's because these progressively managed ranches and their ecologically-minded stewards not only conserve native biodiversity, they often increase it. And many of these ranches do so while operating below Ms. Donahue's 12-inch rule.

Take the U Bar Ranch, for example. Located on the Gila River near Silver City, the U Bar, which is owned by a mining company, managed by a rancher, and employs irrigated agriculture, supports the largest concentration of endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatchers in the world. And the numbers have gone *up* every year since 1996, the year a long-term study began. In fact, the U Bar apparently has become a source population of Flycatchers for the Gila Valley!

Additionally, according to Dr. Scott Stoleson, of the USDA Rocky Mountain Research Station, and lead researcher on the Flycatcher study, the U Bar is home to the largest concentration of neo-colonial migratory birds in North America.

On a working cattle ranch. In a desert.

One reason for the rise in biodiversity on the U Bar is the willingness of the rancher, David Ogilvie, and the mining company to try new ideas, such as grazing the bird habitat only in the dormant season. David also *likes* the Willow Flycatcher and wants to see it thrive. In other words, his environmental ethic is large, and his managerial abilities skillful.

The U Bar's biodiversity may not depend on farming and ranching, but its presence on an intensely managed landscape does contradict Ms. Donahue's assertion that conserving native biodiversity starts with eliminating agricultural use of arid lands. More importantly, however, I believe the Flycatcher is flourishing *because* of David's management, not in spite of it.

Thus we arrive at the crux of the debate.

### *To Manage or Not To Manage*

Debra Donahue's prescription for conserving native biodiversity in the West, beyond simply killing the cowboy, is to employ large contiguous blocks of land as bio-reserves, connected to each other by corridors for migrating wildlife. These Wildlands would be huge, in her estimation, encompassing the majority of BLM lands. They would be so large, in fact, that "active management may not be required," she writes.

Ms. Donahue proposes that nature knows best and should be left alone. Other than a few types of ecological restoration, she considers the management of nature by humans to be undesirable. She blames the current ecological crisis on anthropocentrism. "A utilitarian, mastery-over-nature attitude, along with its biblical roots, is considered fundamental to the Wise Use movement in the West, in which livestock and other commodity interests are prominent."

It is a view shared by other environmentalists. In *Unmanaged Landscapes: Voices for Untamed Nature* (Island Press, 1999), editor Bill Willers argues for "Nature's autonomy," which, he says, can only be found in wild landscapes. "When managed for some human-centered purpose, its autonomy is lost," he writes. "Restoring wilderness conditions on landscapes of all sizes can allow for self-regulation in a state of ancestral wholeness." Although his goal is to recreate an ancestral past – which ancestral past, among so many, is not clear.

Nevertheless, to accomplish this goal, management, in his view, "must become an erasing, a reversing, a minimizing of human impact—a science of letting things be."

But what about the birds on the U Bar? Or all the healthy rangeland on the Empire Ranch? What about all those riparian area blossoming and healing under the watchful eyes of Sid Goodloe and Jim Winder? What about the biodiversity restored under the intense management of Terry Wheeler? What about the environmental ethic of Roger Bowe or the Davis family?

What about the forest fires? The drought? What about the fragmentation of wildlife habitat due to urban sprawl? What about the one *billion* day-visits made to our public lands annually by recreationists? What about global warming and the CO<sub>2</sub> buildup in the atmosphere? What about poverty and population pressure? What about industrial corporate capitalism and the globalization of the economy?

“Letting things be” does not solve these problems. Neither does pining for an ancestral past (which was full of land-managing Native Americans, by the way). Instead, I believe we should use the past to inform the future; and we should get to work – now.

That means management.

### *Democracy*

In a world seriously out-of-kilter ecologically and economically, the visionary idealism of Donahue & Co. is not only impractical, it is harmful. It denies that well-managed landscapes can conserve, or even enhance, native biodiversity while accommodating family-scale commercial activity. Their vision ignores or dismisses contradictory evidence and masks its mean-spiritedness under the banner of “science.”

In a pluralistic society, such as ours, it is a vision that smacks of totalitarianism.

I vote for well-managed landscapes instead.

I vote for the U Bar, the Empire, and Ghost Ranch. I vote for an expanding Southwestern Willow Flycatcher population, healthy riparian zones, and native biodiversity. I vote for open space protection, viable rural communities, strong families, and cultural diversity.

I vote for growing grass, clean water, and cool fires. I vote for sustainable wildlife populations, healthy forests, and robust rangelands.

I vote for well-managed herds of cattle living side-by-side with native species, conserving and expanding diversity together. I vote for wilderness, and ranches.

I vote for the values that promote good stewardship of the land. I vote for a **real** land ethic, one that seeks to create sustainable, self-regulating natural *and* human communities simultaneously. Call it “bioanthropocentrism.”

I vote for cooperation, innovation, conservation, restoration, and work. I vote for an end to bigotry, ignorance, and tyranny.

I vote for democracy. *Real* democracy.

I may be a dreamer, but as someone famous once said, there’s more of us every day.

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### **November 2000 (no. 13)**

*“Man’s curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.” – E.B. White, author*

The great irony of the environmental movement is that it is not about water, wilderness, or wildlife at all; it is, first and last, about *people*.

Specifically, it is about our behavior, good and bad, and how we got ourselves into this mess we call the “state of the planet.” The various crises confronting us, the Biodiversity Crisis, the Population Crisis, the Desertification Crisis, the Global Warming Crisis, to name only a few, are not fundamentally about the environment. They’re about *people*. They were created by destructive

behavior, maintained by poor judgment, greed, ignorance and other follies, and will only be resolved by fundamental changes in the way we do business and live our lives.

Over the decades, the reaction of the “environmental” community to these crises has been largely a defensive one—stop that dam, end those clearcuts, sue the bastards— and appropriately so. Lately, however, some activists have begun to demand that we separate the “environmental” from the “cultural,” and only do what is “best” for nature. The irony, of course, is that their demands are often cultural proscriptions, such as “zero-cut” and the call to end public lands ranching.

The general drift toward environmental isolationism is a mistake. The plight of the endangered silvery minnow, or the unhealthy condition of our forests, is directly, and unalterably, linked to our culture, our norms, values, and beliefs. Separating nature from culture is like separating the minnow from the Río Grande; both, ultimately, will perish.

Instead, we should focus on those aspects of human behavior that restore nature, heal it, enhance it, and make it whole. We should seek out restorative behavior, encourage it, share it, and spread the news.

### *Nature and Culture*

We should begin our quest for answers to the various dilemmas confronting us by looking for examples of good stewardship—role models, essentially, for the rest of us. And a good place to start this search is with the complex and intimate relationship between biological and cultural diversity.

That’s because, according to naturalist and ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan, good stewardship of the land often goes hand-in-hand with healthy biodiversity. In his book *Cultures of Habitat* (Counterpoint Press, 1997), Nabhan examines “the relationships among cultural diversity, community stability, and the conservation of biological diversity in natural habitats.” His discovery? “Where human populations had stayed in place for the greatest duration,” he writes, “fewer plants and animals had become endangered species.”

Looking around the world, Nabhan is struck by the way biological diversity is “nested” with cultural persistence. He cites as an example the case of Ecuador, which “is home to some 1,100 kinds of butterflies and nearly 300 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. It harbors more plants in its 110,000 square miles than you can find in the entire United States.”

And most of Ecuador’s biological diversity, he says, is located in areas where indigenous peoples are still practicing traditional agriculture and husbandry. This cannot be an accident, he insists.

Digging deeper, he observes that of the “nine countries in which sixty percent of the world’s remaining 6,500 languages are spoken, six of them are also centers of megadiversity for flora and fauna: Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, Zaire, and Australia.”

Nabhan is not suggesting that all indigenous cultures are good stewards all the time; nor is he saying that the presence of humans is a requirement for biological diversity. He does refute, however, the doctrine that human behavior is inherently destructive to the environment by asking conservationists to contemplate the question “why are naturally diverse regions also culturally diverse?”

He also wants us to understand the link between the destruction of native cultures and the extirpation of native species around the globe. “Why do such similar forces seem to undercut both biological and cultural diversity,” he writes, “and what can we do to control these forces?”

Before it is too late.

### *An Ark?*

Nabhan's observations are provocative because they stab at a central paradox within the conservation movement: which is the better path to restoring damaged ecosystems— better stewardship or more “wildness?”

The lesson of Nabhan's work, that natural and cultural diversity are linked significantly to each other, appears to contradict the goals of the resurgent wilderness movement, whose aims include protecting our remaining “wild lands” through federal designation as wilderness, a call to “rewild” our open spaces by restoring keystone predators, and the establishment of large “natural areas” as corridors and buffers for wildlife.

These are laudable goals, and I support them in principle; but I wonder—is it right to separate “wildness” from “good stewardship,” as many wilderness proponents do? Is it right to think of our wilderness areas as “arks” without wondering whose hand rests on the steering wheel? And what about the human inhabitants of these “wild lands?” If, as Nabhan says, biodiversity is often linked to the good stewardship of indigenous peoples and cultural persistence, shouldn't wilderness advocates be working *with* reasonable rural people, instead of against them, as is so often the case?

Nabhan himself is critical of constructing an “ark” for biodiversity. Most conservationists, he writes, “have been willing to usher along every kind of plant and animal as long as no other *peoples* are given a place aboard the ark, forgetting that until the very moment of crisis, a diversity of cultures served to safeguard that biodiversity.”

He goes on: “It is ironic how many conservationists have presumed that biodiversity can survive where indigenous cultures have been displaced or at least disrupted from practicing their traditional land-management strategies. Ironic because most biodiversity remaining on earth today occurs where cultural diversity persists.”

Also, the ark mentality does not fundamentally challenge the forces that are creating the biological holocaust in the first place. How does drawing a line on a map, declaring it “protected” and then “rewilding” it with animals alter the *culture* that nearly obliterated wild lands in the first place? What does designating more wilderness really achieve if we continue, as Wendell Berry called it, a “bad way of living?”

After all, shouldn't “rewilding” a landscape mean, fundamentally, “rewilding” *us*?

### *Restoration*

The key to the future, however, does not simply lie with rural people, or wilderness, or biological and cultural diversity. The key to survival lies in our ability to alter our behavior in important ways before our behavior gets changed for us crisis by crisis, calamity, or apocalypse.

This doesn't mean we have to live in the dark, eating organic celery, as the cartoon Doonesbury once joked. It does mean trying new approaches and new ideas. And in a wonderful irony, many of these “new” ideas turn out to be old ones.

One example of new/old thinking can be found in a book entitled *Restoring The Earth: visionary solutions from the Bioneers* by conservationist and futurist Kenny Ausubel (HJ Kramer, 1997). “Bioneers” is a term coined by Ausubel to describe the wide variety of scientists, entrepreneurs, and other biological pioneers who are “using nature to heal nature.” Their business is the restoration of the natural world—by people.

“Restoring the earth,” writes Ausubel, “is destined to be the central enterprise of the years ahead.” Restoration is well on its way to becoming a major industry, he observes, and “the bioneers are acting as the pilot fish guiding the dynamic transition to a future environment of hope.”

His book is a catalog of success stories, from biologist and “alchemist” John Todd's invention of a “living machine” to convert human waste to drinking water using natural bacteria instead of industrial chemicals; to Donald Hammer's “constructed wetlands” which purify wastewater using plants and animals instead of industrial chemicals; to Vandana Shiva's work to overturn the

Green Revolution in her native India by preserving native agricultural seed stock and traditional farming practices.

Bioneers such as Shiva reject the “ark” argument for biological preservation. “The empty-land ethic,” she says, “leads to violence against species and to genocide. The notion of limitlessness that comes with the colonizing mind assumes there are no limits of nature to be respected, no ecological or ethical limits, no limits to the level of greed or accumulation, to inequality of the violence unleashed on other species and people.

“Ecologically,” she continues “we know that limits form the first law. There are limits to the nutrient cycle, and the water cycle, limits set by the basic rights of diverse species to exist, limits on our actions if you respect other beings. There are ethical limits if we are to be human beings. Sustainability is built on limits.”

Restoration, in other words, like “rewilding” means restoring *us*.

### *Future*

Ever since John Muir implored us, nearly a century ago, to “go into the mountains and get their good tidings,” conservationists have struggled valiantly to protect and preserve our natural heritage. But as time goes on, and the crises continue to mount, the overriding lesson of so much hard work is becoming clear: we cannot ensure long-term environmental health without fundamental changes in human behavior.

And we will not achieve those fundamental changes with absolutism, arks, or lawsuits.

Success will require a combination of cooperation, education (both ways), dialogue, restoration, innovation, role models, and leadership— many of which challenge the dominant paradigms within the public lands wing of the conservation movement. Clearly, persuasion, not confrontation, is the key to the future.

Persuasion doesn’t mean compromise, however. The vision of the Bioneers does not include compromise; the same goes for organic farmers, or progressive ranchers. “Using nature to heal nature” is not a “middle ground” position, or a sacrifice of any sort. Instead, it is an example of a powerful, persuasive argument for restoration and sustainability.

We can have “wildness” and good stewardship at the same time. Not in the abstract either—they are already cooperating.

And have been for a very long time.

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### **March 2001 (no. 14)**

*“What goes around, comes around; and it’s all coming back to me now.”* – Blues song

For all of the contradictions and prejudices of the modern environmental movement, one of its principal achievements must be taken seriously by ranchers, federal land managers, and anyone else involved with grazing—that the bar of environmental standards has been raised high for legitimate reasons and is supported by a large majority of Americans.

Moreover, this bar will not be coming down, at least not very far, any time soon. As a result, it is in everyone’s interest to get ahead of this bar, and stay there.

Rising environmental standards are being borne by city and rural dweller alike—by rancher, logger, construction worker, and commuter. City folk face “No Burn” nights, water restrictions, smog stations, no-smoking zones, rolling black-outs, land use covenants, and hundreds of other regulations.

The rising tide of restrictions cannot be blamed on environmental extremists, who are, truthfully, too few in number to affect significant change, or on callous government bureaucrats, because government is almost always reactive to circumstance (expressed in the common lament, “Why does someone have to die before the government does something?”).

Instead, the bar is being pushed up voluntarily by many hands—by soccer moms and work-at-home dads, by bankers and insurance company executives, by teachers and scientists, by lawyers, farmers, musicians, hairdressers, couch potatoes, and tour guides.

By us. And the reasons for change are easy to catalogue.

Remember DDT? And asbestos? And exploding rivers? Remember Love Canal and the Exxon Valdez? Remember the Passenger Pigeon and the Dodo bird? Remember Glen Canyon, and Dinosaur, and Hetch Hetchy (you do remember them, don’t you)?

Remember Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*? Published in 1906, it chronicled the appalling conditions inside Chicago’s meat-packing industry in such shocking, and stomach churning, detail that an outraged citizenry provoked Congress into passing the *U.S. Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906*. By placing significant restrictions on the food industry, it became the first important food safety law in U.S. history.

A law, by the way, enacted without the involvement of a single environmental activist.

### *Looking Back*

“If we forget history,” someone famous once said, “we are condemned to repeat it.” This is especially true for the American West, which has been struggling with the lessons of its history ever since it had one. Through forest fires, floods, droughts, gold fevers, land grants, land rushes, genocide, heroism, tragedy, lawlessness, cooperation, and countless cycles of boom-and-bust, the West has tried, and mostly failed, to come to grips with the highs and lows of the human behavior it inspires.

One mechanism invented to grapple with the West’s turbulent history is the much-discussed Old West / New West dichotomy. For example, in the last five years there has been a great deal of talk about how the “Old West,” dominated by the extractive industries of logging, mining, and ranching—the “Lords of Yesterday” according to one critic—is being replaced by a “New West” dominated by the extractive industries of recreation, subdivision, and globalization.

This debate has become a rumble, with “custom and culture” advocates struggling in the courts and at the ballot box against “newcomers” awash in new economy money and a depleted sense of history. Old vs. New, Us vs. Them.

Unfortunately for the brawlers, according to noted western historian Alvin Josephy, Jr., this Old West/New West conflict does not actually exist. Or, more precisely, it has always existed. An Old West has been continually replaced by a New West since there has been a West at all.

In his memoir, *A Walk Toward Oregon* (Knopf, 2000), Josephy notes that, in 1902, the western artist Frederic Remington despaired at the passing of the One True West. “I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever,” wrote the famous painter. “I saw the living, breathing end of three American centuries of smoke and dust and sweat, and now I see quite another thing where it all took place, but does not appeal to me.”

“I knew what Remington had meant,” Josephy writes, “but as a historian of the American West, I also knew that, before and after Remington, each generation in the West had lamented in its own way the passing of its Old West.”

Indians were replaced by explorers, who were replaced by mountain men and missionaries, who were replaced by miners and soldiers, who were replaced by settlers and sheriffs, followed by cowboys, painters, movie stars, oil men, automobiles, tourists, backpackers, bureaucrats, environmentalists, real estate speculators, latte, Land Rovers.

Every Old West has inevitably and inexorably been replaced by a New West.

At 85 years of age, it happened to Josephy as well. “The Old West that I had experienced was now gone too,” he writes, “changed by industrial and military centers, interstate highways, recreation developments, trophy ranches and urban sprawl, conformity, high-tech pop culture, television, and economically stressed cattle and lumber operations struggling to survive against global competitors.”

And the rising bar of environmental standards.

“Components,” Josephy adds, “that will become someone else’s Old West.”

Resistance, he implies, is not only futile, it is unhistorical. Right or wrong, good or bad, change happens, and it happens more quickly than anyone cares to admit, or can do anything to stop.

### *The Next West*

In October 2000, the Board of Directors of *People for the USA!* (formerly known as *People for the West!*) voted to go out of business. A national organization well-known as an aggressive advocate for states’ rights, private property rights, and unrestrained development of natural resources, especially on public lands, *PFUSA!* led the charge against the environmental movement.

Whether they were condemning the Endangered Species Act, or fighting for relaxed government regulations, or stumping for the privatization of federal lands, the leaders of *PFUSA!* struggled mightily to slow, or reverse, the rising bar of environmental standards. They did so with gusto, fiery rhetoric, and flashes of humor.

And they failed.

In explaining why they voted to disband, the leaders of *PFUSA!* cited declining membership and a shortage of reliable funding (chiefly from corporations which profited by exploiting public lands). But there was another reason—they had become an anachronism in an age that no longer shared their values.

Jeff Harris, Executive Director of *PFUSA!*, admitted as much in a recent newsletter when he wrote, “Americans have embraced the environmental ethic; it is part of our value system like motherhood and apple pie.” (*High Country News*, 12/18/00)

This wasn’t a triumph of environmental extremism either. Instead, it was an expression of mainstream values changing color, of the old giving way to the new.

This was not an isolated incident. Laura Skaer, Executive Director of the 106-year old Northwest Mining Association, was quoted in a newspaper recently as saying, “The public’s attitudes have changed, and our industry needs new approaches and new solutions if we are going to have a viable North American mining industry in the 21st century.” (*Albuquerque Journal*, 12/25/00)

There were other notable quotes from mining leaders in the article, including, “The public has the right to hold mining accountable,” and “Future legitimacy will rest on our contribution to sustainable development.”

Whatever *that* means.

Skepticism aside, the simple fact that industry leaders feel compelled to even use the term “sustainable mining” is significant. It is an acknowledgement that the environmental bar not only rests in a high place, but that it is not coming down. It is an admission that a new society, with new values, is firmly in place.

History tells us that custom and culture have never been static; they constantly evolve, and for a variety of reasons. For ranchers, and people who care about the relationship between ranching and environmental values, the question is—will ranching evolve with direction and purpose, or will it fade away like the Dodo bird and the Pony Express?

Or, as environmentalist Dan Dagget puts it, explaining why he works closely with ranchers, “I’m not trying to save ranching. I’m trying to help control what comes next.”

### *Burden of Proof*

Ed Marston, publisher of *High Country News*, and self-titled obituary-writer for the Old West, proclaimed our time as the “Environmental Age” in a recent essay (1/15/01). By way of explanation, he writes, “We no longer reflexively choose to clear-cut and drill and graze wherever possible, just as we no longer light up on airplanes or assume that the only good wolf is a dead wolf. The burden of proof—making the case to mine or log—lies with natural resource industries.”

This is news. Thirty years ago, the burden of proof was on environmental activists to make their case in front of a skeptical jury. When the federal government proposed building two dams in the bottom of Grand Canyon National Park in the 1960s, or when the Disney corporation proposed constructing a new ski resort in a remote Sierra Nevada valley in the 1970s, the onus was on the environmental community to stop them.

And they did. In one landmark case after another, the activists triumphed, aided by major miscalculations on the other side (when the IRS cancelled the Sierra Club’s tax-exempt status during the Grand Canyon dam fight, in what many saw as an act of retaliation by the government, the Club’s membership shot through the roof).

Environmental groups were both shaping and responding to public opinion. That’s how we got the Wilderness Act, and NEPA, and the ESA, and the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts—not by pressure applied by a handful of crazy zealots, but through a deliberate, and democratic, political process that weighed public opinion carefully. It is not a coincidence that most of these laws carry the signature of a Republican president.

The values of our time have shifted along with the demographics, and will continue to do so.

Now it is ranching’s turn. The environmental bar has been raised no less high for them than any other group at work in the West. And the burden of proof is becoming just as painful. Take the current round of litigation over grazing in national forests, for example. The issue of contention centers on monitoring, or, rather, the lack of monitoring data. The Forest Service, by its own admission, has not done a good job here.

Prior to the Environmental Age, monitoring was not a particularly important concern. Ranchers grazed pretty much wherever and however they wanted on their allotment, and

their federal overseers made only cursory efforts at documenting the effects of grazing on the land, and then usually just to calculate utilization rates. The idea that monitoring would be a source of debate 20 years ago was unimaginable.

Not any longer.

Now, at nearly every meeting I attend the bulk of the discussion centers on monitoring. I also hear talk about inventorying, rangeland health, proper functioning condition, TMDLs, watershed restoration, riparian recovery, and so on.

To their credit, many ranchers, especially those on public lands, understand the need for monitoring and are willing to face increased scrutiny. At the same time, however, many ranchers dislike what they see as the constantly shifting sands under their feet. They want stability and uniformity in the regulations and standards. They need targets to aim at.

Unfortunately, the only constant in life is change. The Current West is already being replaced by the Next West; and the environmental bar continues to rise.

### *The Radical Center*

One solution to this conundrum is to work in the “radical center,” a term coined by rancher Bill McDonald of the innovative Malpai Borderland Group. It refers to a meeting place where practical solutions can be discussed and implemented by reasonable people – a place where extremists on both sides are not invited.

For historian and conservationist Bill deBuys, who founded and directs the successful Valle Grande Grass Bank near Santa Fe, the radical center is the common ground where people with different backgrounds and values can work together collaboratively.

There is a catch, however.

He writes, “For ranchers this means accepting a higher standard of environmental performance; for environmentalists, it means approaching conservation by working constructively with the people who occupy and use the land; for bureaucrats, it means focusing on producing tangible results, not merely defending procedure, and for all it means the sharing of authority and responsibility.”

This is a very important paragraph, and I urge you to read it again. It is a roadmap to the Next West.

For anyone interested in maintaining customs and cultures, protecting endangered species, restoring rangelands, protecting open space, making a profit, producing food, or resolving conflicts, the radical center is the logical place to embrace change, rather than fight it, or succumb to it.

It is the only place where we will find what author Wallace Stegner once called the “native home of hope.”

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### **July 2001 (no. 15)**

*“When the West fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the pattern that most characterizes and preserves it, then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.” – Wallace Stegner*

The recent proliferation of collaborative organizations across the West, many of which are organized around specific watersheds, is beginning to look like an act of radical democracy in action.

The reasons for this proliferation are as diverse as the organizations themselves, but two stand out. The first is a sense of frustration by westerners at an appreciable lack of progress on the ground. We need problems solved, and we need them solved soon. Gridlock is hurting, not helping the land and the people who live on it.

The other reason is the American tradition of fighting tyranny. In the mid-1990s, debate about natural resource use and conservation in the West was dominated by the extremes on both sides. There was no “radical center” to speak of—no mechanism by which ordinary folks could participate in events that directly affected their lives.

The grazing debate, for example, was ruled by individuals and organizations that were not accountable to the average citizen. The debate had become a shoving match between tyrants. And when the water buffalo fought in the marsh, to use a Chinese parable, it was the frogs that paid.

Finally, the frogs are fighting back.

### *The Frontier*

The rise of collaborative groups is the latest expression of a long and intimate relationship between the landscape of the West and the history of American democracy. In his famous 1893 paper entitled *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, historian Frederick Jackson Turner went as far as to declare “American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West. . . .

“The existence of an area of free land,” wrote Turner, “its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” The process of conquering the wilderness, creating new communities from scratch, and enduring many hardships, promoted, according to Turner, “individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy.”

Over the years, Turner’s “frontier thesis” has been subjected to vigorous attack, for good cause. What remains indisputable, however, is Turner’s premise that this nation’s interaction with its western landscape has influenced the character of its democracy. For example, President Franklin Roosevelt once said “There is nothing so American as our national parks. The fundamental idea behind parks is native. It is, in brief, that a country belongs to the people.”

It is a premise that resonates today. Edward Abbey, a self-professed anarchist, once wrote, “True human freedom, economic freedom, political freedom, social freedom remain basically linked to physical freedom, sufficient space, enough land.” Similarly, Wallace Stegner wrote, “What freedom means is freedom to choose, and between what options. Democracy assumes, on the strength of the most radical document in history, that all men are created equal, and that given freedom they can become better masters for themselves than any king or despot.”

The American West has always been about options. It has been a place of renewal, of reinvigoration, of hope. It has existed as an ideal almost as long as the ideal of American democracy has, and helped spawn generations of idealists and dreamers—everything from

the Monkey Wrench Gang to the Militia Movement. People worked hard from the frontier period on to create their vision of a society to match the West's scenery— and most did so cooperatively – a point made by historian Bernard De Voto who observed, “the only true individualists in the West wound up on the end of a rope whose other end was in the hands of a bunch of cooperators.”

The West, in other words, has invigorated American democracy over the years—and is doing so again.

### *Watersheds*

Collaborations are stirring the democratic pot by employing a radical motivating principle: get on-the-ground results. Organized mainly around watersheds (a development that would have warmed the heart of the great explorer Major John Wesley Powell who argued over a century ago that the West should be organized by ecological boundaries, not political ones), collaboratives bring together people who are willing to explore their common interests, not argue their separate positions. People who want results.

For many in the West, including many environmentalists, writes Donald Snow in *Across The Great Divide: Explorations In Collaborative Conservation and the American West* (Island Press, 2001), “collaborative conservation represents a kind of homecoming, a way of bringing the implementation of sound environmental policy down to the ground and back into the lives of people who are directly affected by the outcomes.”

Moreover, the idea of getting results is proving infectious. “Collaborative processes are breaking out in many other settings and across nearly all environmental issues,” writes Snow, “from the reintroduction of species to the management of timber, wildlife, and grazing, to the control of suburban sprawl and the protection of valued habitats, and more.”

Despite its obvious appeal, however, “getting results” remains a difficult concept for many to accept, especially those more interested in process, and conflict, than product. That's because, according to Snow, “collaborative conservation runs counter to the normal course of environmental politics, counter to the course of most politics of any kind in the United States.”

This may be why Michael McCloskey, when president of the Sierra Club a few years ago, attacked the concept of collaborative conservation in a now-famous editorial. The issue, he admitted, was power. “This redistribution of power,” he wrote, “is designed to disempower our constituency,” which is heavily urban. Few urbanites are represented as stakeholders in communities surrounding national forests.

Disempowerment, however, is not the only threat to the modern environmental movement posed by collaboratives. They challenge a variety of paradigms, including some cherished ones.

Philip Brick frames the issue well in *Across the Divide* when he writes: “Where contemporary environmentalism emphasizes ecocentrism, collaborative conservation integrates ecocentric and anthropocentric goals; where most environmentalists embrace regulatory democracy, collaboratives prefer civic democracy; and where environmentalists put great faith in science and technocratic management, collaboration advocates seek to integrate science with local knowledge.”

By demanding, and achieving, on-the-ground results, collaboratives challenge the increasingly individualistic, and oligarchical, behavior of the traditional players on the

western stage, including national environmental organizations. The rise of the “radical center”—represented by collaboratives—constitutes a direct threat to the “Cattle Free” and “Cattle Galore” tyrannies of recent years.

Growing grass cooperatively has become a subversive endeavor.

### *Citizenship*

How does collaboration contribute to civic democracy exactly? Historian David Crislip has an idea. In an article he wrote for the *Chronicle of Community* (1997, Vol. 2, no.1), he sets out four criteria for a “new” democracy:

- 1) Any activity must produce tangible, substantial, and sustainable results.
- 2) Any activity must bring people together in ways that heal rather than divide.
- 3) Any activity must engage citizens in new and deeply democratic ways in the process of defining visions and strategies for their communities and regions.
- 4) Any activity must enhance the civic culture of the community or region.

Crislip thinks collaboratives accomplish all four goals. “The experience of working together,” he writes, “creates the norms of trust and reciprocity, the sense of responsibility for the common good, and the networks of concerned citizens that undergird the success of governing institutions and civil society.”

It’s all about citizenship— identifying it, exercising it—what Crislip calls the “politics of engagement.” Citizenship requires partnerships, trust, respect, and results. To be effective it requires participants to explore their common interests and seek solutions that lift all boats evenly. Citizenship is anti-oligarchy; it rejects the politics of advocacy—a process by which small groups of people attempt to overpower other groups to achieve their ends. As Crislip observes, “When advocacy works, it leaves us divided. When it does not, it leaves gridlock.”

Democracy still matters, in other words.

The success of the collaborative movement across the region means we are at another watershed moment in the West’s history (pun intended). A generation’s worth of paradigms are being challenged at a variety of levels, resulting in the erosion of oligarchical hegemonies. The Conflict Industry, the Compliance Industry, the Custom-and-Culture Industry, the Wilderness Industry, and others are showing visible cracks in their foundations as the cyclic, and inevitable, replacement of another “Old West” with a “New” picks up steam.

This time, however, there is a difference. This time the forces at work are democratic, community-based, and cooperative. This time, hopefully, we will finally begin to construct the society that Wallace Stegner called for—a landscape of shining rivers, healthy land, and robust communities. It is a society within reach, as the recent proliferation of collaboratives across the region implies. It all starts with soil, grass, and water.

And a handshake.

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**October 2001 (no. 16) – no column**

**January 2002 (no. 17)** – no column

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**June 2002 (no. 18)**

*“We spend too much time chasing symptoms, not causes, of problems.”*— Lani Lamming, goat rancher

When my wife, Gen, and I decided to start a family, we sat down at the kitchen table and asked ourselves a difficult question: Were we doing our children a favor by bringing them into this world?

While we suspected that millions of parents had asked themselves this question over the centuries, it seemed especially pertinent now, given the escalating quantity and quality of challenges confronting society. We were not real thrilled with what “progress” had wrought so far, and we were not convinced things were going to get better before they got worse.

So, we wondered: Did “good” parenting extend to not becoming parents at all?

Being optimists, we took the gamble (and a genuine gamble it is), creating beautiful twins, a boy and a girl, the pride of our lives. We also vowed to work hard to make the world a little bit better, so that Sterling and Olivia’s patrimony would be as nourishing as possible.

And the one big lesson that parenting has taught me is this: real change begins at home.

### *Environmentalism*

My home is in the environmental movement. I’ve been a member of one green group or another since prehistory, it feels like. I’ve run the gamut from checkbook activist to letter writer to wilderness warrior to volunteer lobbyist (I even went to D.C.). In the mid-1990s I became active with the Sierra Club in response to worrisome political trends, and in 1997 I took the fatal final step, with the founding of The Quivira Coalition, into a professional career.

In the process, I have come to see that my home, like any home, needs periodic repairs.

I’m not the only one who thinks this way. In an admiring review of the movement entitled *Earth Rising: American Environmentalism in the 21st Century*, author Philip Shabecoff, a former journalist for the *New York Times*, writes that while the old environmentalism brought “profound changes in American life—to its landscape, its institutions, and its people,” today it “seems to have no broad, shared vision of where it wants to take us.” He insists the movement re-focus and redouble its efforts.

The need for action is urgent. “If environmentalists and their cause do not prevail in the next few decades,” he writes, “our habitat, our quality of life, and our democratic institutions could erode to the point that they might take centuries to recover.”

Far from preaching absolutist nonsense, however, Shabecoff urges the movement to return to its roots—to the vision of Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, who saw conservation as “a core value of progressive politics, as an issue of democracy, as a means of bringing science to bear on the creation of policy, and as a means of achieving economic and social equity for present and future generations.”

To take this vision into the 21st century, Shabecoff proposes an ambitious agenda: tackling global climate change; working on “full-account” capitalism, including the creation of sustainable economies; encouraging political reform, including an overhaul of campaign finances; re-democratizing science and technology; and enlarging the struggle against globalization. At the same time, he urges an expansion of the word “environment” to include the “workaday world”—where we work, play, and go to school.

The problem with the old environmental movement, he says, is its fixation on symptoms, rather than causes, of global ills. “The underlying flaws in our social systems that cause or contribute to the environmental predicament are rarely addressed by environmental organizations,” he writes. The movement can no longer simply “nibble” at the edges, he says. It needs to transform itself into a *social* movement, one that digs at the roots of problems.

A key task of this new social movement, he writes, will be creating a *regenerative* economic system based on nature’s model, one that “grows not by continual production and consumption but by constant self-renewal.”

It is a tall order, but Shabecoff remains optimistic. “We possess sufficient knowledge and tools with which to transform the future. Our science and technology have the capacity to restore much of what has been harmed...our economies still generate enough wealth to meet the needs of the transition; [and] our ability to communicate information and ideas to one another is growing with exponential speed.”

### *Causes*

There are good reasons to take Shabecoff’s vision seriously. One lies in a report that he cites from the Environmental Defense Fund (1997) which says, “An historic threshold has been crossed. A shift has occurred in the balance of strength between nature and humankind. We have passed, almost without noticing it, from a world in which the overall stability of the Earth’s environment could be taken for granted to a world in which major, often irreversible manmade alterations of the environment are under way.”

In other words, continuing to separate man from nature—one of the principal philosophies of the old environmental movement—is not only impossible today, it is foolish. The two are now inextricably linked, as biologist Peter Raven points out: “There is not a square centimeter anywhere on earth, whether it be in the middle of the Amazon basin or the center of the Greenland ice cap, that does not receive every minute some molecules of a substance made by human beings.”

This raises fundamental questions about the goals and methods of the old movement. If no place is truly “pristine” anymore, what does “protection” really mean? We are certainly not “protecting” wildlands from global climate change, acid rain, carbon dioxide buildup, or even the rapid spread of noxious weeds. So, what do we accomplish by “protecting” additional landscapes without addressing the social and economic forces that are threatening them in the first place?

Spencer Beebe, former vice president of The Nature Conservancy, puts it this way: “The old environmental movement is over, in a sense. That movement arose as a defense against the industrial economy and to save some precious pieces of the landscape from human industrial endeavor. It was appropriate. But we need now to move to a new era where we find synergy and sympathy between the built and natural environments. We need to move

from a strategy of defending bits and pieces of nature to recognizing the links between a healthy community and a healthy environment.”

This means a whole new strategy based on answering a vital question: how do we live sustainably in our native landscapes? How do we address the causes of problems, not simply fixing symptoms, with the goal of creating a sustainable mode of existence, in harmony with nature, and do so quickly, before our landscapes deteriorate further?

### *Healing*

My native landscape is the American West. I’ve surveyed its deserts, climbed its mountains, backpacked its national parks, traveled its dusty backroads, photographed its frontiers, lived in its cities, and met a countless variety of its citizens. I have also read its literature, studied its history, poured over its maps, drunk its beer, and, most recently, worked to help shape its future.

All of this reading, thinking, meeting, and traveling has led me to one inescapable conclusion: the West needs more restoration, not more protection.

By “restoration” I mean restoring to good working order what Aldo Leopold called the “land mechanism”—stable soil, diverse plant communities, functioning watersheds. As an activity it should be humble and modest, working one acre at a time, with the goal of creating a regenerative system on the land.

My definition of “restoration” also includes people and their economies, both urban and rural. Fundamentally, it means restoring hope. I like Wendell Berry’s definition of sustainable agriculture: “That which depletes neither soil nor people.” We desperately need to stop depleting our land and our people in the American West.

Restoration should be an act of healing. It is a useful metaphor. As with a sick patient, land can be restored to full health under the caring guidance of knowledgeable professionals trained to the latest methods, including a land health version of homeopathy. Under this paradigm, land protection becomes useful as a form of preventive medicine.

Rather than simply continue to treat symptoms, a land health paradigm can direct us to causes of problems. Healing can be collaborative, democratic, and life-changing, with the long-term goal of a sustainable, fruitful, and hopeful future.

Fortunately, the land health paradigm is not just wishful thinking. I see it in operation almost every day, from collaborative watershed groups to the rise of progressive ranching techniques. The recent re-emergence of goats as a tool for controlling noxious weeds is a good illustration of the land health movement at work. “Using nature to heal nature” could be the motto of these efforts, and the movement as a whole.

All of these developments give me hope for the future, and reassure me that my children could still inherit a world rich in ecological and cultural diversity. If I can contribute to this patrimony in some small way, I’ll consider my job as a parent to have been successful.

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**September 2002 (no. 19)**

See “Sierra Club Resignation Letter” in *Essays* section

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**February 2003 (no. 20)** – no column

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**June 2003 (no. 21)**

*“Without the threat of environmental disaster caused by the short-sighted unbalancing of natural forces, how are we to bring about positive change in the world?”— satire from *The Onion**

Periodic retreating, like fasting, is probably part of nature’s plan.

In mid-January, after a hectic year came to a noisy crescendo with an intense week of Conferencing and Retreating in Albuquerque, I decided I needed to clear my head of sound and motion. I needed space and peace to straighten out the many strands of thought that were occupying an increasingly large amount of my diminishing mental capacity. I needed fresh air to organize, prioritize, clarify, and make sense of competing, sometimes conflicting, ideas, notions, hunches, hopes, and dreams.

In other words, I needed to retreat to go forward.

So, in late February, I jumped in the truck and drove rapidly to the James Ranch, located on a pastoral stretch of the Animas River, north of Durango. Once happily ensconced in David and Kay’s quaint A-frame, I laid every idea I had on the table, literally, and began the laborious process of uncovering a hidden unity that might provide a semblance of order amongst the chaos.

In addition to Quivira work, I tossed in personal goals as well, including plays and books I wanted to author, essays on parenting and “growing up Western,” photography projects, novels, and even a trio of children’s books that I wanted to compose.

It quickly became an exhilarating, if daunting, lifelong “To Do” list.

I searched for a theme that connected these projects together— the personal stuff, The Quivira Coalition, the New Ranch, The Radical Center, a land health movement, restoration, education, sustainability, profitability, food, wildlife, family, culture, history, soil, grass, and water. My motto up to this point had been simply “Do good work and have fun doing it.” But clearly this was not going to sustain me for much longer, not without imbibing toxic levels of caffeine.

Clearly, I needed a mission statement. Trouble is I suffer from a college-bred skepticism of “themes” and other forms of bumper-sticker reductionism. Knowing that life looked better in shades of gray than in black-and-white was one of the reasons I cofounded The Quivira Coalition in the first place. At the same time, I knew a thread existed someplace among the books, projects, and ideas. There had to be.

There was.

*Nature’s Model*

During the course of her talk at the Banquet event of our Second Annual Conference, Jo Robinson made an eloquent case for the raising and consumption of grass-finished beef, arguing that recent scientific research demonstrated that humans are healthier consuming a “Paleolithic” diet rich in Omega 3s and other essential nutrients found in grass-fed food. Her mantra, “If it’s in the feed, it’s in the food,” rang loud and clear around the room.

Jo concluded by arguing for a return to the food nature meant for us to eat, for the way nature meant animals to be raised, and for the way in which the environment was supposed to function properly. Her final slide said simply: “Returning to Nature’s Model.” Sitting at the little table in the James’ A-frame, it dawned on me that was exactly what The Quivira Coalition has been trying to accomplish since its inception. It was the message Jim Winder pushed the first time I met him—how to graze livestock in nature’s image. It was the underlying theme of our just concluded Conference—how to forge a West that Works by understanding and employing natural principles. And it was the core of all our work in between—that meaningful, long-term ecological and economic health is only possible when we work with nature, not against it.

It was the same message that Kirk Gadzia has been teaching for years—that we need to learn from nature, instead of trying to “break” ourselves on the “rocky shore” of fundamental ecological principles, as has too often been the case. In fact, much of the substance of progressive ranch management, including the issues of timing, intensity, and frequency of livestock impact on the land, and questions of recovery, movement, planning, and profit, involve “returning to nature’s model” of herbivory in grass-dominated landscapes.

It is the same message that Bill Zeedyk has been promoting, in his quiet way, through his work. “Thinking like a river” and “Letting nature do the work” are two phrases often employed by Bill, who has pioneered a riparian restoration strategy premised on nature’s model. His approach is based on humility rather than on arrogance, and on healing rather than hurting. The goal of Induced Meandering, for instance, is to get creeks and rivers back into health “by goosing nature along,” as Bill puts it, with simple structures and small flood events, rather than strong-arming it with cement and impatience.

It is the same message, though in different language, taught by a new generation of scientists and specialists in range, forest, and riparian systems. From issues of functionality, biotic integrity, and soil stability to strategies focused on restoring keystone ecological processes, the goal of the scientific community is today, in the words of forest ecologists Craig Allen and Melissa Savage, to “reset ecosystem trends toward an envelope of ‘natural variability,’ including the reestablishment of natural processes.”

Their goal, in other words, is getting back (or going forward) to nature’s model.

Whether it is Lani (Lamming) Malmberg using her goats to mow down noxious weeds, Bill deBuys working hard on his Grass Bank so that fire can be restored to the mountains of northern New Mexico, Tony Benson and Mike Jones pounding sagebrush to death with their cattle near Taos, Terry Wheeler or the Tiptons jump-starting natural processes on arid mine tailings with their cattle “poop-and- stomps,” or dozens of other acts healing, maintenance, or improvement, the theme is the same: nature has the best ideas. And in the long run, they are the only models that will be truly sustainable ecologically and economically.

As Aldo Leopold noted so many years ago, “Healthy land is the only profitable land.”

### *The Iron Triangle*

While wrestling with this emerging theme, I was suddenly struck with a desire to create a diagram. Normally, I shun graphs and diagrams like the plague, especially avoiding anything to do with circles, triangles, or pentagons. But suddenly I found myself drawing my very own “Iron Triangle” on paper, as if I were some environmental absolutist expounding

on the evils of livestock grazing on public land. Had I gone crazy in the little A-frame? Had my coffee consumption finally passed a critical threshold?

No, a logical interrelationship suddenly seemed to reveal itself. On one corner I wrote “Quivira Coalition” with the word “conservation collaborative” underneath. On another corner I wrote “The New Ranch” with the words “working models of sustainability” underneath. Then I wrote “Land Health” at the third corner of my Iron Triangle, followed by the words “nature’s model.”

Then I drew the dreaded Arrows between the three corners, filling them in with works such as Education, Demonstration, Restoration, Profit, Food, Leadership, Monitoring, Labor, Values, and so forth. Each represented an activity or a program that I knew was already taking place in the real world.

When I wrote the words “The Radical Center” in the center of the Triangle, I knew I was in trouble. It made too much sense, and it was far too neat and tidy. I thought about erasing words, but it was too late.

The truth is conservation collaboratives, such as The Quivira Coalition, are forming all across the West with the goal of creating examples of sustainable use of local natural resources based on ideas drawn from nature’s model. Whether it is EcoResults! in Flagstaff, Arizona, helping ranchers get paid for healing damaged land, or the Chico Basin Ranch, on the Front Slope of Colorado, discovering all sorts of conservation values on the ranch that city-dwellers are willing to support, or the James Ranch producing grass-finished beef that is eagerly consumed in Durango, or a nonprofit like Earthworks which works to restore land collaboratively in the Galisteo basin south of Santa Fe—a version of the Iron Triangle is in operation someplace. That’s because the goal for each is an interlocking of collaboration, land health, and sustainability.

And in the center of it all is The Radical Center—the political will of all the participants. Currently, this political will is small, but as time goes by, and as the three sides of this equation grow stronger, The Radical Center, like a whirlpool, will gather momentum and strength as well.

At least I hope so.

Before packing up and leaving my little sanctuary, I decided to take a stab at articulating the dreaded mission statement. I wrote it down quickly, knowing that I would, in a fit of unavoidable skepticism, revisit it later— probably a few miles down the road. Here’s what I wrote: “Achieving sustainability in our native and adopted landscapes by returning to nature’s model of land and human health.”

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## **October 2003 (no. 22)**

*“The only thing I ever wanted to be was home.” – James Galvin, *The Meadow**

“There is only one way to have grizzlies in these mountains, and that is on the grizzlies’ own terms....This is roughly how the West itself must now be understood. Whatever the feelings nonwesterners have about the region— whatever affections, whatever myths— the only way to take care of the West now is to give it the room it needs to take care of itself.”

So starts Dan Kemmis' controversial and provocative book *This Sovereign Land*. In it, Kemmis lays out a compelling case not only for western self-governance but also for its inevitability. That's because the history of the American West is the history of colonization by empire, both foreign and domestic, and the lesson learned is the same one from around the world—eventually all empires fall. Self-governance in the West is as inevitable as the Boston Tea Party.

Strong, imperial forces, Kemmis argues, have controlled the West from the get go. They started fast with the national land grab called Manifest Destiny. After the Civil War they gained industrial strength during the phase of buccaneering capitalism called the "frontier." Then, in reaction to the tide of environmental destruction that resulted, a new set of imperialistic forces coalesced under the paternalistic leadership of Progressive Era federal technocrats. After waning a bit, these bureaucratic forces gained new life as part of the New Deal. After mid-century, both sets of forces were reinvigorated by simultaneous, and linked, trends—a booming national economy, which encouraged another round of exploitation of the West's natural resources, and the rise of an urban-based environmental movement, which demanded greater bureaucratic command-and-control.

The West, in other words, has never been free from the grip of empire.

As an illustration, Kemmis focuses on the West's public lands, which, he argues, remain important for two reasons: They allow equal access for all Americans, and they include all Americans in the decision-making process that determines how the lands will be managed.

However, many rural westerners now view the public lands system as anti-democratic. They feel ignored by a decision-making process that is supposed to include them, causing them to vent their frustration and anger at employees of public land management agencies, politicians, and environmentalists. This anger, and the resulting emotion it provokes among its targets, has created a paralysis that now characterizes the region. This paralysis must be overcome. "The future of the West," Kemmis writes, "must involve a radical and permanent transcendence of the region's embedded struggle between imperial-type environmentalism and Sagebrush Rebellion-type resistance."

However, this transcendence will require significant political reform that cannot take place until we settle the question of liberation. "No viable, democratic, ecologically sustainable institution for governing western landscapes can be successfully devised," he writes, "without in some fundamental and innovative way addressing the question of sovereignty. In the end, this is the question of who rules—of who will be in charge of the West."

### *Collaborations*

Out of the ashes of gridlock, frustration, and anger, has come a resurgent movement based on the radical (and very "frontier") ideas of collaboration, cooperation, and progress. And it is in this movement that Kemmis sees signs of revolution.

Many of the collaborations he highlights are familiar to us by now. But Kemmis takes us an important step further—he links the rise of the collaborative movement to the question of sovereignty. He writes, "The steadily expanding collaboration movement is an indigenous, democratic phenomenon through which westerners have begun to translate their land rootedness into direct and effective control over their home ground."

However, Kemmis does *not* argue for the privatization of public lands, as some of his critics have assumed. Instead, he argues *for* what he calls “watershed democracy”—collaborations of individuals and organizations working toward on-the-ground solutions to common problems. It does not mean the abdication of federal control of public land, but it does mean a reinvention of federalism as well as the revitalization of democracy in general.

He concludes: “Americans cannot nurture democratic practice worldwide if they do not trust their own people to govern their own landscapes. If there was a time when national control of most of the West was the most democratic and the most ecologically sound approach, there is also a time when that approach must give way to a more vital, more human-scale, more grounded form of democracy. The time has come when westerners must be allowed to be in charge of the West.”

I wholeheartedly agree. But Kemmis’ book leaves an important question unanswered: How is the West supposed to achieve its emancipation exactly? I agree that conservation collaboratives hold the key to self-governance, but many of the collaborations he describes are notable more for their dissimilarities than for their unities.

There are as many permutations of “watershed democracy” as there are watersheds. Collaborations run the gamut from inclusive to exclusive—Dan Dagget tells the story about a nonprofit director who once told him, “I like collaboration. I like it when I tell you what to do, and then you do it.”

Some include all stakeholders in a watershed, from loggers to bird-watchers, and some consist solely of a coalition of disparate environmental groups. Some focus on resolving a specific dispute in a specific place, while some work at a regional scale.

Some file lawsuits, and some have vowed not to. Some exist to influence the political process, and some stick to the “grass” and the “roots.”

While diversity is a strength of the movement, it is also a weakness. How, for example, do we get from this relative state of chaos to orderly self-governance of the American West? How do we achieve emancipation without subsequently dissolving into feudalism? Without unity, how do we fulfill the inevitability of change and progress without letting the empire strike back? And perhaps most importantly, how do we make self-governance last?

### *Nature’s Model*

An answer can be found, I believe, with a deeper look into the movement. Despite its apparent disunity, there is a key commonality that wends its way through many collaborative efforts. It is the goal, whether outwardly expressed or not, of “returning to nature’s model of land health.”

Nearly all collaborations have an ecological restoration element to their work. For many, it is a significant part of what they do. For example, one of the unifying objectives that brought the Malpai Borderlands Group together in the early 1990s was the desire to reintroduce prescribed fire into the landscape. The Applegate Partnership, in southern Oregon, came together to address the problem of unhealthy forests in their watershed. South of Santa Fe, EarthWorks has initiated a cooperative project in the Galisteo Basin with a major focus on slowing and reversing erosion in a watershed that is being steadily subdivided.

The list goes on and on.

Much of this work expresses new knowledge about nature's basic principles. When Aldo Leopold bought a worn-out piece of farm land on the banks of the Wisconsin River and set about methodically restoring the land to health, he was mostly guessing at what to do. Seventy years later, ecological science has developed to the point where we can make sound decisions about what to cut, where to burn, when to graze, and how to measure the effects—all with the goal of restoring the “natural range of ecological variability.”

The significance of “returning to nature's model” to the collaborative movement, and ultimately to the question of sovereignty in the West, is this: It creates an unambiguous baseline from which we can commence our work together. This is how revolution starts—not just with the requisite handshake and declaration of good intentions, but with common, and measurable, goals of human and land health.

It is noteworthy that the vocabulary of land health developed over the last twenty years can be applied to evaluating political health as well. Words and terms such as self-renewal, diversity, stability, resilience to perturbation, vigor, adaptability, and functioning properly at the grassroots level suggest that the health of a watershed democracy can be maintained and monitored in much the manner a watershed itself can.

Perhaps we need to develop a “seventeen-point checklist” of indicators of political health in the West to go along with ecological evaluations.

In any case, the tyranny we wish to throw off is not just the last vestige of empire, but the legacy of history itself. Creating a society to match the West's scenery doesn't just mean “getting along with each other” but actually drawing to a close both the environmentally destructive exploitation of our natural resources and the socially destructive exploitation of our anger and frustration.

It will be hard work, but I know it can be done. That's because it has already begun. I don't know if we need a Missoula Tea Party or not, but liberation is coming. Only through unity, however, can we hope to control what happens next.

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### **February 2004 (no. 23)**

*“What's past is prologue.”* – William Shakespeare

One of the reasons I became involved with the environmental movement years ago was the lesson it taught about living within limits.

As a member of the Baby Boom generation, barely, I had grown up in a world of excess – there was no shortage of food to eat, things to buy, or land to gobble up. There were no limits in my youth. Everything there was for the taking, at least for those who had the means, encouraged by a culture of “Just Do It.”

Gradually, I became aware that I lived in an age where our desires far outstripped our needs. Watching new stoplights near my home plod on, one by one, into the desert I decided to enroll in the conservation movement in order to support its effort to draw the line *someplace*. By the time I graduated from college I was swept up in the work to protect our national parks and wilderness areas against short-sighted exploitation.

At the same time, as a student of anthropology I began to understand that the question of limits was culturally based - that most things began and ended with human behavior.

But the movement's message about limits seems to have been lost amid the sound and fury of recent years. The movement today seems to be motivated more by issues of power and control, as well as an unattractive desire to punish people, particularly rural people. There isn't much constructive talk about limits, ecological or social, anymore, or how we might live and work sustainably within nature's model. Instead of acting as the nation's teacher, instructing and encouraging good behavior, it has become a movement of scolds.

Too much of the movement today is focused on the symptoms, not causes of environmental problems – “fixing the pump, not the well” is how Aldo Leopold might have put it. And addressing causes means, in my opinion, addressing the issue of limits. This, I've decided, has to be a principle goal of a new conservation movement.

### *Dust Bowl*

For anyone interested in limits, I highly recommend two books. The first is Donald Worster's gripping history of the Depression-era ecological and social tragedy called the Dust Bowl. It is a highly instructive lesson in what happens when humans shatter ecological boundaries, as well as a cautionary tale about culture and society.

“The dust storms that swept across the southern plains in the 1930s,” writes Worster, “created the most severe environmental catastrophe in the entire history of the white man on this continent. In no other instance was there greater or more sustained damage to the American land, and there have been few times when so much tragedy was visited on its inhabitants.”

The ‘dirty thirties’, as they were called, were primarily the work of man, not nature, Worster argues. Nature had a role, to be sure – without the winds the soil would have stayed put and without drought the land would have been covered with healthy crops. “But natural factors did not make the storms,” writes Worster, “they merely made them possible.” Farmers had stripped the landscape of its grass cover to such an extent that there was no defense against the dry winds. “The sod had been destroyed to make the farms to grow wheat for cash.”

Between 1925-1930 more than 5 million acres of grassland were torn up by tractors. Then drought returned, as it always does. When the dust storms began in 1935, one-third of the Dust Bowl region – 33 million acres lay exposed to the winds. Kansas and Oklahoma topsoil blew as far as Washington, D.C. – and then out to sea.

Society, in the form of mechanized agriculture, had destroyed a unique ecological complex. Eons of alternating cycles of drought and rainfall in the southern plains had created an ancient, but fragile, set of natural alliances, much of it based on the presence of grass. Out of some 4500 species of grasses that have evolved on the planet, Worster notes, the Great Plains became home of several hundred. And the grass had endured every disruption - drought, silting, and Ice Age climate shifts – everything but the plow.

Of course, the farmers didn't see it this way. The dominant slogan of the age – “rain follows the plow” – suggests that many thought they worked within natural limits.

They didn't. In fact, according to Worster, all this demonstrated a complete absence of environmental realism. “The ultimate meaning of the dust storms in the 1930s,” he writes, “was that America as a whole, not just the plains, was badly out of balance with its natural environment. Unbounded optimism about the future, careless disregard of nature's limits and

uncertainties, uncritical faith in Providence, devotion to self-aggrandizement – all these were national as well as regional characteristics.”

Actually, it went deeper. The real trouble, according to Worster, started two centuries earlier when humans began to believe they were autonomous from nature – free of the restraints that control other species. “There has been no more important change in the human condition,” he writes, “than the transition from a traditional sense of intimate dependence on the ecological community to the modern feeling of absolute free will and human autonomy...[that] all ecological limits were simply challenges to be overcome by human energy.”

The Dust Bowl is a lesson in the consequences of breaking these limits.

It is a lesson we keep relearning. “The discovery of expansionary limits has recurred in modern American history,” Worster concludes, “like the experience of a runner pausing for breath along his course. Each time he rests is in a different place, sees a new terrain, assess his reserves by what lies ahead – and then goes on to run again.” During these pauses the nation is filled with mixed feelings about the race itself, whether it has been worth the effort, and what could be done to run the next leg more wisely. “‘Conservation’,” he writes, “is the word that sums up these disparate attitudes; it has meant for some a rejection of the race itself, for others a preparation to plunge ahead.”

### *Brave New Future*

Plunging ahead is exactly what worries Bill McKibben, author of the 1980s bestseller “The End of Nature” and a long-distance runner himself. In his new book “Enough: Staying Human In An Engineered Age,” McKibben tackles the thorny, and alarming, questions surrounding the rapid advance of biotechnology, including the brave new frontiers of genetic engineering, nanotechnology, cryogenics, and cloning.

He worries about a future described candidly by bioengineers and other techno-prophets as “posthuman.” He observes that we have come to a technological threshold where we are poised to alter the very essence of what it means to be human, both biologically and socially. For example, he argues that enhancing intelligence or longevity, perhaps even to the point of eliminating death altogether, through gene manipulation will change us fundamentally – and not for the better. Not only will it change us profoundly physically, but who, for example, gets to be immortal first? The rich?

Imagine the religious, social and environmental consequences of breaking the mortality boundary!

The biofuturists, he notes, believe we are deeply flawed as a species, starting with our bodies. Our multi-purpose mouth, for example, is awkward to the point of “absurdity” they say. One theorist puts it this way: “I don’t much like how people are now. We’re too shallow, slow, and ignorant...we seemed to have reached a plateau in our intellectual development. There’s no sign that we’re getting smarter.” This theorist sees it as a hard-wiring problem that can be fixed by technology – creating neural connections between our brains and the Internet, for instance.

Here’s another example from another theorist: eventually “smart chips” will be implanted inside you, then “your body temperature might give your stereo system clues as to your mood and it would select appropriate music.” The chip could also, according to the theorist, “compute how much of your body weight is fat, and offer suggestions for diet

recipes *to the refrigerator.*” [emphasis added] McKibben is not making this stuff up. It is quite real, as he documents in detail, and it is hurtling toward us with great speed.

The bottom line in all cases is this: these Transhumanists, as they call themselves, oppose limitations, either technical, social, or biological. Transcending mankind’s tragic flaws, in fact, is their overriding goal.

McKibben’s response is to shout: “Enough!”

“We need to do an unlikely thing,” he writes. “we need to survey the world we now inhabit and proclaim it good. Good enough. Not in every detail...but good enough in its outlines, in its essentials. We need to decide that we live, most of us in the West, long enough...[that] we have ease enough...we have enough stuff. Enough intelligence. Enough capability. Enough.”

He lays some of the blames for this emerging “posthuman” world at the feet of the environmental movement. “The movement to value everything else on earth has often talked carelessly about people, spreading the idea that we are a grim and uncontrollable race, a cancer cell metastasizing unchecked across the defenseless fabric of nature.”

In fact, he notes that some environmentalists are embracing this brave new future, believing that new technology, will, in the words of one bioengineer, “reverse the harm done by the industrial revolution.” Cloning could be the solution to the endangered species crisis, they argue. Nanotechnology could replace farming. “Humanity will become a low-pollution system largely decoupled from nature,” exults one writer.

McKibben thinks this is a bad idea. “We are leaping across thresholds,” he writes. “While the jump to microscale technology may have made life easier, the further jump to nanoscale engineering will eventually drown us in a gushing cornucopia. While the jump to modern medicine may have freed us from many ills, the next leap to human genetic manipulation will imprison us in a house of distorting mirrors. That’s how thresholds work: up to a certain point something is good, and past that point there’s trouble.”

We are approaching that threshold now. “Our food has been genetically modified,” he writes, “which makes us uneasy; our children are about to be, which should make us cringe.”

For McKibben, it’s a fundamental choice between Enough and More. As a species, we have procrastinated the decision. “But now the hour draws near,” he concludes. “Faced with a challenge larger than any we’ve ever faced – the possibility that technology may replace humanity – we need to rally our innate ability to say no.”

*Yes*

Worster and McKibben are not scolds. Their message about living within limits, while alarming and disturbing, is not punitive or misanthropic. It is, in fact, a message of optimism – and a guide for a new conservation movement.

Worster argues for reform of an economic system that he sees as unnecessarily exploitative, not for its abandonment. He also argues for a stronger ‘sense of place’ among all Americans. The possession of more knowledge is not enough – if it were, he writes, “then the most highly advanced cultures in terms of science and machinery would also be the most well fitted to their environments. In fact, those cultures are among the least well adapted in the world.”

Adaptation is the key. It requires knowledge, of course, and appropriate technology, but it also requires a sense of place – a sense of self-identity intimately connected to the land.

“Adaptation follows almost instinctively,” he writes, “like a pronghorn moving through sagebrush. Houses and fields, tools and traditions, grow out of the earth with all the fitness of grass; they belong in their place as surely as any part of nature does. This is genuine adaptation, and it implies much more than shallow managerial skill. It comes from having a sense of place, which is at once a perception of what makes a piece of land function as it does and a feeling of belonging to and sharing in its uniqueness.”

When McKibben argues that things are “good enough” he means those things that have adapted themselves to limits. He points to the theory of nonviolent civil disobedience, as an example, as well as the protection of wilderness. Wild areas “are crucial ecologically,” he writes “but in some ways their greatest value is philosophic: here are places where people have actually decided to take a step back.”

There are other signs of our maturation as a species in regard to limits. We’ve slowed global population growth. We’ve begun a conversation on global warming. Sprawl has become a major concern of many. Sustainability has become a target of some.

Both authors argue that limits can be a positive thing. “We could decide that instead of endless technological growth and economic expansion,” writes McKibben, “we want to focus a larger fraction of our joint energies on other things: service, art, celebration, love...It wouldn’t require that we lead lives of sacrifice and poverty; merely that we lay aside childish fantasies of eternal wealth and eternal life. We could decide to stay mere humans.”

Staying human may be the ultimate goal of “conservation.” I’ll let McKibben have the last word on the topic:

“Immortality matters less among the rotting trees and the sprouting saplings, just as “enhancement” matters less among people who take good care of each other.”

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## **June 2004 (no. 24)**

*“Conservation is a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence or caution.” – Aldo Leopold*

On the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the landmark Wilderness Act, I am compelled to ask a heretical question: should wilderness protection continue to be a top priority of conservation activists?

It is a maxim of any social movement that old ideas, and the motivations that inspired them, unless reinvigorated by fresh meaning become, well, old. Like any enterprise, to maintain “profitability” movements must evolve in response to changing knowledge, technology and values or else run the risk of becoming anachronistic.

This is exactly where the wilderness concept finds itself today – struggling for relevance in a modern world gripped by global climate change, rampant consumerism, political gridlock, and social lethargy. Even in the American West, where I live, wilderness protection is increasingly like, to paraphrase Aldo Leopold, “fixing the pump without fixing the well.” Shielding bits of land from the destructive behavior of human beings without effectively influencing the forces that threaten them in the first place means they are not really protected in the long run.

That’s because the essence of the crisis confronting us today, as it was a century ago, is social and cultural, not ecological. The Wilderness Act is a social document, not an

ecological prescription. It was a legal, and thus cultural, response to the nation's "frontier hangover" which was destroying the primitive nature of our landscapes at a rapid clip. Leopold and others made ecological arguments for wilderness protection, but the potency of the concept primarily lay in its social *value* – what it said about ourselves, our behavior, our strengths and our weaknesses.

Does the wilderness idea retain that potency today? I think it does not. "Protection" does not mean what it did forty or eighty years ago. The threat from motorized vehicles, for example, no longer compares to the effects of global climate change or noxious weed infestation, which ignore lines drawn on maps. The recent vigorous arguments for the expansion of protected areas on ecological grounds, which, while meritorious, do little to solve the underlying issue: how we alter the coalescing social forces that are threatening the ecological integrity of the planet. Reinvigorating the wilderness idea can't "fix the well" anymore. Instead, I think we need a new strategy altogether.

### *Vision*

What worries me most about the current state of affairs is the steady disengagement of people and society from the natural world. This concern might seem ironic given the dramatic rise over the past two decades of recreational use of our public lands, but I'll argue that the overall trend in society is one of increased isolationism, especially from nature. We are spending more time in front of our computers and less time outdoors (and probably less time with our families). The trend of work continues to flow toward cities and indoors – just ask the sons and daughters of farmers and ranchers about their future plans and dreams. What flow there is toward the rural tends to be in the form of recreation or subdivisions, both of which create more problems than they solve.

Meanwhile, the science community has determined that much of the land under our care is in need of ecological restoration. New protocols for the qualitative and quantitative assessment and monitoring of land health have been developed, allowing us to gauge the relative "health" of landscapes. And the emerging picture isn't pretty. At the same time, an entrepreneurial spirit has spread across the West focused on "fixing" degraded land by employing methods modeled on nature's principles. As a result, a shift is underway in the region away from acts of "shielding" and towards acts of "healing."

The conservation movement needs to catch up with this shift. In fact, I think the primary challenge confronting the conservation movement is to develop a paradigm that reengages people with the land that emphasizes *work*, and not simply weekend recreation. Play and aesthetic appreciation are fine as far as they go, but if our goal is to join the movement to restore and maintain ecological integrity of land for the long run, then our engagement with nature needs to be deeper than a quick trip to a national park.

And it is only through the meaningful engagement called 'work' that we will influence the social forces that threaten our planet and existence.

I have a vision of a new conservation movement that sends volunteers into riparian areas to plant willows and construct structures that heal creeks collaboratively with landowners; I see ranchers being paid by city folk to repair historically damaged arroyos so grass can grow and water can be stored in the banks for downstream use; I see conservationists learning from scientists how to restore a landscape properly and sustainably; I see birders and ranchers looking for ferruginous hawks together; I see open space protected

not by fences, but by work – people restoring, managing, healing, and earning a paycheck from labor within nature’s model.

I see a new conservation movement that cascades *upwards* from the real grassroots (grass and roots), toward social and political centers of power, changing our behavior in ways that, to paraphrase Wendell Berry, no longer deplete soil or people. By a profitable and regenerative reengagement with nature based on work and restoration, we can begin to influence those social and economic forces that imperial the very heart of what we love and know to be essential to our existence – a healthy relationship with the natural world.

### *Six Steps*

A new conservation movement will come into existence, however, only with difficulty. Old ideas and prejudices will take time to tear down or replace. I propose, therefore, that individuals and organizations consider six steps, or transitions, as key:

#### 1) Give Up the Myth of Pristineness

Whether a “pristine” environment ever existed before or not, it doesn’t exist now. Anywhere. Pollution, climate change, CO2 buildup, soil erosion, and a myriad of other global anthropogenic changes are here to stay for a very long time. Additionally, ecologists are telling us that the myth of the “balance of nature” was just that – a myth. Instead, they argue that nature exists in a “state of flux” – always changing, always adapting to perturbations, and a little bit chaotic. So, rather than try to “conserve” the natural world, I think activists should encourage a dynamic relationship with nature that acknowledges the “impure” world that we now inhabit.

#### 2) Soil First!

Our land needs more, and better, stewardship, not less. Much of the American West, for instance, exists in various degraded conditions, the result of historical damage, poor mitigation strategies, and, now, global changes. At the same time, ecologists have developed a much clearer picture of what constitutes land health at the level of soil, grass, and water – what they call ‘functionality.’ Consequently, restoring, maintaining or improving this “land mechanism,” as Aldo Leopold called it, should be a top priority for conservationists, including restoring health to wilderness areas and national parks. Preservation alone is no longer an option, because without healthy land at a baseline level, much of what we value will be jeopardized over time.

#### 3) Be More Balanced

The old movement’s habit of stratifying land by degree of “pristineness” – with national parks and wilderness areas at the top and working landscapes at the bottom – created a hierarchy of land quality that was elitist and had the effect of encouraging disengagement. Wilderness can still be a “gold standard” for a new movement, but it should also acknowledge that working landscapes matter. This means a new movement needs to be more democratic than in the past – questions of ecological function, wildlife protection cultural diversity, economic prosperity, justice, and egalitarian access for all citizens need to be balanced together. This is crucial because as America continues to urbanize, the need to

reconnect its citizens with its natural heritage at many scales and many locales becomes increasingly important.

#### 4) Talk About Boundaries

A new conservation dialogue needs to expand from simply doing “what is right for the caribou” to questions about curbs to society’s appetites and behaviors. Scientists talk about negative environmental consequences when systems cross ecological thresholds, but social and political thresholds exist too. And all three are often connected. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s, for example, was as much about an unsustainable social activity as it was about breaking natural boundaries. Conservationists should talk about both – not only what constitutes “nature’s model” but how we might learn to adapt to it.

#### 5) Profit Is Not a Dirty Word

If it isn’t about economics, and profit, at some level then long-term environmental and social health will not be achieved. Lectures by conservationists about ethical behavior without pragmatic solutions that help people make changes in order to reach a more sustainable future will always be just that – lectures. Fortunately, new models of sustainable work have emerged in the last twenty years. The new entrepreneurial spirit on the land aims at creating a “healing economy” – as opposed to the traditional one that exploits natural resources for short-term gain – and doing so with the aim of making it pay. Restoration, for example, should, and can be, profitable. Conservationists should help by supporting this type of new business activity.

#### 6) Join the Radical Center

A new movement should eschew the extremes. It needs to focus on pragmatic solutions that solve real problems – and that means mobilizing the middle. This means engaging ranchers, scientists, public land managers, poets, farmers, dayhikers – anyone dedicated to restoring ecological and economic health to this country, and doing so collaboratively, and with meaningful measurements of our success. It is in the middle – the Radical Center – where the work can begin. Reengagement means asking not what the land can do for you, but what you can do for the land.

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### **November 2004 (no. 25)**

*“The difficulty lies not in new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.”* – John Maynard Keynes.

Looking back over the past century, the greatest, and most telling, shortcoming of the conservation movement in the American West is its near total failure to devise an effective strategy for privately owned land in the region.

By any yardstick – watershed acres, animal species, ecological processes – the sum total of conservation success on private land has been small.

While many environmentalists correctly note that half of the West is publicly owned, and thus held in trust for the public good, they rarely mention the other part of that equation - that half of the West is in private hands.

This is significant because, as many researchers have written, private lands contain the most productive soils, are located at lower elevations, and often include key riparian areas – all of which make them critical to conservation efforts.

Wildlife biologist Rick Knight, of Colorado State University, put it this way: “We will not be able to sustain native biodiversity in the Mountain West by relying merely on protected areas. Future conservation efforts to protect this region’s natural heritage will require closer attention being paid to the role of private lands.”

But how? One reason why the movement has failed to develop an effective conservation strategy for private land is because its toolbox is so deficient. The tactics of demonization, litigation, regulation, and pressure politics – effective on public lands (though to a diminishing degree these days) – are essentially useless on private land.

For good reason. They are tools of coercion, useful, perhaps, to right a wrong or quick-fix a crisis, but not very effective for chronic afflictions, such as the slow decline of threatened and endangered species. That’s because at root our ecological crisis is really a social crisis, and you don’t achieve long-term change in human behavior with a hammer.

Not unless you want a fight.

### *Bifurcation*

It is the idea of a bifurcated West – half public, half private – that lies at the heart of the movement’s troubles. Until conservationists can conceive of the region as One West, indivisible in the things that matter, such as water, wildlife, soil, community, and the common good, and develop strategies that work evenly and fairly, the ecological trend will continue downward.

A few years ago, I was part of a panel discussion in Silver City, New Mexico, focused on the question of livestock production and native plant protection. On the panel with me was a vigorous local environmentalist who drew a sharp line in the sand when it came to cows. In response to a question from the audience, I cited a statistic that I had heard recently: that over 100 million acres of private land in the West are owned by public lands ranchers, most of whom need the grazing provided by public lands to stay profitable.

I turned to the activist and asked: “If you’re successful in eliminating public lands ranching, as you desire, what happens to all that private land? Who’s going to keep it from being sold to subdividers?”

The environmentalist responded by saying his only concern was for public land. He was only interested in creating “refugia for native plants and animals.”

This comment upset the Forest Service biologist at the other end of the panel. “What good is a refuge if it’s also a biological desert?,” he asked, hotly. “Cause that’s what’s happening in the Gila wilderness.” He went on to say that the suppression of fire and other natural agents of ecological disturbance, including, under the right conditions, animal impact, had contributed to ecological stagnation in the wilderness.

Right there, I realized, was the heart of the matter. Do we continue to divide the West into two parts based on philosophical ideals – such as whether we have a public or a private “right” to something on the land – or do we talk about processes, both social and ecological, that cross boundaries? Which is the stronger foundation for the long-run?

If you believe in an ideal, such as the sanctity of non-working landscapes, then there are only two strategies for private land: buy it or ignore it. While my environmentalist

colleague chose the latter, other conservation organizations, including The Nature Conservancy have opted for the former.

The trouble with the 'buy it' strategy, however, should be obvious: there isn't enough money out there, not even for the purchase of conservation easements, to do the job right. And prices keep rising, almost literally by the minute.

One response to the dilemma of limited funds has been to target for purchase those private lands considered "the last best places." It's been an effective strategy. The Conservation Fund, for example, reported last month that it had passed the four million acre mark nationwide, in terms of protected land.

It only took them nineteen years. I laud their efforts, but four million acres is a drop in bucket, especially given the rapid pace of development in the country.

Perhaps as an acknowledgement of this dilemma, many land-buying organizations have recently turned to collaborative, community-based projects to widen the conservation impact across threatened landscapes. At the same time, other conservation organizations, such as Defenders of Wildlife and Environmental Defense, are offering incentive programs and other tools to encourage better land use among private landowners.

These are positive developments, but I wonder if they are enough to make a real difference. Do they dig deep enough at the social roots of the ecological conundrum we all face? Could there another way?

### *The Land We Share*

I recently read a book that approached the question of private lands and conservation from the other side of the equation. Written by Eric Freyfogle, a Professor of Law at the University of Illinois, "The Land We Share" digs into the meaning, and shifting definition, of private property in America. His thoughts are provocative, to say the least.

Given the current, urgent problems confronting American society, he asks, how should we begin to redefine the role of private property rights? "Can private development and resource-use practices continue as in the past," he writes "or have the complexities of modern life brought us to the point where a new approach is needed, some new understanding of how the private owner fits with the surrounding community?"

One emerging problem he sees, highlighted by recent advances in ecology, is the division between the law, which crisply defines boundaries, and nature, which does not. This division is at the root of so much conflict in the nation.

"Private land in the law is an abstract human construct; a bundle of legal rights and responsibilities typically defined without regard for the land's natural features," he writes. "In nature, the situation is starkly different. Nature is an interconnected whole, one parcel fully linked with the next. Even a seemingly slight action on one tract of land can trigger far-spreading ecological ripples."

In his book, Freyfogle seeks to close this gap between law and nature. His main argument focuses on the concepts of citizenship and community. While private property owners have secure rights in their land, to be sure, they also have public responsibilities to the common good. The law, Freyfogle notes, has been clear on this point for a long time: neighbors cannot "do harm" to each other by their actions. For instance, the state has a right to object if a landowner tries to build a nuclear waste dump on his or her property.

No private landowner, in other words, has an unlimited right to use of their land.

However, since the American Revolution, Freyfogle observes, the idea of “limits” on landowner rights has ebbed and flowed. Limits were strongest in Jefferson’s day, when an agrarian-based economy dominated, and weakest in the late nineteenth century, when Robber Barons ruled and industrial capitalism went mostly unchecked.

Today, we find ourselves somewhere in the middle. While “free to use” and market-based philosophies remain strong among many private property owners, public concern about the health of wildlife populations, particularly endangered species, and other natural resource issues has grown proportionately. Definitions of “limits” and “harm” are in flux, with the main result being sustained conflict between the concepts of “public” and “private.”

At heart, says Freyfogle, is a struggle to define the common good. When something works in the interest of both public and private landowners, such as securing high quality and abundant water supplies, for instance, then everyone wins. When the common good is in dispute, and conflict erupts, however, land degradation often results.

He sees evidence of this all over.

“In the view of fair-minded observers,” he writes, “many occupied American lands continue to decline in quality. Natural ecological functions, particularly fertility and hydrologic cycles, are severely disrupted. Biological communities continue to unravel as many species decline. Farms, forests, grazing lands, and other working lands are typically used in ways that cannot be sustained ecologically.”

The answer he suggests to this dilemma, however, is not what you might expect.

### *Land Health*

For help, Freyfogle turns to Aldo Leopold, who, for over half his career, wrestled with the puzzle of encouraging good land use on private property. During the Dust Bowl years, Leopold saw first hand what short-sighted, unrestricted, “unnatural” land practices could do. He watched as thirteen millions acres of topsoil blew to the Atlantic Ocean.

Leopold supported private property rights, as does Freyfogle. But the main question for Leopold became: how to get landowners to think of the community of life, plants, animals, and people, as a whole? “Leopold had reached the heart of the matter,” writes Freyfogle. “People saw themselves as separate from nature, when in truth they were not.”

One answer, Leopold determined, was to embrace the concept of land health – which he defined as the land’s “capacity for collective self-renewal and collective self-maintenance.” The common good was best served by restoring the land to properly functioning health. But it couldn’t stop there. It also meant restoring and maintaining societal health. To Leopold, it was futile “to improve the face of the land without improving ourselves,” as he put it.

It all came down to a healthy respect for human limits. “Nature was highly complex,” Freyfogle says of Leopold’s conclusions, “and even leading scientists could not predict its interactions or decipher the functions of all its parts. Only an attentive, caring landowner stood much chance of drawing sustenance from land without degrading it.”

In the end, Leopold believed that land health should be the major indicator by which society calibrated the rights of private land owners.

“He had rethought,” writes Freyfogle, “from the ground up, how humans related to nature, how they related to one another, and how their well-being was ecologically linked to the well-being of the larger natural order. The legal community was not listening at the time;

indeed, even Leopold's fellow conservationists had trouble making sense of his conclusions. But Leopold's ideas would remain alive, awaiting future readers."

The future is here. Nearly sixty years after Leopold's death, the science community has developed protocols that quantitatively and qualitatively measure land health. On-the-ground practitioners have developed models of sustainable use. And the community-based collaborative movement has developed suitable models for implementing change.

What remains, says Freyfogle, is for the law to catch up with the times by promoting healthy connections between land parcels.

"If the land community of the future is to remain healthy," he concludes, "the private property approach will need to take on even more of the trappings of a successful common-property regime. Landscape everywhere will be made up not of two types of land – private and commons – but of a wide array of variants that blend the two."

Many benefits would come, he says, from looking at land ownership as a smooth continuum. "It would become easier to imagine more flexible ways of protecting the public's interest in private land," he writes. "In addition, the never-ending controversy over public lands would be easier to address if a full suite of options were open to discussion."

It is to that full suite of options, grounded in the goal of land health, that the conservation movement should now turn.

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#### **April 2005 (no. 26)**

*"Green fingers are the extensions of a verdant heart."* – Russell Page, master English gardener.

It is time to walk out of the wilderness and into the garden.

It is time, in other words, to change our metaphors. From Thoreau, meditating beside his pond, to Muir, climbing Yosemite Falls, to Aldo Leopold, Olaus Murie, David Brower and beyond, the dominant metaphor among naturalists and other defenders of nature has been the wilderness – officially defined in the Wilderness Act as a place "untrammeled by man."

Of course, wilderness is more than a metaphor; it has been a fact of life from the very moment native and European colonists set foot in the New World. Over the centuries, North Americans responded to the presence of "wild" land around them with strong emotions: either to tame, cherish, or protect wilderness.

Love it or hate it, wilderness became the principle yardstick by which we measured the natural world, and consequently, ourselves.

No more.

Obviously it's not 1491 any longer, but neither is it 1909, the date when an energetic young forester named Aldo Leopold began his first assignment with the fledgling Forest Service in the remote mountainous country of eastern Arizona. In 1909, the Apache National Forest *was* wilderness – the place, not coincidentally, where Leopold watched the "fierce green fire" die in the eyes of a wolf that had just been shot by his comrades, an event immortalized years later in his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain."

But if Leopold could return to the Apache today, what would he think? After his initial shock, which would probably be profound, he might ask: where did the wilderness go?

What would Aldo say about the state of the things in the American West today? Literally, what metaphors would he use? I doubt he'd talk much about wilderness. Instead, I suspect Leopold would find hope in the emerging movement to revive damaged land, and damaged relationships, through restoration. After all, in the 1930s he led a pioneering program to restore native prairies near his home in Madison, Wisconsin – an effort that eventually gave birth to the science of restoration ecology.

Today, I think he'd employ the language of healing, of repairing and restoring. He'd also talk about humility, respect, and thoughtful action. I think he'd talk about wildness, but also about the knowledge of nature that comes with getting our hands dirty through weeding and growing things.

I think he might talk about gardens.

### *Second Nature*

The debate may be moot. I believe global warming is destined to make us all gardeners. That's because "nature" no longer exists outside of "culture" anywhere on the planet, requiring, if we are to maintain the things we value such as biodiversity, deliberate and methodical action. Earth is now ours to tend.

Thinking like a garden could be a positive development for a number of reasons: it removes a wedge between nature and culture that has become increasingly destructive; it encourages a meaningful reconnection between people and land through active participation in nature's rhythms and mysteries; and it detaches our concept of "wildness" from the anachronistic idea of "pristineness" – putting it in our hands, literally, to define in relation to our labor and goals.

Still, old metaphors die hard. The transition from "wilderness" to "garden" has been personally difficult, especially since much of my youth – our indelible years – is intimately bound up with wilderness adventures. Recently, however, I felt an increasing friction between my traditional faith in wilderness and the practical reality of working with land and people.

Relief came recently in the form of a book entitled "Second Nature: a Gardener's Education" by Michael Pollan, a journalist and author of the recent bestseller "The Botany of Desire." His book hit home because he too struggled with this very 'American' conflict.

"Like most Americans out-of-doors, I was a child of Thoreau," Pollan writes. "But the ways of seeing nature I'd inherited from him, and the whole tradition of nature writing he inspired, seemed not to fit my experiences...Everybody wrote about how to BE in nature, what sorts of perceptions to have, but nobody about how to ACT there. Yet the gardener, unlike the naturalist, has to, indeed WANTS to, act."

Thoreau, Pollan noted, was the last important American writer on nature to have anything to say about gardening. The famous naturalist planted a bean field near Walden Pond but got caught in the messy contradictions between his needs and his perceptions of nature's prerogatives. Eventually throwing down his hoe and forsaking his beans, Thoreau declared that he would "prefer the most dismal swamp to any garden."

This led, says Pollan, to the very American habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed - that whenever one gains, the other must lose. And it is this paradigm that must now be overturned.

“We need, and now more than ever, to learn how to use nature without damaging it,” he wrote. “That probably can’t be done as long as we continue to think of nature and culture simply as antagonists. So how do we begin to find some middle ground between the two? To provide for our needs and desires without diminishing nature?”

To find an answer, he looks in his garden.

### *Weeds*

Pollan’s educational curve was steep. He chose, initially, not to fence his new garden (he lived in Connecticut at the time), which resulted in an invasion of woodchucks, deer, and other hungry animals. But he also rejected his neighbors’ response, which was to create, and constantly maintain, bright green lawns, which he considered a form of totalitarian rule over nature.

The trick, he decided, was to find a middle ground between these positions – and that is what a garden is – “a place that admits of both nature and human habitation.”

“But a garden is not, as I had imagined, a harmonious compromise between the two, nor is it stable,” he writes, “from what I can see, it requires continual human intervention or else it will collapse. The question for the gardener – and in a way it’s a question for all of us – is: What is the proper character of that intervention?”

His experience in the garden suggests that finding a good answer to that question is much more complicated than simply choosing between “raping the land or sealing it away in a preserve where no one can touch it” – both of which he considers to be dead ends.

“Gardening quickly teaches you to distrust all such absolutes,” he writes, “Must we *always* shrink before our own power in nature? We are one of only a handful of creatures with the capacity to deliberately alter our environment. To simply renounce that power – isn’t that in some sense to renounce our humanity? *our* nature? And is that nature any less real than the nature we seem to think exists only *out there*?”

Take weeds, for instance. To romantic writers, who often lived at a distance from nature, weeds were emblems of freedom and wildness, and weeding stood for another form of domination of nature by man.

Gardeners have a different perspective. They know weeds don’t originate in the wild. They thrive, instead, in disturbed soil such as vacant lots, railroad sidings, and gardens. They know weeds are often nonnative and exotic, and very often the creation of hybridization – evolving with one end in view: to thrive in ground that man has disturbed.

“My weeds were no more natural than my garden plants,” writes Pollan, “Those smug quotes in which naturalists like to coddle weeds were merely a conceit. My battles with weeds did not bespeak alienation from nature, or some irresponsible drive to dominate it.”

Weeding is necessary; having changed nature irrevocably around the globe, humans are now obligated to tend to the consequences of our actions, which is to say, to garden.

“We have made so many changes in the land that some form of gardening has become unavoidable, even in those places we wish to preserve as monuments to our absence,” Pollan writes. “Even Yellowstone, our country’s greatest “wilderness” stands in need of careful management – it’s too late to simply leave it alone...wolves, tourists, fires, elk, all need active management...Today, even Yellowstone must be “gardened.””

Weeding, and thus gardening, involves making informed choices in nature – to apply our intelligence and sweat to the earth. To weed is to bring culture to nature in a way that is mutually beneficial to both.

“Weeding is what will save places like Yellowstone,” writes Pollan, “but only if we recognize that weeding is not just something we do to the land – only if we recognize the need to cultivate our OWN nature, too. For though we may be the earth’s gardeners, we are also its weeds. And we won’t get anywhere until we come to terms with this crucial ambiguity about our role – that we are at once the problem and the only possible solution to the problem.”

Pollan’s education has much to teach us about the usefulness of the garden as a metaphor for a new relationship to the natural world. Gardening, for instance, requires an intimate knowledge of a local landscape.

“Gardening is a painstaking exploration of place,” he writes, “everything that happens in my garden – the thriving and dying of particular plants, the maraudings of various insects and other pests – teaches me to know this patch of land more intimately, its geology and microclimate, the particular ecology of its local weeds and animals and insects.”

By working intimately with land, whether it is restoring a patch of native prairie or restoring a riparian area, “gardening” reverses our alienation from nature. By cultivating a ‘green thumb,’ work on the land restores an ancient relationship between humans and the natural world that is productive and spiritually uplifting.

Gardening is also a source of moral instruction as we seek a way to use nature without damaging it. Gardening can teach us about models of ecological responsibility, and can, in the process, be a form of redemption for our sins against nature.

Gardening also teaches us humility.

But perhaps most important of all, Pollan says, gardening teaches us forbearance – the very essence of culture.

“Conscience, ethical choice, memory, discrimination: it is these very human and decidedly unecological faculties that offer the planet its last best hope,” he writes. “It is true that, historically, we’ve concentrated on exercising these faculties in the human rather than the natural estate, but that doesn’t mean they *cannot* be exercised there. Indeed, this is the work that now needs to be done: to bring more culture to our conduct in nature, not less.”

Aldo Leopold, of course, said much the same thing when he called for a ‘land ethic.’

But what about Thoreau’s “dismal swamp”? Should we forsake it? Not at all, says Pollan. But we must be pragmatic too – which is another lesson learned from the garden.

“It is too late in the day – there are simply too many of us now – to follow Thoreau into the woods, to look to nature to somehow cure or undo culture,” he writes. “As important as it is to have swamps, today it is probably more important to learn how to...satisfy culture without offending nature.”

To find that satisfaction, he turns to the very symbol of a garden.

“The habit of bluntly opposing nature and culture has only gotten us into trouble, and we won’t work ourselves free of this trouble until we have developed a more complicated and supple sense of how we fit into nature. I do not know what that sense might be, but I suspect that the rose, with its long, quirky history of give-and-take with man, can tutor it as well as, if not better than, Thoreau’s unsullied swamp.”

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**August 2005 (no. 27)**

*“For the duration of our time on the planet...restoration will be the great task.” – Kenneth Brower, in an Introduction to *A Sand County Almanac**

For a while now I’ve been dogged by a Socratic question: who am I?

This has become a pressing concern because we live in a world of ‘ists,’ as in ‘specialist’ or ‘generalist’ – which are teams, essentially, complete with uniforms, rules, and expectations. And in our culture, if you’re not a team, you’re probably on the sidelines.

For a long time I resisted signing up with any particular squad. Part of it was a college-bred skepticism of group orthodoxy in general, but most of it was indecision. Which team should I choose? Who would have me? The teams on my particular playing field included conservationist, environmentalist, naturalist, ecologist, scientist, and archaeologist.

I am not, and cannot be, a scientist. My predisposition leans toward the right brain. Even archaeology was a stretch – I preferred the romantic parts of hiking and camping in the desert over the artifacts and analysis. Birding is not in my nature, though I’ve recently taken an interest in plant identification. Still, I’d make a second-rate naturalist at best.

I’ve never considered myself an environmentalist, at least professionally. Part of it is how I defined the word ‘environmentalist’ – as someone dedicated to the *defense* of nature and people. Look at the vocabulary of environmentalism: defend, save, preserve, fight, protect, shield, sue. This is necessary work, but it’s not my cup of tea.

I should have joined the ‘conservationist’ team, but I decided early in the game not to. For starters, I was never attracted to the word ‘conserve’ which the dictionary defines as the effort to “keep in a safe place.” Historically, this was exactly the aim of much conservation work – to keep safe what we valued in the natural world through parks, wildernesses, forest reserves, ‘conservative’ farm practices, and the like.

This is necessary work too, but it’s not enough. To paraphrase Aldo Leopold, conservation is more about fixing the ‘pump’ than the ‘well’ – meaning the real challenge in front of us is not environmental, it’s social and economic. Our ecological ills are manifestations of societal maladies and they won’t be fixed until we employ social remedies. Conservation can’t do that alone, as nearly 150 years of hard work has demonstrated. Nor can it do the job in partnership with environmentalism. Protect and defend are not enough.

I knew early that I wanted to fix the ‘well,’ not the ‘pump’ or at least try, so I began to look for another team. I quickly discovered that this meant finding another playing field as well. Eventually, I found both; and after scrimmaging and studying the rule-book (such as it is) for a few years, I think I’m ready to sign a contract.

I am a restorationist.

*Redemption?*

First and foremost, I am attracted to the language of restoration. Taped to my computer is a postcard that I found in a local coffee store. It depicts an ill-looking planet Earth, with its tongue hanging out, imprinted with the message: “The world could be in better shape.” Surrounding this image are words: renew, heal, reaffirm, nurture, rekindle, revitalize, repair, revive, mend, soothe, rebuild, fix, regenerate, reinvigorate.

As the son of a doctor, these words have powerful appeal to me. They are the essential raw materials for communication and teaching. They are part of the ‘common language that describes the common ground below our feet.’

They are words of action – positive, progressive, healing action. They are the words of advancement, not defense of safe keeping, and as such give people direction and hope. It involves us in a ‘giving’ rather than merely a ‘taking’ – a giving back to nature, an honoring, while we necessarily continue to take nature’s bounty.

They are also words of redemption.

We have taken much from the natural world, often with tragic consequences, and we continue to take an accelerating rate. Restoration is a way to redeem our behavior – a kind of moral exercise, if you will. Perhaps “salvation” is too strong of a word to use, but it points us in an interesting direction.

It’s an opinion shared by William Jordan in his book *Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (University of California 2003). It is a book, by the way, that uses the word ‘restorationist’ so frequently that it suggests a larger team on a larger playing field than I suspected.

“Everything we have, we take from nature,” he writes, “sometimes by persuasion or collaboration, sometimes by outright theft. Either way, the debt we incur is, or at least ought to be, a constant concern. For many, restoration is an attractive idea because it offers a way of repaying this debt.”

Jordan considers restoration to be a ‘gift’ back to nature, both in the restored ecosystem and in the greater understanding and self-awareness that restoration creates among its practitioners. It is a redeeming gift, a gift or reciprocity – we give so that nature may give back – not a one-way gift of charity or commerce. Restoration is an unending exchange of goods and services with the natural world. It is not, Jordan says, about settling accounts.

He goes on to say that the trouble with environmentalism and conservation is that there is no exchange of gifts in their actions.

“We can take from nature but we can never give back,” Jordan writes of these two paradigms. “We accept its gifts of food, materials, place, and beauty but never offer back the clinching gift that would establish a basis of solidarity...and because we never risk the offering of a gift, we have no need for sacrifice...”

In contrast, restoration is all about giving.

“As for the gift, the basis for solidarity with nature, the restored ecosystem is perhaps as close as we can come to paying nature back in kind for what we have taken from it.”

### *Lessons*

For over twenty years, Jordan directed the Education Program at the University of Wisconsin’s Arboretum, home to an experiment in prairie restoration that began back in the 1930s, under the guidance of Aldo Leopold. When Jordan started working at the Arboretum, however, very few people in the nation were doing restoration. Environmentalists almost universally ignored it, he notes, considering it at best as a distraction from the serious work of preservation, and at worst a threat.

Environmentalists didn’t like restoration because they believed that the ‘naturalness’ of wild places was irreplaceable. The hand of man could only harm, not restore, the state of nature. Jordan believes this line of reasoning had devastating consequences.

“It implied that conservation was a one-way street,” he writes, “essentially nothing more than a delaying action, that might slow the inevitable decline of natural landscapes toward eventual extinction but can never reverse it. It also conveyed the idea, often expressed quite explicitly by environmentalists, that the influence of human beings on natural landscapes is invariably negative and destructive; though we may take from such a landscape, we can never give anything back.”

But giving something back is exactly the point of restoration, and why it appeals to Jordan. Not only does it offer the opportunity to reverse environmental degradation, it also offers *hope* – something the environmental movement sorely lacks.

“Since restoration is an active process – in fact, a kind of gardening – it offers something that eluded environmentalists for the better part of a century – a way to “use” classic landscapes, such as prairies and forests, actually participating in their ecology, without changing their character or using them up.”

By the early 1980s, Jordan realized that the work at the Arboretum was crucial. “It combined the best elements of two forms of environmentalism – the conservationist’s willingness to participate in the ecology of a natural landscape, and the environmentalist’s insistence on the inherent value of that landscape, independent of its value to humans – into a single act that linked engagement with total respect. This act, it seemed to me, provided the basis for a new kind of environmentalism.”

Once upon a time, I thought so too – that a “new environmentalism” was in the offing. I’ve come to the conclusion, however, that environmentalism is genetically predisposed to certain types of activities, the defense of nature for example, and indisposed to other work, such as restoration. Asking it to change would be like asking a gazelle to slow down.

It is the same with the conservation movement – it doesn’t need to change as much as it needs to be cognizant of its boundaries, where ‘protection’ begins and ends, for example.

We need a new movement – a restoration movement – with new language and a new ‘ist’ – to compliment the old movements and begin the gifting.

I’ll be a restorationist. And I am confirmed in my resolution by a simple unorthodox fact: my computer’s spellchecker doesn’t recognize the word.

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#### **April 2006 (no. 28)**

When I began this column the horizon seemed very far away indeed.

In fact, I wondered at the time if we might be staring at a mirage. This is one of the reasons we chose the word “Quivira” – it signified an elusive dream as much as it marked unknown territory to early explorers of the Southwest.

Dream or not, one thing was clear – we had no idea of how long the journey would be or how far down the road we would go.

Almost as proof, we nearly stumbled on the very first step.

On a fine June day in 1997, Dan Dagget and I arrived at the Unitarian Church in Santa Fe to set up The Quivira Coalition’s inaugural workshop, only to discover that I had the wrong key to the front door. We were locked out. Panicked (because we were running late), I drove to the nearby Sierra Club office and made a desperate call to a fellow activist, who, luckily, was home.

We secured a key, and had a marvelous day. To our surprise, and delight, over fifty people attended, including ranchers, scientists, and conservationists. The mood was convivial, and the speakers – Dan, Kris Havstad, Jim Winder, Ray Powell and Frank Hayes – were as provocative as they were informative.

Organizationally, we were armed with only two things that day: our first newsletter, which we distributed to every chair, and hope.

Our second event, held in a motel meeting room in Silver City the following January, went more smoothly. Over one hundred people came to hear the “Dan, Kris, and Jim show,” including another healthy mix of ranchers, agency folk and conservationists. The meeting also attracted our first vocal anti-grazing activist, who held his tape recorder up in the air for all to see. It also attracted our first reporter.

The meeting had been denounced the day before in a press release issued by a coalition of environmental organizations, who branded us, as I recall, “handmaidens” to the cattle industry. This must have been news to the New Mexico Cattlegrowers’ Association who had recently written me a very chilly letter.

I took both the denunciation and the chilly reception as positive developments.

### *Grassroots to Village*

Meanwhile, we took our case to the ground. One of our original goals was to become a true “grassroots group” – meaning, we wanted to start over at the level of grass and roots. To do this, we organized Outdoor Classrooms on well-managed ranches, taught by Kirk Gadzia. These proved popular – again somewhat to our surprise – drawing the now familiar mix of people.

We were also pleasantly surprised by the large amount of media attention we received in the first year. We assumed that since we were wearing neither a Black Hat nor a White Hat, the press would ignore us. Quite the opposite happened.

In fact, over time a curious thing took place: the public denunciations dropped off – and not just of The Quivira Coalition, but of livestock grazing in general. Not so long ago, if a “pro” cattle story appeared in a magazine or newspaper article there would invariably be a tide of angry rebuttals, some of them personal.

But the rebuttals and the charges have evaporated – and I think this is a significant sign of change, and success.

At the same time, I believe the core message of the conservation community – that ranchers, especially those who run livestock on public lands, must perform to higher environmental standards – has been heard too. Is overgrazing still a problem in the region? A quick glance out the window as one drives suggests that it is. But it seems clear that ‘business as usual’ on our rangelands today is more hindrance than help in a rapidly changing world.

Meanwhile, the idea of the ‘New Ranch’ – a term I made up to describe the progressive ranching movement emerging in the region – continued to evolve and grow as we met more landowners, consultants, and conservationists doing innovative things. In particular, our work with Bill Zeedyk opened our eyes to the important possibilities of restoration.

All of which led us to change our mission statement in the fall of 2002. It now reads: “The mission of The Quivira Coalition is to foster ecological, economic and social health on

western landscapes through education, innovation, collaboration, and progressive public and private land stewardship.”

Over the years, our work has expanded to include demonstration restoration projects on Comanche and Cedro Creeks and the Dry Cimarron River, owning and managing the only federal lands Grassbank in the West and publishing manuals on fixing ranch roads, and monitoring grasslands.

And yet we have tried hard not to lose sight of one of our core original goals – to provide a meeting-place for the ‘radical center.’

A sign of how close the horizon has come happened in April 2006, when a reporter writing for the online magazine ‘New West’ wrote the following headline about a Report on the State of the Rockies: “The New Ranch May Be Key to the Success of the New West.”

In the beginning we tried to provide a ‘neutral ground’ on which various people of diverse backgrounds could meet, talk, look, learn, and listen. Upon the conclusion of our Fifth Annual Conference this past January, however, when another five hundred people showed up, it became clear that ‘neutral ground’ has become a village.

And ours isn’t the only village. Across the West, a movement has been building slowly for a decade, focused on exploring our common interests rather than arguing our differences. Little villages, widely separated, popped up first in watersheds and on ranches – collaboratively determined to break gridlock. Over time, these villages proliferated to the point where they seem to be everywhere today.

Nine years later, in other words, the horizon doesn’t seem so terribly far away anymore. We still have a long way to go, of course, but I can say with confidence that the dream is no mere mirage.

It’s time now to focus on the village, not the horizon – and even here we are consistent with our original goals. In fact, I’ll conclude this column with a quote from the end of the original one: “A good place to start is with affection. We love the land, but so do ranchers, and for reasons that are more similar to ours than we suppose. Each of us loves the open space, the blue skies, the wild critters that live there, and the feeling of a fresh breeze in our face. Going outside is going home, as Muir said; and it is a home that we all share.”

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