

[This is a column I wrote for the bi-monthly newsletter of the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club. The opinions expressed were strictly mine and in no way reflected official positions of the Chapter or the Sierra Club generally]

The Uneasy Chair

September 1, 1995 (I)

I can sense the uneasy spirit of Bernard DeVoto stalking the land. Novelist, historian, author of a popular World War II-era column in *Harper's Magazine* called 'The Easy Chair,' and a professional provocateur, according to his friend and protégée Wallace Stegner, DeVoto almost single-handedly stopped the wholesale giveaway of our western public lands in the late 1940s. Campaigning from his easy chair against an imminent transfer of federal land to the states, DeVoto called the backroom deal "one of the biggest land grabs in history" and accused the politicians in Washington, D.C., who were orchestrating the transfer of wanting to "shovel most of the West into its rivers."

Fortunately, DeVoto's outrage proved infectious and a chorus of complaint was raised across the country. The land transfer was killed the old fashioned way – by public demonstration. Now, nearly fifty later, another land grab is underway and I can hear the curmudgeon from Salt Lake City pacing creakily in the shadows, muttering to himself despairingly about the never-ending cycle of things – and the stunning familiarity of it all.

As should be clear to anyone who believes in the intrinsic value of public land, there can be no doubt that another attempt at a massive land grab is underway in Washington. Bills before both houses of Congress attack the fundamental philosophy of public land – of equal access, and every citizen's right to share in the stewardship of that land. Most politicians know that a wholesale giveaway of BLM or Forest Service land to states is impractical today (contrary to the rhetoric of some 'public servants'), so a more sinister, and effective, stratagem has been employed – to pick apart the federal lands puzzle, piece by piece. Open the Arctic Wildlife Refuge to drilling, defund Mojave National Park, disarm BLM rangers, gut the Endangered Species Act, put pro-development language into a Utah wilderness bill, kill a twenty-five year-old land acquisition fund, downsize the federal land agencies, put a bounty on the head of a wild wolf, propose a national park "decommissioning" committee, legislate cattle ranching as the 'highest and best use of public land'... Individually, these efforts accomplish much the same task as Senator Robertson of Wyoming tried in 1947, only in a bitterly cynical 1990s style. At least that fight was in the open.

DeVoto once marveled at the West's obsession with suicide. Why would a land, he wondered, with so much natural abundance, both material and spiritual, try so relentlessly to slit its own throat? He couldn't proffer an answer – no one can. Still, it is disheartening to see, fifty years later, the same debate being waged, the same half-truths and full lies being hurled, and the same fingers pointed. Has nothing changed in two generations? The West, despite the best intentions of public users and disapprovers, appears to be just as suicidal as ever. Western senators and congresspeople in Washington have grabbed a sharp knife and are holding it directly over their hearts, saying "Don't try to stop me, I know what's best for the land." The question is – should we stop them or not?

"Things have changed," I say to DeVoto's restless shadow, which appears to be searching vainly for a mechanical typewriter, "you have friends, for example, lots of

friends.” The entire modern environmental movement, I remind him, has flourished since he played the Lone Ranger, riding a stuffed chair, caressed by a gentle eastern breeze. Public land is not alone anymore, I tell him, it has millions of advocates, at least theoretically. It didn’t do any good, I could still hear him pacing across the floorboards, hands clenched tightly behind his back. Why, his nervous behavior implored, was this happening again then? Why had the suicidal impulse come back? How could a handful of politicians fly in the face of millions of campers, hikers, fishermen, and other outdoor enthusiasts of every stripe and *think they could get away with it?* He stopped pacing and turned a round, shadowy head toward me. How, he asked silently, could this be happening?

It was a good question. I didn’t have an immediate answer. Nearly 300 million Americans visited the national park system last year, which means, theoretically, the National Park Service should have 300 million constituents. So how could a group of vote-sensitive politicians think they could propose closing any national park and not get publicly disemboweled for their trouble? Well, the answer appears to be – because they can. They appear to be acting with impunity – they don’t sense a backlash, so they don’t fear one. Perhaps they sense no Bernard DeVotos out there, or perhaps (and probably more accurately) they sense complete voter apathy. Perhaps they are depending on that apathy. Perhaps after fifty years this is the greatest difference between DeVoto’s age and our own.

His spirit resumed its fretful pacing. He was beginning to make me feel very uneasy.

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## **November 1, 1995 (II)**

“Why is this happening?” I tossed this question to Dave Foreman, the original wilderness warrior, during a conference on wild land held recently at the College of Santa Fe. I pointed at a classroom blackboard where the names of two dozen public land giveaway bills before Congress had been etched in chalk. The bills closed national parks, gave away all Bureau of Land Management territory to the states, gutted the Endangered Species Act, opened the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, authorized the Animas-La Plata dam in southern Colorado, mandated higher timber targets on the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, and ruined redrock wilderness in southern Utah forever, to name a few. Minutes earlier, Dave Foreman had called the combined effect of these bills “A theft of our public lands” – an audacious attempt to remove the “public” from public lands altogether.

What I wanted to know, however, was why this assault was happening now, twenty-five years after the first Earth Day? From clean water and clean air, to wilderness and wildlife, environmental causes, polls say, enjoy substantial support. Hell, nearly three hundred million Americans went into our national parks last year, and received their good tidings; that means there should be nearly three hundred million advocates for public land and open space (provided they were not discouraged by the shabby facilities and packed parking lots). Three hundred million people hollering all at the same time for national parks should wake up even the most cynical member of Congress. So why, then, do we have a bill threatening to close national parks? How could this be? Who are our congresspeople and how could they flaunt public opinion so brazenly?

(Note: the park decommissioning bill was defeated in the House recently when sixty-seven moderate Republicans broke ranks and joined the Democrats. The Republican leadership’s response to this defeat was deeply, and disturbingly, cynical: they attached the

bill to a budget appropriations bill and dared the President to veto it. Remember, the parks bill had been voted down! Is this democracy? I think not. And politicians wonder why people hate Washington so passionately?)

Why is this happening? Partly, because it can. Determined politicians dead-set on stealing public land from the public are depending on voter apathy to accomplish their goals. But part of the blame must be directed at ourselves as well. The environmental movement has become stalled. We have become complacent, said Mr. Foreman, gorged on our success, fat and lazy. We have also allowed ourselves to become demonized, unfairly I feel, by reactionary forces who stand to profit from a roll-back of environmental laws and regulations. Of course we're partly to blame for this condition as well. In the great shouting match between supposedly "competing" interests over the future of public land, some environmentalists have been the loudest agitators. If we are going to play the blame game then we need to point a few fingers at ourselves.

Mr. Foreman's answer to this stagnation is to organize, organize, organize – as evidenced by the weekend's conference. We should get back to grassroots, he insists, and start knocking on people's doors. If we don't, he implies, then we'll become exactly what our detractors say we are: elitists. We're in danger of losing our relevancy because we're losing touch with our primary constituency – fellow human beings. Obviously, the support for environmental causes is still out there, as Congress is slowly learning, the problem becomes, how do we tap it?

Dave suggests that we mobilize, and he's right of course, but I have another idea. It is slowly beginning to dawn on me that it is the message, not the messengers, that needs to be revitalized. Environmentalism, for one reason or another, has been backed, snarling, into a corner. We seem to be perpetually on the defensive – block this, stop that, don't do this, don't do that. We seem to be perpetually objecting to things. The stereotype has finally become a negative one and is in danger of sticking. I am reminded of a comment made last year by the head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who said the only time she ever heard from the environmental community was when we sued. Otherwise, there was no communication. That is clearly a mistake on our part.

I believe we need to discover, or perhaps rediscover, a positive message. Of course our effort to provide clean air, water, and wilderness is packed full of positives, even if they don't get touted that way in the press (the slogan "Cattle Free in '93" was a disaster, let's face it – by being needlessly inflammatory it obscured the genuine debate over healthy rangelands). But our chore is greater than simply putting a new spin on old wine bottles. We need to get out of the 1970s. We need a message that speaks to the concerns of today, one that embraces the issue of values and responsibilities – individuals, families, and communities. What form this message takes isn't clear to me yet. In the meantime we must work overtime to block, object, derail, and defeat the Congressional assault on our public land, even if it reinforces our obstructionist image.

Why is this happening? We used to be the good guys.

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January 1, 1996 (III)

Recently, I have been thinking about dwindling fish populations, bumper stickers, trash compactors, and the future of the environmental movement. And it's making me feel very uneasy.

Over the past year or so, a deluge of alarming stories have rained down on our heads concerning the precipitous decline of wild fish populations in the world's oceans. Fish stocks have dropped so rapidly that many governments have been forced to impose moratoriums on the harvest of particular types of fish in fear that these populations might actually go extinct. Needless to say, these decisions have created havoc in the fishing industry, which is in jeopardy of collapsing altogether, especially along the northeastern coast of Canada. Many fishermen, in turn, have pointed their fingers at the environmental community, saying, in effect, "get off our back!" – a charge that baffles me entirely. It is, overall, a very distressing situation.

What alarms me the most, however, is the lesson not being learned from this tragedy. The cause of population decline – overfishing by humans – is beyond debate, and yet no one in the industry seems willing to admit fault, or share any responsibility. People would rather point fingers and swear oaths. But the truth is the fishing industry appears incapable of living within one simple rule: there must be a limit to the catch. Obviously, there are only so many fish in the sea; harvest them all and everyone suffers. Conversely, if the fishermen chose to live and work within certain limits, then they could have their fish and eat it too, so to speak. It really seems that simple: fish together in moderation, or die together in exploitation.

Living Within Limits

If I had to boil down environmentalism's central thesis into a bumper sticker I would write this: *Learning to Live Within Limits*. Everything we say and do as members of the movement, when we stop to think about it, comes back to this message. If we want to live in a healthy, attractive, and profitable world then we must abide by certain limitations to our wants and needs. We simply cannot have it all. This rule applies not only to Canadian fishermen, or to ranchers, loggers, and other commodity-based lifestyles, but to environmentalists too. A forest full of Spotted Owls, or a rangeland free of cattle is, for a variety of reasons, simply an unrealistic goal. We must accept limitations to our dreams and actions as well. This is a lesson we can all share – living within limitations means striving for a balance of dreams and realities.

The trouble is nobody likes limits. Nobody likes to get their hand slapped when it is caught in the cookie jar. A stern parent, shaking a finger, saying "no, no, no" isn't anybody's idea of fun, or profit. For over a generation the environmental movement has acted as this country's stern parent, shaking a finger at polluters and recalcitrant federal agencies (and occasionally striking them). It was a tough role to play, especially when the children threw noisier and more violent tantrums. But as any good parent knows, it is a job that *must* be done, if he or she intends for the child to grow into a healthy and productive citizen. If not liked, we were at least respected for what we were trying to accomplish.

But something has changed in the last five years or so. The tantrums by natural resource users, and others, have grown to deafening proportions, inciting some, on a national political level, to attempt to dismantle the very limitations that were considered reasonable by most people. The stern parent has suddenly become a bad person; someone to be reviled as a totalitarian bent on imposing his or her will on our playpen private rights. We seem,

suddenly, and in a heat, to resent any and all limitations on our behavior – and damn the consequences.

Life in a Trash Compactor

I'm not a sociologist but I will hazard one explanation for this dramatic turn of events: we act as if we lived in a trash compactor. It might be true; by all indications we are being squeezed on four sides: by a shrinking base of natural resources, by stagnant wages, by a breakdown in cultural norms and values, and by a loss of faith in the political process to make a constructive impact in our lives. Slowly, and inexorably, the compactor keeps squeezing us, resulting in a great deal of anger. A convenient target for this rage is the stern environmental parent. A resentment has begun to build about our message – living within limits – because it is not what people want to hear when they are being compressed into a little ball of trash. It is still a good message, of course, and one, I believe, that will allow us ultimately to climb out of the compactor, but that may not be the point anymore.

Cynical attitudes about the corporate motives of the Republican leaders in Congress aside for the moment, I believe the attack on environmental regulations at the state and federal level is rooted in this 'compaction' of American life. The anger appears to be genuine, as does the resentment, and it would be a serious error on the part of the environmental community to dismiss them as the illogical rantings of a lunatic fringe. There is more substance to this complaint than we realize. People are hurting, frustration is mounting, and the environmental movement, as a consequence, runs the risk of irrelevancy. We must turn our attention to the noise in our midst; we must find a new way of articulating our message – to accept limits as a form of salvation – so that it means something to the majority of American. Right now we're not doing that.

And it's making me very uneasy.

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### March 1, 1996 (IV)

As the eye of the congressional hurricane passes over the country, giving us a temporary respite from an unreasonable tempest, I find my thoughts turning to history and lessons that have been apparently unlearned.

In my quest to understand how we arrived at this moment in time – in which a shockingly brazen frontal assault is being waged on a generation's worth of environmental achievement against the will of public opinion – I have turned to history of the conservation movement for clues. What I have discovered, however, has made me uneasy.

### Turn-of-the-Century Anxiety

Reading history in the shadow of a new and uncertain century, I am struck by how familiar the hopes and fears of 1896 sound, especially to the ears of today's conservationists. A century ago, John Muir and friends were grappling with the increasingly bleak aftershocks of the Industrial Revolution. Physical and spiritual soot were spreading at an alarming rate. Cities were overflowing with crime, alienation, and anxiety. The nation's quality-of-life was under siege. Turn-of-the-century America, wrote historian Roderick Nash "appeared to be

overrun by confusion, corruption, and a debilitating overabundance.” People became deeply concerned about “the eclipse of morality, refinement, and idealism by urbanization, industrialization, and business values.”

In response, Muir urged “nerve-shaken and overcivilised” city-dwellers to wander in the wilderness, post haste. In heeding his advice, many became leaders in the burgeoning conservation movement. The sentiment of Will Dilg, founder of the Isaak Walton League, was typical: “I am weary of civilization’s madness...I am tired of your piles of buildings and I ache from your iron streets...I long for the unharnessed freedom of the big outside.” He and others urged the populace to fish, hunt, hike, camp – whatever it took to restore mental health. As a result, open space became a prerequisite to a healthy society. Nature became a source for aesthetic experiences, spiritual contemplation, and physical fitness. Even business-minded President Calvin Coolidge endorsed “life in the open.”

In the process of protecting open space, the conservation movement also became profoundly anti-modernist. It savaged society for its “loss of illusions,” as historian Michael Cohen wrote, and “its loss of trust in ideology, in God, of love, science, art, and faith.” The answer, for activists such as Bob Marshall, was a redefinition of wilderness as the salve and savior of civilization. In nature could be found not only health, beauty, and spiritual renewal, but an antidote to the shortcomings of a materialistic culture. Conceptualizing wilderness, as much as walking through it as Marshall did, meant challenging the standard definitions of growth, progress, and economic value.

Protecting wilderness meant accepting boundaries. Nash put it this way: “Preserving wilderness means establishing limits. We say, in effect, we will go this far, and no further.” Unfortunately, self-restraint has proven to be a very elusive goal for Americans.

### Ring in the Ears

The so-called Information Revolution shows every sign of becoming the Industrial Revolution redux. The incessant clamor of our age, the babbling heads on television, the petty vindictiveness of our politicians, the congestion in our cities, not to mention the breakdown in basic civics, morals, and manners, has caused a terrific ringing in my ears. I, too, am beginning to ache from our iron streets.

If others feel as I do, then a return to the natural world as the antidote to our creeping madness should logically follow, especially in this era of shrinking open space.

The rush to nature, however, does not seem to be materializing, at least on the political level. It is true that more Americans than ever are using our public lands, but it also seems true that fewer Americans are demanding that their representatives do something to protect that land. On top of this apathy is the unparalleled effort by Congress to give away the very land that is so intensely cherished by its constituents.

Why is all this happening? Blind political hubris on the part of Congress can’t be the only answer. Part of it must be found in history and rhetoric. I believe the success of the conservation movement in the early part of this century was directly tied to the link its leaders made between wilderness and human health – mental and spiritual – not just the physical, as we emphasize today.

Conservation in that earlier age was wedded to human needs and human values in a way that is no longer promoted, or even tolerated in some quarters. A deep faith in science seems to have supplanted human emotion as the primary interpreter of the natural world, and

I wonder if it's turning people off. The movement's capacity to critique society also appears to have been undercut by our obsession with hard science. What good are a few thousand facts and figures unguided by a convincing social message, spoken in human terms that we can all understand?

Science has produced significant progress in our effort to protect the environment, and hopefully will continue to do so, but looking back over the course of conservation history, it seems to me that this loss of the human element in the argument for the preservation of open space has endangered the entire movement. Emotions – what we feel and believe – seem to have been dropped from the equation at the peril of alienating the movement's popular support.

Combined with the creeping chaos of our time, I believe it is time to restore 'the human' to the conservation movement. A failure to do so would be a cause for deep concern.  
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May 1, 1996 (V)

I returned recently from an annual meeting of professional archaeologists where a number of the papers delivered and theories discussed have set me to thinking, and worrying, about the state of things environmentally.

Much of what archaeologists do and write about involves the environment. There are two reasons for this: First, environmental variables are relatively easy to discern in the prehistoric record. Tree-rings tell us a great deal about changes in climate, such as the onset of a drought, over a long period of time. Pollen analyses reveal what plants were in bloom, when, and how frequently. Animal bones talk of wildlife. Human artifacts talk of agriculture.

Secondly, the environment played a huge role in all prehistoric, and most historic, people's lives. Living 'close to the land' really meant something a thousand years ago. In order for an archaeologist to truly understand a culture he or she must come to grips with the dynamic of human-environment interaction. In many ways, it is the key to what happened so many years ago. I believe it is a useful key for us today.

The Lesson of Prehistory

Contrary to popular expectation, what most archaeologists will tell you about the relationship between prehistoric cultures and the environment is this: it was rough. Far from being an edenic, harmonious balance of give-and-take between nature and culture, it was mostly take-and-take by humans. Most often prehistoric peoples would move into a particular region, exhaust its natural resources – water, wood, and wild game – and move on. It was a cycle as "natural" as the seasons.

Sometimes this cycle took two centuries, sometimes it took a lot less. Sometimes it ended spectacularly, such as what happened at Chaco where a rapid rise in population put tremendous stress on scarce resources. When Chaco Canyon entered a prolonged drought the whole social structure collapsed in a heap. Communities broke up and scattered across the landscape. A grand experiment in social aggregation, much like what we're trying today in our big cities, proved environmentally unsustainable.

The archaeological record is replete with similar stories of boom-and-bust. Prehistoric New Mexico, in fact, can be viewed as one long migration flowing from northwest to

southeast with communities flourishing and expiring in regular order according to differing rates of environmental exhaustion. Ask an archaeologist. This cycle was broken only by the arrival of the Spanish and enforced settlement.

From my own experience as an archaeologist, reinforced by what I have read and heard over the years, the lesson of prehistory appears to be this: humans are predisposed to short-sighted exploitation of natural resources. Unless a social or environmental check is put in place somehow, such as economic self-restraint, or a drought, the human inclination to take-take-take and damn the consequences will cause ecological damage and social displacement. It is a lesson we have refused to learn, or chosen consciously to ignore.

Moderation

Everything, as Einstein once despaired, has changed except the way we think. This especially applies to technology – another arena of intense archaeological investigation. Resource exploitation was tolerable in prehistoric times because populations were small, open space was abundant, and technology was simple. Of course, all three of these conditions have changed profoundly by 1996, but none more than technology. Our ability to affect nature by technical means has leaped forward by light-years. Our thinking, however, remains Neolithic.

Technology-bashing, of course, is not the answer to our current conundrum – despite its faddishness. Instead, our thinking needs to evolve. We need to come to grips with our predispositions, and profligate habits, and make decisions about how we want to live our lives. We don't need to roll back technology, as some suggest. Rather, we need to roll forward our thinking and priorities – reuse over waste, for example; open space over 'No Trespassing' signs; self-health over self-abuse.

I think one answer is *moderation*. This is a radical idea, when you think about it. Everything in our culture points directly at excess: eat what you want, buy more than you can afford, curse public officials as loudly as possible, expose every fetish on TV talk shows. There is nothing too outrageous anymore. Urged on by TV advertisements we seem to have thrown all restraint, and caution, to the wind.

So it is with the environment. Regulations that protect the safety of our air and water have suddenly, according to some lawmakers ('lawbreakers would be more accurate'), become "burdens." They are obstacles to future growth and profit, i.e. continued excess and waste. They are impediments to the American Dream, now only affordable by a small handful of citizens. The environment, it seems, has come to symbolize a wet blanket to a society determined to "Just Do It."

That's alright. Environmentalism's lesson is, or should be, moderation and self-restraint. Moderation is not the same thing as a monastic life, or a Neolithic one, however. Rather, it means putting strong curbs on our appetites – less growth, less consumption, and generally treading more lightly. It means breaking our predisposition to take-take-take. It means giving something back, and slowing down. It means changing the way we think – before it gets changed for us.

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**July 1, 1996 (VI)**

As most of us are well aware, a recent Sierra Club referendum on forest policy netted a new national policy that demands a ban on all commercial logging on public land. Although the referendum did not muster anything resembling a mandate (less than 7% of the Club's total membership voted in favor of the ban) it is official Club policy. Now we must live with the consequences and I, for one, am rather alarmed.

Wise-Use antagonists, abetted by a salacious press whose appetite for controversy is downright carnal at times, are already demagoging the new no-cut policy as Exhibit A in environmentalism's continuing slouch toward extremism. True or not, it is terrible timing. Just when it seemed that the flames of conflict could not get any higher, along comes a new log for the rhetorical fire – placed there by Sierra Club hands.

Worse is the spin coming out of Club headquarters in San Francisco. The new policy, we are reassured, will “not tie the hands of local groups or chapters in any way.” And yet, according to another memo, “if asked, Does the Sierra Club favor the elimination of commercial logging on federal lands? Anyone speaking in the name of the Club will explain that we do. This is clearly and unequivocally our ultimate policy objective.” The answer to this awful contradiction, we are told, is “explicitly stated in background materials.”

### Spinning in Circles

I'm upset because, as anyone who has read this column knows, I believe the solution to the myriad problems confronting us and the environment on which we depend, lies in moderation, not more extremism. As a society we must learn to curb our appetites, acknowledge our mistakes, and check our exploitative instincts. We must teach others to live in moderation, which is not the same thing as denial, so that we might all have a bright future together.

This is no less true for activists in the environmental movement than it is for all those “others” out there – Wise Users, industry executives, ignorant consumers, as well as the 80% of Americans who insist, poll after poll, that they want a healthy environment. In fact, it is *more* true for us. We cannot preach moderation while behaving like an extremist organization, as this no-cut logging policy would have us do. To do so destroys our credibility, which, in turn, destroys our ability to affect change. Moderation is as moderation does, no matter how explicitly stated in background materials.

Policies such as this one indicate that we are poised to become the elitist bastards our enemies have been accusing us of being. There is simply no other way of interpreting it, in spite of the spin. It is a brass-knuckle policy. It suggests that the Club is ready to swing wildly and energetically at any person who eyes a tree as a source of revenue. There are no nuances in this bullring, no compromises, and no common ground; the forest product industries, no matter how big or small, will view this policy as a threat to livelihoods, and by extension, their lives. It is an invitation to rumble.

Rather than spin in circles until they become dizzy, I think our leaders in the Sierra Club should admit that the no-cut policy is elitist and either embrace it wholeheartedly, or fight to overturn it. To do neither is pure bureaucracy. Either we become the narrow-minded know-it-alls we are accused of being, or we endorse moderation as a concept and begin to enforce it – starting with ourselves.

Spy vs. Spy

Now I am beginning to understand why the Republican-led assault in Congress on twenty-five years of environmental legislation went as far as it did. The answer in a nutshell: we helped. Not by complacency, as has been suggested often, or by ineptitude, also suggested. No, environmentalists helped by losing touch with the hopes and concerns of middle America. We quit making our case to ordinary Americans and then resorted to threats and denunciations when the chickens came home to roost in the '94 elections.

Fortunately, the irresistible force was met by an immovable object – public opinion – and the Republican war on the environment ground to a halt. The only genuine accomplishment has been stalemate. As a result, many middle Americans became educated to the precarious nature of the laws that were designed to protect them. They responded and were largely, if not entirely, responsible for stopping the bad bills in Congress. We led, of course, but the people followed.

In the process, however, the environmental movement's disconnection from ordinary citizens was laid bare. We know people want clean air and clean water but we do not really know much more than that. Nor do some of us seem to care. The hoi polloi are useful when aroused, some seem to believe, but not much needed beyond that. We want their letters but we do not desire their opinions. Let them watch television.

It is this attitude that produces policies such as the commercial logging ban. I cannot believe that, if asked "Do you favor the elimination of commercial logging on federal lands even if it means the destruction of rural communities and the livelihoods of people who live there?" that the majority of Americans, or Sierra Clubbers for that matter, would respond "Yes! Of Course!"

Some, however, see it differently. The lesson they have learned from the year's Washington wars is this: we must fight fire with fire, extremism with more extremism until, like the two comic strip spooks hell-bent on destroying one another, both sides perish in a blaze of sound and fury, achieving nothing.

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September 1, 1996 (VII)

Now that Hurricane Newt has been downsized to a tropical depression, I believe it is time to deliberate on the damage it hath wrought and contemplate how we might avoid similar maelstroms in the future. We might need to do this quickly. Hurricane Newt may swing out to sea over the next few months, gather strength, and return to our coasts in full fury in early November – a prospect that makes me extremely uneasy.

A Near Miss

A few ago, Congress passed a tolerable Safe Drinking Water Act, which President Clinton has promised to sign. It was, however, mostly a symbolic act. It signaled the conclusion, possibly temporarily, of the Republican leadership's strenuous effort to gut a generation's worth of environmental legislation. It also marked a 180 degree reversal from an early effort to write an Unclean Water Act, thus setting a World Record for the cynical depths to which politicians will descend when faced with overwhelming public sentiment. Thank heavens for election years. The shameless attempt to line the pockets of corporate fat

cats in the name of a smaller and “more efficient” government was exposed for what it was – a fraud. Newt and Company took a direct shot to the jaw from an outraged citizenry for their malfeasance – as well they should have. Unfortunately, it was not a knockout punch and I am beginning to wonder how many rounds this fight will go.

The Good Guys won, that much is clear. What is less obvious, however, is the moral of this fable. What is the lesson we have learned? Not to elect Republicans? Not much of a lesson there. Pound the pavement and get out the vote? Possibly, but Democrats don’t always bring a brighter sunrise either. Keep the heat on Washington? Better, but waging a constant defensive campaign is exhausting. Get in touch with the grassroots? Good, but this is hard work and most environmental organizations seem more eager to focus on capitol houses. Blame the Bad Guy? This is effective and makes us feel good, but does not accomplish much in the long run. Beg for more money? I don’t think so.

What have we, as citizens concerned about the environment, learned about this near miss? One thing seems crystal clear – it’s World War I out there. Both sides have dug deep and elaborate trenches, hunkered down, and refuse to come out. The Big Berthas of both sides rain bombs of incendiary rhetoric down over the field, igniting any flammable material. Poisoned emotions flow across No Man’s Land like a gas, choking combatants and neutral civilians alike. Futile charge and counter-charge are mounted, resulting in carnage. It’s war out there, right vs. wrong, good vs. bad; and the casualty list keeps climbing. A famous Civil War general, when asked which ideological position he stood for in the war, responded wearily: “I just want to win.” That describes Hurricane Newt’s philosophy well, I think – but it also describes our own. Winning, it seems, is all that matter anymore.

Certainly winning is important, mostly because the price of losing is so high. Newt simply had to be defeated, no ifs, ands, or buts. Now that we have succeeded, at least for the time being, what next? A truce? A treaty? Or more fighting? Do we continue the Great War of Attrition at all costs? Do we, as Tacitus once observed about the Roman invasion of Britain, make a devastation and call it peace? Do we sit in our trenches, catching our breath and mending our wounds while waiting for the next round of bombardment, or do we look for a way out of the battlefield?

Solutions

When Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey announced his retirement from Congress last year, he said that the 1994 elections had been fundamentally misunderstood by both sides. The electorate, he said, wanted solutions to problems, not another round of finger-pointing and name-calling. The Democrats had failed to solve fundamental concerns, such as the deficit, low wages, and an uncertain financial future. So they were tossed. The Republicans, in turn, thought they had the solutions, but these proved to be even more unpalatable than Democratic attempts to change things. What people want, Bradley said, was a coming together to solve mutual problems mutually. He saw, however, little or no hope of this being accomplished, so he quit. This is an option that has undeniable attraction.

How can we find solutions to the economic and environmental conflicts that are strangling the West, and the country? The trenches are deep and intractable and very few seem willing to climb out for fear of being shot. Recently I have been accused of being a member of the Wise Use movement. My previous ‘Uneasy’ column, which attacked the Sierra Club’s new policy calling for a ban on all commercial logging, prompted one of the

ban's authors to call and chew me out in no uncertain terms. He asked if I worked for the timber industry. I told him I did not, and then I told him I was simply trying, in my column, to understand how we got to this place and time, and what role we, as environmentalists, might have played in digging such deep trenches. I told this war is unhealthy for everything – it's bad for the land, for wildlife, for rural economies, for trees, and for our future. He disagreed and hung up. I think he simply wants to win.

Can we find solutions? If so, can we do so before Bob Dole becomes President and a handful of extremists dismantles legislation the public so obviously cherishes? Probably not. If Dole wins then there will be just two options: full-out conflict, or despair. There can be no compromise with the sort of administration that Dole will lead, especially if Newt still rules the congressional roost. That much is clear. If Clinton wins, however, I think serious efforts should be mounted to find solutions to these problems. I am not exactly sure what those solutions are, but I am willing to look. Are you?

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### **November 1, 1996 (VIII)**

Recently I attended two events that, though unrelated, proved to have a provocative, and disturbing, connection. One was an informal gathering of forest activists, dominated by Hispanic loggers and members of the Green Party, whose purpose, it seemed, was to vent various grievances under the guise of consensus-building. The other was a formal workshop on wilderness and culture in New Mexico, hosted by the Sierra Club, whose purpose also involved the airing of opinion, albeit a bit more dispassionately.

At the root of both meetings was the uneasy relationship between culture and wild lands. Nearly every speaker at both meetings agreed that we should make room for wilderness in our lives, but no one, I realized, really knows how to do that anymore.

#### **Bashing the Dominant Culture**

The primary grievance voiced at the forest meeting was directed at the Dominant Culture, meaning Euro-Anglo society, which was castigated for its inherent greed, its rapacious actions against the earth, its consumerism, and, above all, its stubbornly colonial attitude toward indigenous people. Which is probably all true. Our society IS intolerably short-sighted. We eschew the Big Picture, and have for a very long time, which is why we find ourselves in such a precarious position, not just environmentally, but socially as well. Imperialism-bashing, however, rarely creates a solid foundation for consensus or common ground, especially when expressed so hotly, as it was that day.

It was, however, what followed that disturbed me. The environmental movement was thrown into the evil capitalist sink along with all the other sins. We were considered to be part of the Dominant Culture, part of the problem, and dismissed almost out-of-hand. There were a few enlightened environmentalists out there, they implied, the Green Party for example, but the rest of us were just another set of players in the great colonial game, bent on steamrolling everything and everyone who disagreed with us into the earth.

This incensed me, at first, because I considered it pure ignorance at work. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the conservation movement has been one of the chief attack dogs biting at the heels of the Dominant Culture. "Stop Polluting the Air!" we yelled.

“Stop Despoiling Our Water! Leave Some Wilderness Alone! Stop your greedy, wasteful, destructive ways!” As I quoted in an earlier essay, the sentiments of Will Dilg, founder of the Isaak Walton League, was typical of the age: “I am weary of civilization’s madness...I am tired of your piles of buildings and I ache from your iron streets...” What is this sentiment, if not a direct challenge to the Dominant Paradigm?

This challenge is as true today as it was a century ago, if not more so. Why, then, were we being lumped together so casually with the elements of society that we were working so strenuously to change? Because a roomful of local folk felt dispossessed and colonized? Because they were angry at the score so late in the boxing match? Republican leaders in Congress, after all, tried mightily last year to subvert what THEY considered culturally dominant environmental legislation. They were the outsiders, attacking the status quo, they said with a straight face, not environmentalists. How then, could we be perceived as being imperialistic by both indigenous peoples AND their true colonizers? What was going on?

### Wilderness Workshop

The second meeting involved a day-long conference on the meaning of federally-designated wilderness to the cultures of New Mexico. The themes were multi-culturalism and management – were they compatible? The overall goal will be to create a BLM wilderness bill that most New Mexicans of all stripes can support and pass it through Congress. To that end, Rep. Bill Richardson showed up to promise his assistance – if we could cobble together a true coalition proposal. Could we? We met for a frank discussion to find out.

Another, more personal, goal was at work that day. As one of the workshop’s organizers, I wanted to see if we could make a case for wilderness on cultural instead of biological grounds. The ecological argument for wild land has, in my opinion, come to dominate most, if not all, debates about setting aside wilderness. It is a good argument, and an important one, but it is overwhelming all other theses. This is ironic considering that the Wilderness Act is primarily a cultural document. The word “biodiversity” is not mentioned once. It may not even have existed, as a word, in 1964.

Much of the discussion at the workshop focused on wilderness as sacred land. This was certainly the Native American perspective, but it was almost everyone else’s as well. To most Anglos, such as myself, a wilderness area is a sacred place, a spiritual place for rest, contemplation, prayer, and healing. It is also a place for biodiversity – but I view ecological integrity as simply another type of sacredness. It is a sacred place even if we never visit it. Simply knowing that holy places exist, for others, is enough. The act of reserving wild land, especially against the background of an unrelenting assault by the Dominant Culture on open space, endangered species, and other hallowed ideas, is exactly the sort of challenge to the paradigm that must continue. The alternative is too frightening to consider.

### Nature and Culture

However, as I listened to the speakers make a very strong multi-cultural case for wilderness, I began to understand why the forest activists wedded our movement so easily to a Dominant Culture they despised. They view the ecological argument for wild land as imperialistic as any big corporation’s business strategy. I had to agree. Divorced from a

cultural thesis, the biological imperative looks an awful lot like another capitalist tool – as incredibly ironic as that sounds – which is why ecology is often referred to, metaphorically, as a sledgehammer. Or, as one forest agitator likes to complain constantly: “They shut logging down even though they can’t even FIND any Mexican owls in the forest!”

There must be a balance between cultural and biological arguments for environmental policy. John Muir, after all, implored us to come into the mountains to get their “glad tidings,” not to stay away. Even Aldo Leopold, the founder of ecological environmentalism, once pleaded for “the preservation of some tag-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of their cultural inheritance.” Culture and biology – two halves that should be equal in the conservationist message, but are not. It’s time to change that. It’s time to restore ‘the human’ to the environmental movement and put it back on an equal footing with ‘the biological.’ How we can do this without diminishing efforts to protect biodiversity, which are critical to the health of these sacred places, will require careful navigation.

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January 1, 1997 (IX)

Upon President Clinton’s reelection in November, an audible sigh of relief could be heard rippling through the environmental community. Despite some misgivings about Clinton, which culminated in a painful endorsement process, environmental leaders knew they could breathe a little easier for the next four years, even with Republicans in charge of Congress. No one expects a reprise of the unprecedented assault on national environmental legislation that occurred two years ago. Everyone, including us, seems chastened by that experience.

During this lull (the bad guys, after all, haven’t packed their bags and left town), while the air is full of talk about cooperation, consensus and achievement, sincere or not, it will be worthwhile to ponder the lessons from this period of high anxiety and then act. It is a critical moment; the public, stirred to action and paying attention to the environment as never before, awaits leadership. The goal-line stand was successful; now the ball is in our possession.

Where do we go from here? Do we march down the field to the same tune that put us in such a precarious position in the first place, or are we going to reach out to middle America and say “Your concerns are our concerns too?” Are we going to put the human back into our movement, as I believe the public is asking us to do, or are we going to keep pushing people away with misanthropic policies? We sit, nervously, at an important crossroads.

People-Free Wilderness

Our movement is out of balance. It should be equally weighted between ecological concerns and human needs, but is not. A century ago, the conservation movement was driven by human desires – solitude, spiritual refreshment, a rejection of modern industrial life, to name a few – but often shortchanged ecosystems in the process (feeding bears at Yellowstone dumps is a good example). The movement was brought into balance by Aldo Leopold, Olaus Murie and others, who demanded that we consider the biological health of land as well. Science balanced emotion and for a while there was harmony.

Today, the pendulum has swung too far toward science. Ecology, particularly in the form of endangered species, seems to be driving most of the movement's policies. Not only have the 'rights' of wildlife been placed ahead of human needs, but a deliberate demonization of human in general has occurred. Humans have become an ecological Lucifer, according to some, the source of every ill afflicting the natural world, and we must be punished.

For example, a resolution was passed recently by a Sierra Club group in another state that called for the "setting aside of some habitat areas that are off-limits to all humans ("pure" habitat), preferably connected to each other by wildlife corridors that are also inviolable." The reason? "...the mere presence of human," continues the resolution, "and hence any type of recreation, can be harmful or even deadly to wildlife." It goes on to say that wildlife have "as much right not to be molested in their homes as we do."

Politically, of course, this resolution is suicidal. It reinforces the cliché that our movement is simply determined to "lock up" the landscape, and will be used, justifiably, by our enemies against us. Pragmatically, it is a stretch as well. The number of humans who actually go into designated wilderness areas is small. Are they really having such a deleterious effect on wildlife? What is "pure" habitat anyway? Humans have been mixing it up with animals for 20,000 years or so in North America; does "pure" mean a pre-contact environment, with Woolly Mammoths and Saber-Toothed Tigers?

While I can support the quarantining of critically endangered species from human contact in order to ensure their survival, that is not what this resolution is about. It has at its heart a fundamentally misanthropic message: humans are bad. We are the source of the plight that has befallen wildlife in this country, which is true – but banishment is not the answer. It also belittles the legitimate use of wilderness for enrichment and recreation. Wildlife *uber alles* is not a solution, it is part of the problem.

Fighting the Wedge

Policies such as 'people-free wilderness' drive a wedge between people and nature. It says, in effect, that people are "unnatural" and do not belong in the normal order of things. The Sierra Club's call for a ban on all commercial logging on public land drives a similar wedge between people and the land. These policies are wrong because in an age of increasing and overwhelming urbanization we should be making every effort to reacquaint people with the natural world, not driving them away. We should be investigating ways that wildlife and people can get along, not categorically rejecting any association.

I believe it was the environmental movement's determination to drive a wedge between people and wildlife that fueled the recent Congressional assault on our conservation heritage. Although greed, politics, and corporate shenanigans were significant forces stalking the halls of Congress too, there is no doubt in my mind that a backlash to our creeping misanthropism was also at work. The public struck back at Congress, of course, but they responded primarily to human issues – clean water in their homes, clean air in their cities, open space for their children, the opportunity to see wildlife in their natural habitats, and a chance to relax in their favorite national parks. It was a fight for the integrity of biology *and* people.

The lesson learned is this: we need to swing our movement back into balance. We need to balance the needs of the ecosystem with the needs of people, and not just hikers and

campers, but hunters, fishermen, even loggers and ranchers. We must require that people tread more lightly on the land and learn to respect the rights of all living things to exist there, as Aldo Leopold implored us to do years ago, but we must also acknowledge the “naturalness” of humans and their “right” to use public land. We must also learn to get along; coexistence is not an option, it is a requirement.

The voice of human need must be returned to the environmental debate. We must say, for example, that the Animas-La Plata dam is equally bad for symbolic as well as ecological reasons. We reject the dam on spiritual, aesthetic, and social grounds, not simply because it might endanger a fish. Why dam one of the last free-flowing rivers in the West? Why must there be more agriculture in a desert? Who dies and appointed engineers God? Forget economics, that dam is simply an ugly idea. Let’s curb our addiction to growth, change our ethics, and kill the dam. If that’s good for the fish too, then so be it.

No social movement in history has succeeded without the support of people – many people. If we are to reinvigorate the environmental movement and capitalize on the groundswell of support generated by the recent fight with Congress then we need to restore the needs of people to our cause. Otherwise, we are doomed to goal-line stands in perpetuity.

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### **March 1, 1997 (X)**

In my effort to comprehend recent events, and to explore my belief that our movement is out-of-balance, I have sought advice in recent months from books by authors that I respect. It is important, I believe, to see wise counsel from those who have gone before, who have thought and fought over the same issues in the past, and who might have something to teach us today. Unfortunately, more and more of us are plowing ahead in ignorance of the history, philosophy, and literature of our movement. And it makes me very uneasy.

Two authors in particular, one living and one living in spirit, provide a provocative, and corroborative, commentary on our movement’s imbalance. Both speak to the ‘human element’ in conservation in a thoughtful and eloquent manner that needs to be shared here.

#### Wallace Stegner

Novelist, essayist, short story writer, and all-around gentleman, Stegner became an eloquent and effective champion of conservation causes, especially in the defense of public lands (he served on the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors for a time). Together with his good friend Ansel Adams, with whose aesthetic he was closely allied, Stegner had a significant impact on critical fights – stopping the dams in Dinosaur and the Grand Canyon, protecting wilderness areas, and decrying the exploitation of the American West and its natural resources. His death in 1993 created a void that has not been filled.

Stegner’s perspective on conservation was almost entirely humanistic. In his famous “Wilderness Letter” of 1960, he wrote: “We need wilderness preserved because...the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can briefly bring, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there – important, that is, simply as idea.”

In his essay on why we should save Dinosaur National Monument from the clutches of dambuilders comes this provocative statement: “It would be idiotic to preach conservation of a wilderness in perpetuity, just to keep it safe from human use. It is only for human use that it has any meaning, or is worth preserving.”

He elaborates: “A place is nothing in itself. It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist, except in terms of human perception, use, and response. The wealth and resources and usefulness of any region are only inert potential until man’s hands and brain have gone to work; and natural beauty is nothing until it comes to the eye of the beholder. The natural world, actually, is the test by which each man proves himself: I see, I feel, I love, I use, I alter, I appropriate, therefore I am. Or the natural world is a screen onto which we project our own images; without our images there, it is as blank as the cold screen of an empty movie house. We cannot even describe a place except in terms of its human uses.”

Whether you agree or not with those sentiments, they strike at an important chord in us. It tells us that powerful arguments can be made for the preservation of wild land for humanistic reasons – arguments, I submit, that resonate strongly with the public today. Or, as Stegner puts it: “We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.” We need that hope now, more than ever.”

Wendell Berry

Novelist, poet, essayist, and farmer in rural Kentucky (as well as a former pupil of Stegner’s), Berry has emerged as the leading voice of a new conservation ethic, one based, essentially, on getting one’s hands dirty in the soil. A passionate critic of corporate capitalism as it applies to the earth, Berry champions the conservation of rural communities as a way to simultaneously preserve the ecological integrity of the land and heal our wounded society.

Like Stegner, he too is a humanistic conservationist. In a collection of essays entitled *What People Are For*, Berry writes “Our environmental problems are not, at root, political; they are cultural. As Edward Abbey knows and has been telling us, our country is not being destroyed by bad politics, it is being destroyed by a bad way of life.” And “I believe that until fairly recently our destructions of nature were mot or less unwitting – the by-products, so to speak, of our ignorance or weakness or depravity. It is our present principled and elaborately rationalized rape and plunder of the natural world that is a new thing under the sun.”

The answer is not more science, but more affection. “The sciences are of no help, indeed are destructive, because they work, by principle, outside the demands, checks, and corrections of affection.” Humans, insists Berry, need to retune their attitude to the land, to develop a love for nature that also includes respect for it. Aldo Leopold had much the same in mind when he wrote his famous ‘land ethic’ essay all those years ago.

In his most recent collection of essays, entitled *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry aggressively and eloquently links human health to the health of the land. He writes: “People are seeing more clearly all the time the connections between conservation and economics. They are seeing that a community’s health is largely determined by the way it makes a living.” He continues: “The natural membership of the community party consists of small farmers, ranchers, and market gardeners, worried consumers, owners, and employees of small shops, stores, community banks, and other small businesses, self-employed people, religious people, and conservationists. The aims of this party really are only two: the

preservation of ecological diversity and integrity, and the renewal, on sound cultural and ecological principles, of local economies and local communities.”

## Two Goals

Berry, like Stegner, sees the conservation movement as a two-pronged effort: to protect the ecology of wild land and to preserve the best aspects of human cultures. Both writers view these goals as inseparably entwined. The ruination of the environment shares a root cause with the destruction of culture. The same remedy must be applied to both symptoms. To fight strictly for biodiversity and the rights of wildlife while ignoring the simultaneous destruction of beneficial cultural traditions is foolish and dangerous. We need to embrace ‘the human’ along with ‘the natural’ and think of them as coterminous.

As Berry puts it: “When we include ourselves as parts or belongings of the world we are trying to preserve, then obviously we can no longer think of the world as ‘the environment’ – something out there around us. We can see that our relation to the world surpasses mere connection and verges on identity. And we can see that our right to live in this world, whose parts we are, is a right strictly conditioned...There is simply nothing in Creation that does not matter.” Including people.

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May 1, 1997 (XI)

An uneasy calm seems to have settled over the nation’s environmental wars. Whether this clam is simply a lull in the fighting, a temporary truce, or pure exhaustion on the part of the combatants is not clear. While the skirmishing continues, the principal armies have returned to their camps to rest and reconsider their strategies. I wonder what it all means.

In Washington, D.C., Congress is off to its slowest start in decades, thankfully. Although a few bad bills have been introduced, notably Senator Craig’s ‘Logging Forever’ vision for our national forests, the scale of potential harm is significantly lower than two years ago. The much-touted “Republican Revolution” failed to stir the masses, and is no more.

A similar lull is spreading across New Mexico. In recent weeks, two generals of opposing armies, a rancher and a forest activist, were tried by their peers and sent packing. On the Gila, the capitulation of the Laneys means the Diamond Bar grazing fight is ending with a whimper, not a bang. Although the sounds of chainsaws can be heard once again in our forests, the sound is thin and solitary. And no one has been hung in effigy for quite a while.

What will we make of this uneasy calm? Where shall we go from here? Back into battle one more time? Or call a truce? We are at an important crossroads, and I think we should pick our direction very carefully.

The Upper Hand

By most indications, the environmental movement has prevailed in its struggle with the rural extractive industries. Backed solidly by rising public opinion, we have scored important and lasting victories, such as the recent decision to reintroduce the endangered

Mexican Wolf. The public's mood is in favor of cleaner air and water, healthier land, increased open space, and tighter regulations. The public is demanding more environmental protection, not less.

Concurrently, the strategic plan of the Wise Use Movement has failed on nearly every score. For example, the County Movement, which was a nutty scheme to seize control of federal land, has been rejected unanimously by the courts. It was the latest, and perhaps the last, desperate gamble to maintain an exploitative status quo. Its demise signals a curtain call, of sorts, for this particular western melodrama and its colorful cast of characters.

A surging tide of demographics, and resulting culture change, may be the final nail in the coffin of the "good old days" as well. Recent immigrants, including Baby Boomers, urban refugees, lone eagles, cappuccino liberals, and other restless souls, have been changing the face of the rural West for a decade. Their political and social influence was bound to alter the nature of traditional western communities, whether anyone like it or not. Today, these changes look to be permanent.

The Real Enemies

How should the environmental movement react to the state-of-things in the rural West? Should we go in for the kill, demanding that all chainsaws be silenced in our forests and that all public rangelands be cattle-free by 2003? Now that we have slipped the knife into the body of traditional communities, should we twist it hard and watch what happens?

No. I believe it serves no one's greater good to exterminate the rural West, especially our own. Nature abhors a vacuum; if we kill off rural communities, who will step into the breach? If your answer is wildlife or other agents of biodiversity, then you are more naïve than I am. More government? No way. If federal land is emptied of working people, irresistible political pressure will build for its disposal. Of that, I am confident.

Who will fill the vacuum? The answer is easy: the same people who are already rushing in – land developers. Residential subdivisions and commercial urban sprawl are the true enemies of the land, and our health. Tell me with a straight face which does more long-term damage to the land: a herd of forty cattle, or tons of concrete, asphalt, auto emissions, and Bermuda grass?

The trouble is, we know this already. We know that urban sprawl is killing the West; we lament this development in books, articles, and op-ed pieces, we decry it on street corners, at workshops and potlucks. We wring our hands and shake our heads, debating simple solutions to terribly complex problems over beers. Then, when we are done complaining, we get back to the business of trying to Kill The Cowboy.

Why? What has the Cowboy done to us, really? He has overgrazed the land, to be sure, and he has been obstinate, politically belligerent, and occasionally rude too. He would rather fight than switch, but that's his problem. He taunted us into the boxing ring, and we happily obliged. It was his mistake. Now our blood is up, and the KO is in sight. So we wait, panting, for the next round to start. Meanwhile the West burns around us.

Compassion

These should be our goals: to put an end to overgrazing, clearcutting, and bad mines. The prize must be healthy land, and a healthy future, but not at the price of exterminating

rural cultures. We should convince ranchers, for example, to behave better, to graze in an ecologically sensitive manner (yes, it can be done!) and to become the environmentalists they keep insisting they are. We should help them do this, which helps all of us – city and country.

The time is ripe for compassion, which the dictionary defines as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” This should be our marching orders. We should extend a hand now, not a knife. However, though I believe rural communities have a right to survive, and prosper, they do not have a right to continue their abusive ways. They will need our compassion to endure, but they must show some compassion of their own, particularly toward the land. Kindness must be a two-way street.

Some will interpret compassion as a form of weakness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am not suggesting that we slacken our vigilance, or our standards. Quite the opposite. We are still in a desperate struggle with the destructive muscle of corporate capitalism in this country. We just don’t need to take our frustration and anger out on the Cowboy any longer. In fact, there is a possibility we could be friends in this fight.

Forget the olive branch. What we need to do is roll up our sleeves and get to work. There are reasonable answers to the environmental and social ills that plague the West. There is a sensible solution to the grazing debate, for example – one that allows ranchers to make a decent living and which, at the same time, protects the environment. Significantly, this solution does not include the word “compromise” as part of its vocabulary.

It does, however, require compassion.

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## **July 1, 1997 (XII)**

On April 1, 1996, Taco Bell, a subsidiary of the mammoth PepsiCo conglomerate, took out full-page newspaper ads to announce its recent acquisition of a famous Philadelphia landmark – the Liberty Bell. Its purchase, the ads said, was made in the magnanimous cause of reducing the federal deficit. The chime, henceforth, would be called the Taco Liberty Bell.

The truth was revealed at noon. April Fool. Unfortunately for PepsiCo, not many people were laughing. Sold the national symbol of liberty to a private business? Ha-hah. Privatized a piece of our beloved national park system to save a few bucks? Ho-ho.

The timing of this ‘joke’ was quite illuminating, coming as it did at the tail-end of Republican attempts in Congress to dismantle significant environmental laws. Although late to the party, PepsiCo’s contribution to the knife-sharpening chorus was no less noisy than any of its fellow wishful-thinkers. The table was set and the guests were in place. Fortunately, the waiters refused to answer the bell.

## **Bad Dog**

Corporations, as an economist friend of mine likes to point out, are out of control. They are everywhere, telling us what to eat, how to dress, what to buy, where to vacation, who to emulate, how to live. They have gone global too, and are now telling everyone else how to behave. They will not stop either, until each of us becomes a predictable consumer.

They have already succeeded in America. We are a conquered tribe. The signs are multiple and obvious (one need not look any farther than the stranglehold television has on society). We are sheep, blindly and blithely doing as instructed. Ideology is dead, killed by

greed, and replaced by “free” trade. There are few aspects of our world left that have escaped the often pernicious attentions of corporate conglomerates.

One of them is public land. Our national parks, forests, and wildlife reserves remain mostly unsullied by the hand of corporate America. True, our national parks are cluttered with cars and snack stands, and true, our national forests continued to be managed to benefit a handful of corporate timber ‘beasts,’ but escape is still possible. We can leave it all behind, sneak off into the wilderness and be alone. And it is driving the corporations crazy.

Last year a plan was proposed in Congress that would allow corporate sponsorship of selected national parks. I was dumbfounded. Parks are for people, not corporations. They are designed to reflect, and encourage, public values, such as egalitarianism and a love of open space, unfettered by ‘No Trespassing’ signs. Anybody with a ten dollar bill can get in. Parks are about nature and beauty, commonly shared. They are also about history, a national story that resonates in each of us, no matter what race, sex, or religion. They are not about money.

In this context, the Taco Liberty Bell ‘joke’ becomes ominous. Corporations are trying, I believe, to find ways to chop down the significant obstacle in their path, i.e., the “public.” Much of the recent effort in Congress to demolish environmental laws was prodded, funded, and *written* by Big Industry. Their goal was a simple one: separate the public from the laws that protect it, and then go in for the kill. They almost succeeded.

## Heart and Soul

I am not an anti-capitalist, not by a long-shot. I believe, however, that the system should have a heart. Let me explain: a very famous person once said “Capitalism has no soul.” The speaker wasn’t Karl Marx, or Lenin. It wasn’t even John Lennon. It was the Pope, John Paul II. He meant, of course, that the free market has no *inherent* soul. It is intrinsically indifferent, cold, calculating, and occasionally cruel.

It is a machine, John Paul suggested, that comes without a heart included. It is not an evil or bad machine by nature, just one without morals or rules, other than the rule of the jungle. Soul must be brought to the free market by the individuals who chose to work there, or profit by it. The heart of the machine, in other words, will be no greater, or less, than the quality of souls which inhabit it.

The father of a friend of mine is the best capitalist I know. He began his career as an elementary school teacher but quickly became disgruntled with the poor quality of teaching materials forced upon him by megalithic publishing houses. He decided to go into business for himself. He hired the best teachers and writers he could find and launched a company dedicated to high-quality, affordable, and innovative primary school publications. Teachers welcomed him like rain after a drought. Business boomed. He won awards. He expanded his mission to Grades 4-6. The accolades, as well as the money, poured in.

He succeeded, in part, because he brought a very big heart to his business. Not only did he affect people’s lives constructively (there are few nobler goals than educating children) but he also ran his company with compassion and consideration – and did it profitably. Eventually he sold the publishing firm to another corporation for multiple millions of dollars and retired knowing he had made a difference, to schoolchildren, to teachers, to coworkers, to family, and to friends of his family who were overjoyed to see the system work beneficially for others.

## Our Work

In the aftermath of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, two jobs seem crystal clear. First, we must expand environmentalism's role in criticizing bad capitalistic behavior. It is part of our roots. The environmental movement was born, in part, as a strong reaction to the ugliness of the Industrial Revolution. If anything, things have become uglier. Short-sighted self-interest still rules the roost – and shows no sign of abating anytime soon.

We must also strenuously defend the “public” in our society, particularly public land. We must not let national parks become toys of advertising agencies. We must put an end to the corporate rape of our forests. We must zealously guard every acre of BLM land against increasing pressure for its disposal. Sprawl is lapping at the fenceline of public land today. Tomorrow it will demand an additional sacrifice of open space. We must say “no!”

Secondly, we must find ways to inject soul into our dominant, and dominating, economic institution. While fighting the egregious elements of capitalism, such as clearcuts, toxic spills, bad mines, and air pollution, we must also foster sensible alternatives, ones that address the heart of the way we live.

I don't just mean solar power, permaculture, straw bale walls, or recycling. We need to address cultural issues too, not just technological ones. We need to seek out the good capitalists and reward their good behavior. We need to teach moderation, sustainability, and sensitivity. I include ourselves among the pupils.

We also need to help. If a rancher, for example, manages their operation in an ecologically sustainable manner, we should be there to encourage him or her. A ranch, like a farm, if handled with care can be the very model of soul. What greater affection can one have, besides for one's family, than for one's home and the land it rests on?

On that we can certainly agree.

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September 1, 1997 (XIII)

Two years ago, when I began this column, I promised myself three things: one, to be open-minded about the causes of the Congressional assault on environmental laws; second, to be willing to level blame at ourselves if we deserved it; and third, to shut up after a reasonable period of time. Having stuck to the first two promises as best I could, I now keep the third.

Before I go, however, I would like to revisit a few of the points discussed previously, and offer a final recommendation or two. The roller coaster ride called ‘perpetual vigilance’ never ends, of course, but there are ways to make it more effective.

Reinventing Our Roots

The environmental movement must broaden its focus, rearticulate its message, and find more eloquent heralds. It must get away from its current ‘ecology uber alles’ approach by looking to its roots, which are grounded in the humanities, not science. It must reincorporate human needs into its paradigm, such as physical and mental health, spiritual questing, aesthetics, relaxation, and contemplation. After all, the two goals, ecology and human need, are connected at the root and can harmonize with little effort.

The environmental justice movement is a good example. It attacks the exploitation of people *and* land, insisting that both are suffering from a common ailment. National environmental organizations, however, have been very slow in addressing EJ issues, mostly as a result of their continued ecological focus.

Our goal should be this: since human beings are predisposed to short-term environmental abuse, we must devise strategies that encourage long-term behavioral change. We must get people to look at the Big Picture. People must also learn to accept limitations to their appetites and think about sustainability in the long-term. Ecological damage is just one manifestation of our perpetual short-sightedness. We must change fundamental behavior.

To do this we must find eloquent and creative leaders. Our movement has suffered from the recent deaths of passionate and articulate fighters, Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and Ansel Adams among them. Their shoes lie vacant. We are losing ground as a result; while we can promulgate an avalanche of letters and phone calls to stave off a congressional crisis, we need philosophers and motivators to keep our fires burning for the long haul. Some exist, but we need more, and we need to encourage their activism.

Persuasion

Long-term change in human behavior will only occur if it done voluntarily. People will change the way they conduct their daily business only if they are persuaded to do so, not arm-twisted into compliance. Recycling is a great example; a long and thoughtful campaign to change people's attitudes toward their daily garbage has succeeded beyond most people's dreams. Recycling now appears to be embedded in our national psyche.

Unfortunately, environmentalists are increasingly abandoning their persuasive powers in favor of the sledgehammer lawsuit. Moral, ethical, and economic arguments for changing our destructive ways are replaced by legal opinion and enforcement. We are achieving narrow ecological victories at the expense of long-term change. We have stopped being teachers, and become bullies instead.

The Club's new "zero-cut" policy, which calls for a ban on the commercial sale of public timber, is a good example. It has all the persuasive power of a guillotine. It abandons argument in favor of arm-twisting; it pushes people into a corner and tells them to stay there – or else. It creates resentment and anger, as guillotines do, instead of voluntary change.

On the other hand, we must not abandon the 'big stick' when exploiters do damage to the land. Lawsuits, letters-to-the-editor, protests, and public denunciations will always be a part of the toolbox of perpetual vigilance, and rightly so. But we need a carrot to go along with our stick, otherwise things will never change substantially.

We need to persuade people as to the moral, ethical, economic, and spiritual 'rightness' of our cause. Theoretically, everyone should already be on board. After all, who in their right mind could oppose clean air, clean water, open space, or the protection of wildlife? Well, *some* could, and do; but the majority of Americans are with us. Or should be.

Yet, polls say that the word 'environmentalist' has become a dirty word. Why? Because we have stopped trying to convince people to change their lives through articulate argument, compassionate action, and meaningful solution. Instead, out of frustration, cynicism, and despair we are leaning more and more heavily on sledgehammers and forest theatre. We've abandoned the debater's podium in favor of the back alley.

Face it, our message is not getting through in a meaningful way anymore.

Creative Solutions

We need, as a movement, to generate new ideas to solve old fights. We're stuck in a rut. Sledgehammer lawsuits and eco-theatrics are not getting the job done anymore. While they remain narrowly, and temporarily, effective they are having a decreasing impact on the hearts and minds of Americans. Witness the steep decline of membership in Greenpeace (from 1.2 million in 1991 to 400,000 today).

Fortunately, creative solutions to complex problems are beginning to appear. I am excited by a recent effort called "Green Wood." This is a certification process by which environmentally-sensitive timber practices will receive a Green Seal-of-Approval, allowing consumers to vote with their pocketbooks. If activists involved in this collaborative process can work things out satisfactorily, Green Wood holds genuine promise for change.

Personally, I am putting my words into action by devoting large chunks of time and energy to an effort to bring ranchers and environmentalists together over a new ranching technique that protects ecosystems while allowing ranchers to make a living. The response to the effort, called the Quivira Coalition, has been extremely positive, and nearly overwhelming.

Quivira's goal is long-term, voluntary change in behavior on the part of everyone – ranchers, environmentalists, agency folk, and the general public. We're not arm-twisting anyone. Instead, we're letting the power of our idea do the talking. Through workshops, site tours, and lectures we hope to educate and persuade people to change their attitudes. Already it is working. A few ranchers and environmentalists have put down their swords and begun talking about cooperating. It's a great first step down a long road.

I go with fingers crossed.

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