

2002 Starker Lecture Transcripts

Speaking Western: Honest Conversations in the New West

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The frontiers have been explored and crossed. It is probably time we settled down. It is probably time we looked around us instead of looking ahead. We have no business, any longer, in being impatient with history. We need to know our history in much greater depth...Plunging into the future through a landscape that had no history, we did both the country and ourselves some harm along with some good. Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging. (Stegner 1992:205-206).

The New Old West

The American West is a new place; increasingly composed of people who have just arrived from somewhere else. Indeed, the concept of the "floating baseline" ensures our region will continue to fill up with people from somewhere else. Because the quality of life is so much better here than it is elsewhere, people will continue to leave where they live and move to the West, where the cost of living, traffic congestion, crime rate, and pollution are less than where they are from. Not surprisingly, nine of the ten fastest-growing states are in the West, as are the fastest-growing counties and the "most desirable places to live, work, retire,..."

The upshot of this is we live in a New West, a quite different place from what it was just a short time ago. This New West is presently going through a transition from what might be called a "workscape," where people dress in canvas and denim, to a "playscape," where they are more likely to be seen in fleece and Lycra. Historically, the main economies of the intermountain West were extractive in origin. Today, we see the industries of logging, mining, water development, and ranching being replaced by the newer amenity-based economies related to technology and service jobs (Knight 1997).

The most important generalization that emerges from this phenomenal shift in demographics is that of land-use changes on both private and public lands. And these changes are emphasized because land ownership in our region is blended; half public and half private. In the not-too-distant past, private lands beyond city limits were allocated to utilitarian uses; today their emerging best use is increasingly residential and commercial development. Whereas the public lands were historically devoted to extractive uses, today their highest and best use has been decreed to be outdoor recreation in all its myriad forms, from passive to mechanized to motorized.

Let me hasten to say that I am speaking of transitions, not of absolutes that have already taken place everywhere across our region. True, there are still sectors of public and private lands in the West where ranching or logging or energy development is still

the principle use. What I speak of are trends that we are in the middle of, though increasingly these conversions in land use have already occurred. In Colorado, over 270,000 acres of private land are converted annually from farming and ranching to residential and commercial development. On the public lands, we see less logging, mining, and grazing every year as recreationists descend on our state and federal lands, fully motorized and looking for a week or weekend of happiness away from our region's increasingly congested and stressful cities.

If you agree with me that we are living during a period of rapid land-use change that affects equally our public and private landscapes, then let me suggest that we are as much in need of a land ethic now as at any other time in our history. And we are also in desperate need of a consumption ethic, because our region's unbridled growth and expansion is a byproduct of unprecedented consumption, sanctioned by a remarkably complacent attitude of denial, of belief that we can continue to grow this New West without limits.

First, let us examine whether the economies of the New West are benign or equally damaging to our region's natural heritage as the traditional extractive uses that so defined the Old West.

Recreation and Residential Development: Extractives Uses Under Different Names?

First, the public lands. Outdoor recreation, it turns out, has the same potential to affect biodiversity as have the traditional land uses of logging, mining, water development, and livestock grazing, albeit in different ways (Knight and Gutzwiller 1995). On public lands, outdoor recreation is second only to water development as the chief culprit in the decline of federally threatened and endangered species (Losos et al. 1995). On all lands, public and private, outdoor recreation is the fourth leading cause for the decline of federally listed species (Czech et al. 2000).

Let me be quick to point out, for those of us who recreate passively while hiking, rock climbing, or dry-fly fishing, that a further breakdown of which recreation activities harm native species is unnecessary. We are all at fault, whether we mountain-bike or dirt-bike across our region's public lands (Knight and Cole 1995, Losos et al. 1995). So, although we may call outdoor recreation an amenity use, it is as culpable as logging or dam-building in its ability to affect populations of species that help define our region's natural diversity.

What about residential and commercial development on private lands? Do these activities alter our natural heritage as, belatedly, we are discovering outdoor recreation does? Yes, and then some. Exurban development is the second leading cause across America, second only to invasive species, for the decline in federally threatened and endangered species (Czech et al. 2000). Perhaps this is not too surprising. After all, if we transplanted a typical city suburb from town to country, might we not expect to see more robins, starlings, raccoons and skunks, and fewer (if any!) bobcats, badgers, orange-crowned warblers, and lark buntings? Research on species that thrive and those that decline near rural ranchettes suggests that residential development away from city limits favors generalist or human-adapted species and results in the displacement of specialist or human-sensitive species (Odell and Knight 2001). As we convert the

privately owned, once rural parts of the West to ranchette developments as vast as the ranches that once occupied the land, we will see a landscape increasingly populated with generalist species, of little conservation concern other than their weedy capacity to displace more-sensitive species whose evolutionary history does not allow them to successfully compete with the newcomers.

A quick aside for those of you who may think we can sacrifice our rural private lands, yet still protect our region's natural heritage on its public lands. Our public lands are the least productive, with the harshest climates and the least-fertile soils. The private lands of the West are where we find the highest primary productivity, because they are situated at the lowest elevations with the richest soils (Scott et al. 2001). The early settlers weren't fools.

One further note for those of you who wonder why NGOs are working with ranchers across the West to keep their ranches vital economic units and out of development. In an ongoing study with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, we are examining bird, plant, and mammal communities across the three principal land uses of the New West other than metropolitan areas: protected areas, ranches, and ranchette developments. Perhaps not too surprisingly, we are finding that private-land ranches support a biodiversity quite similar to that found on protected areas. Ranchette landscapes, however, have a quite different collection of fauna and flora, more closely approximating what would be found in town than in the country (Knight 2002).

Ethics of Land and Consumption

If these results surprise you, please know that you are not alone. My sense is that many individuals and organizations have worked long and hard to either eliminate or modify the traditional extractive uses in the West. Their primary motivation, I suspect, was the belief that if we have less utilitarian use in our region, we would have a more pristine and natural landscape in which to live, work, and enjoy recreation. I can imagine the disappointment among those who believe this when they discover that the uses we have replaced them with also come with great ecological costs. When one devotes a career to stopping rampant logging, inappropriate grazing, and wholesale water development and mining, one should expect to see the one's home region better off.

This thinking, however, is far too simplistic. In reality, as we replace the Old West with a New West, we run a great risk of continuing to live here in a nonsustainable fashion, jeopardizing our region's natural heritage (Knight and Landres 1998). This is where we finally confront the need for a land ethic, a consumption ethic, and an honest conversation.

Aldo Leopold gave us the land ethic. What he had in mind can be captured in a variety of excerpts from his written legacy (Meine and Knight 1999). These include:

- " a universal symbiosis with land, economic and aesthetic, public and private"
- " a protest against destructive land use that seeks to preserve both the utility and beauty of the landscape"
- " a harmony between men and land"

And my favorite:

We end, I think, at what might be called the standard paradox of the twentieth century: our tools are better than we are, and grow better faster than we do. They suffice to crack the atom, to command the tides. But they do not suffice for the oldest task in human history: to live on a piece of land without spoiling it.

What Leopold was asking is that we acknowledge our responsibilities to ensure land health. This acknowledgement entails stewardship--placing our obligations to sustainable uses of natural resources ahead of our individual rights to treat natural resources however we wish. This is a tall order indeed, for the words "property" and "rights" are emblazoned across our Constitution, while the words "land" and "responsibilities" cannot be found within this august document.

You can easily see how Leopold's philosophy of an ethical responsibility toward the land is captured today in the concept of ecosystem management (Knight 1996). Within ecosystem management is the acknowledgment that land uses, both extractive and recreational, are welcome, but only if they are done in a sustainable way. The heart of Leopold's land ethic insists that we have an ethical obligation to ensure that land remains capable of supporting both healthy natural communities and healthy human communities.

What about a consumption ethic? Are we living within our ecological footprint? Across the New West that we inhabit, are we consuming resources and producing wastes in keeping with the amount of productive land and water required to generate the resources and assimilate the wastes?

I sense not. Since 1970, the size of U.S. families has declined by 16%, yet house size has increased by 48%. From 1965 to 1999, annual paper consumption increased by 120%, and annual per-capita consumption of paper increased from 468 to 750 pounds. And, not surprisingly, this is occurring at the same time that the amount of forest products taken from our public lands has plummeted. Between 1987 and 1997, federal timber harvest dropped 70%, from about 13 billion board feet to 4 billion board feet annually (MacCleery 2000).

As we speak, citizens of America, including parts of the American West, are involved in a national dialogue about producing more energy to match our rapacious consumption levels. The concept of conservation and living within our limits was initially discarded by the present administration as a matter of personal virtue. In a more thoughtful country, the concept of conservation would fit nicely within a party of conservatives.

I don't mean to take cheap shots at partisan politics, but the present energy "crisis" is a good example of the need for a consumption ethic to balance a land ethic. After all, if wood products, food, energy, and minerals don't come from within our country, they must come from elsewhere. Across our region and nation, there are serious conversations about offshore production of all of these natural resources. From where I stand, it seems both unfair and hypocritical that the best and highest use of our public lands is for paper, and that of our private lands is for homes.

Ask yourself this question the next time you are faced with choices of resource consumption, whether at the mall or at the thermostat. Should the resources you use come from where you live, or should they come from somewhere afar, from a country where environmental regulations may be not only more lax but less well enforced?

So, in contrasting a land ethic and a consumption ethic, allow me to make these observations. In 1930, nearly half of all Americans lived on farms. Today fewer than 2% of us are farmers, foresters, and ranchers. Which, therefore, is easier--a land ethic or a consumption ethic? Leopold wrote, "A farmer who clears the woods off a 75% slope, turns his cows into the clearing, and dumps its rainfall, rocks, and soil into the community creek, is still a respected member of society." He lamented the fact that we were still so far from a land ethic (Meine and Knight 1999). If you will indulge me, I might paraphrase Leopold and say, "A ranchette dweller who lives in a 4,000-square-foot home, owns three cars, and commutes to work alone is still a respected member of society." Should either be respected members of society? Times are more complicated today than when Leopold was struggling with how to express the need for ethical relations between human and natural communities. Today we need not only a land ethic but also a consumption ethic, for we are increasingly not of the land, but of the mall.

The Time for Honest Conversations

Wallace Stegner wrote, "We are the unfinished product of a long beginning." (Stegner and Stegner 1981). Our region is not the same place it was only a decade ago. It is filling up, and the traditional cultures, dating back to the first Americans, are changing as rapidly as at any time in our history. There is a dire need to begin honest conversations. For too long we have been dishonest in our dealings with each other and with those from outside our region. We have arrived at a point in Western history where conversations about Western lands and land health on private lands and on public lands are entwined and cannot be separated. Private and public lands must be dealt with simultaneously when discussing the future of the New West. The science informing these discussions needs to be accurate, not value-driven, and the conversations about cultural and natural history need to be honest, not mythologized. Science is important in these discussions, but to be useful, the science must be done carefully so that the answers are the best we can get. All of us need to look better and listen more carefully as we struggle to match Stegner's challenge for us to make a society that matches our scenery (Knight and Bates 1995).

There are those among us who actively champion the far ends of the political spectrum. Some Westerners want the public and private lands free of manure, cows, clearcuts, and pumpjacks because they want these places for their own uses, such as mountain biking and river rafting. They want ranchers, loggers, and miners off the Western ranges and forests because they believe what others have told them, that cows sandblast land and that loggers and miners denude hillsides and leave it to wash away into our waterways.

What about the far right? The New Federalists who are obsessed with spreading their private-property rights hysteria? They are as intolerant as the Far Left of collaborative conservation efforts in the New West that strive to bring ranchers, scientists, and environmentalists together. These powerful players in the West throw out incendiary

remarks about wildland protection and government land grabs as easily as their counterparts reflexively oppose appropriate grazing and logging. Thank goodness for those in the radical center who strive to build connections across landscapes, connections that run through human and natural communities and across socio-political chasms. Perhaps the wing nuts at either ends of this human spectrum stir up dissent because they find it easier and more profitable to simplify, divide, demean, and demonize.

Perhaps it all comes down to values--of the rancher, the urban environmentalist, the scientist, and the government employee. Each of us is in love with the West, its punctuated geography, its rich cultures, its wildlife, and its heart-rending beauty that stretches further than our imaginings. All of us will have to change in order to make this a place with vibrant human and natural communities. We can do that. One only needs to look at the history of natural resources management, a continuing evolution which increasingly shows concern for all of our natural heritage. Those with extremely narrow ideologies, those on the far right and far left, may never join us. The rest of us should, perhaps, meet halfway, or nearly so. The need of the moment is to find common ground on which to work for common good. Good-faith efforts, and a retreat from demonization and demagoguery, are what we need today.

If it makes what I have written any more palatable, let me admit where my values come from. My wife and I live in a valley along the northern end of the Colorado Front Range. Our neighbors and friends are ranching families and those who live on ranchettes. Over the years we have come together to dance, eat, be neighbors, and chart a common ground. Whether working together in our weed cooperative, developing a place-based education program in the valley school, or fencing out overgrazed riparian areas, we are working together to become a place where people cooperate, collaborate, and show communitarian tendencies, rather than a place where they engage in ferocious combat, litigation, and confrontation. We are home, we have our hands in the soil and our eyes on the hills that comfort us. In our imperfect lives, we work together to build a community that will sustain us and our children, for we understand that we belong to the land far more than we will ever own it. We strive together in a cooperative enterprise to steward our lands for all of God's children and all of God's creatures. Perhaps that is why I write as I do.

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