

HOME AND HOPE IN THE ROCKIES

The 2004 State of the Rockies Challenge Essay by Ed Marston

Colorado College would have us take the pulse of the eight-state Rocky Mountain Region.

I attempted to do approximately that over 19 years as publisher of *High Country News*. Colorado College has adopted eight of the 10 states, and one- million square miles, my paper covered. I hope you will allow me to stretch the college's region to my 10-state interior West.

It's not a major difference since any attempt to precisely define the region is impossible. The 10 states don't follow the contours of a definable interior West, so I immediately lop off the Washington and Oregon coasts, where the population is, and the great plains of Montana, Colorado, and New Mexico, because the coast and the plains have very little public land and because their cultures and landscapes are so different from that of the interior West.

Nor do I pay a lot of attention to metropolitan areas. I can't lop off the Salt Lake City and Denver metro areas since they're at the geographic heart of the region, so I create exclusionary donut holes.

Like CC, I also leave out the dog whose tail the interior West is: California, with its 35 million people and immense economy. But I include eastern California, which means I've thrown in a chunk of an 11th state. But how could I leave out eastern California? What could be more "interior" than Death Valley and Pyramid Lake and the immense salt valleys of the Great Basin?

The human core of the region I'm left with is the small-town West and the federal lands in which those communities are embedded as well, of course, as the Indians nations, with the largest being the Navajo Nation. With that as background, does it make sense to produce a report card on this region, made up politically of states with straightedge boundaries ruled across the western heart of the continent, without regard to natural or human boundaries formed by rivers and mountain ranges and cultural communities?

We are talking here of the former Empty Quarter of the nation, a term that is becoming

a misnomer at a rapid rate. At the moment, the former Empty Quarter is half empty, or half full, depending on whether you're an optimist or a pessimist, and depending on whether you want it to be empty or full.

Obviously, a statistical report card can be created about this land: we can enumerate population by age and income, per capita and gross income, divorce rates, sexually transmitted disease rates, education, number of Wal-Marts, number of Starbucks, number of Subarus, and so on. Then we can assign our values to those numbers and from that determine the "health" of the West.

But Colorado College, I think, is after something more essential than the A's and B's and F's that make up conventional report cards. It wants the scribbled notes at the bottom of report cards, in which the teacher evaluates the core of the student. It is after the essence of the region.

Does the region have an essence? Wallace Stegner wrote it was aridity. Ansel Adams said in black and white photos that it was the wettest part of the region – the high country. Water developers said in massively poured concrete that it was our ability to create an oasis culture in the desert.

The essence of my West are its federal lands. Of the one million square miles, 500,000 are owned by the federal government. The land is indivisible, as the Pledge of Allegiance describes the larger nation to be. The public land is owned collectively, in joint tenancy, with all the other 275 million Americans.

That is our legacy as Westerners. It is also our curse and challenge. We live amidst this collectively owned land mass. Because it is collective, we must live with other Westerners and with all Americans in ways that only the Alaskans also know.

We are like the residents of the medieval cathedral towns: The public land we live nearest to symbolizes America in the same way cathedrals once symbolized Christendom. Although we often deceive ourselves, we are no more in charge of or own



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lands than the people who lived in the cathedral towns were in charge of the cathedrals. Nor should we dream of being fully in charge. It will not happen. It should not happen.

But we can dream of being responsible for those lands, and for learning to live with them in ways that accommodate our needs and the needs of the other land owners.

We are not doing that at present. Other Americans do not trust us to be local stewards of the land. And they are right.

This distrust has created misery for us and for them. Our destiny is tied to our relationship to the federal lands, and we have not yet learned to live alongside them in ways the rest of America finds acceptable. So we are in a state of perpetual political and economic struggle. A major result for us Westerners is that we lack sovereignty. We live as Southerners did during Reconstruction, occupied by an often federal force, and for many of the same dismal reasons.

The examples of lost sovereignty are many. We had no control over the carving up of the West by drawing of straight state boundary lines that cut up watersheds, divided human communities, and separated natural resources from those who used them.

But it was Westerners who extended rectilin-

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earity to the county level. To take a Colorado example, try some winter day to get from Marble, in Gunnison County, to the county seat in Gunnison in under 2-1/2 hours. This could be fixed by land trades among three counties. But that is not going to happen in our present state of development.

The most famous example of the West's lack of sovereignty came early in the last century, when President Theodore Roosevelt and forester Gifford Pinchot created many of the forest reserves over a long White House night. This loss of sovereignty was justified, and is applauded today. But we should see it for what it was: a childish, destructive, greedy West was treated as it deserved. John D. Rockefeller later on did the same thing in Wyoming, by snatching Grand Teton National Park away from the residents of northwest Wyoming.

The trend continues. Most bitterly for Utahns, there was the secretive creation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by the Clinton Administration in 1996, followed toward the end of the Clinton Administration by the creation or expansion of 22 national monuments.

It is not just a conservation or environmental agenda that runs over Western sovereignty. The Carter Administration ran over Alaskan sovereignty by protecting lands against the will of Alaskans. At the same time, Carter was running over the interior West through a federally subsidized push for synthetic fuels. If a region lacks sovereignty, sooner or later all sides in the region are gored.

If you don't remember synfuels, look at how the present Bush Administration is forcing gas development down our collective western throat.

The West suffers not just from the actions imposed on it by *force majeure*, but also the loss of morale that comes from being the roadkill of national politics and national economics. Does the nation need to get rid of radioactive waste? Does it need to base missiles somewhere? Does it need 5,000 square miles of airspace so that Top Guns can practice bombing and dog fighting? Are we short

of oil or natural gas? Do we need space for recreation? Or for solitude?

Eyes turn west.

In political reaction, we elect people to Washington because they hate the federal government and they hate the values held by other Americans. It makes for great sagebrush-stirring rhetoric and continued powerlessness.

I don't blame Teddy Roosevelt or Jimmy Carter or Clinton-Babbitt or even George W. Bush or corporations or national green groups for running over Westerners. I blame us for failing to even try to figure out how to become sovereign.

To take an example of regional sovereignty, although the World Trade Center site is now a national shrine, not even Californians are trying to tell the New York region how to rebuild. Our goal should be to become that strong, that sovereign.

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Let's return to the Colorado College report card. If I were filling it out, after the few A's and mostly C's about education levels, divorce rates, growth rates, and especially public finance, I'd write at the bottom:

"Johnny has no control over the important things in his life. More seriously, he shows little interest in gaining control, beyond habitual whining and outbursts of anger."

What can we do to gain control over our lives and our region? How can we move from Sagebrush Rebellion behavior, which is the mark of the powerless, to sovereignty?



The traditional path to regional power has been to use the federal treasury and the federal lands to bootstrap growth. After the initial looting of the West's gold, bison, beaver, forests, and arable land, attention turned to raiding the U.S. Treasury to build water projects. Water projects create a construction industry, as well as a political base, symbolized by such men as the late Colorado Congressman Wayne Aspinall and Arizona Senator Carl Hayden. Once built, they create an agricultural industry. And because irrigation, unlike dryland farming, requires a high level of cooperation, irrigated agriculture also builds community.

But Western leaders saw irrigated farming as stopgap, a prelude to industrial and residential development. The desert was to bloom, but only for awhile.

Everyone is complicitous here. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under President George H.W. Bush rejected the Colorado Front Range's application to build a large dam and reservoir at Two Forks in 1990, among those suing to overturn was the Colorado

Cattlemen's Association. The defeat of the environmental movement has been part hurt and part help to those who dream of conventional development in the West. Environmentalists stopped many projects, such as the dam in Dinosaur National Monument and the two dams in the Grand Canyon.

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Two Forks was a victory for rural interests. But CCA didn't want to defend rural interests; it wanted to defend ranchers' ability to sell out to urban interests.

Two Forks has not been the only defeat for the conversion of rural lives and economies to urban ones. The Carter push for energy development in the late 1970s and early 1980s collapsed with energy prices. Even an \$88 billion federal subsidy couldn't make that cow fly.

Environmentalists also provided the only alternative vision to traditional development. We promote a natural West, in which wildlife and grand vistas become an engine that drives the region.

But by creating what have come to be seen as "amenities" – wilderness, national parks, national monuments, wild and scenic rivers, endangered places – environmentalists attracted population and economies that clash with pristine, protected landscapes. Environmentalism transformed the West by making it romantic and famous – thank you, Edward Abbey – and created a growth dynamic it did not foresee and cannot control.

The result has been a convergence; traditional dreams of conventional development have merged with the activity spurred by environmentalism to create one of the fastest growing regions in the nation. In the Third World, economic development dampens population growth. In the American West, it spurs population as rural land uses such as logging and ranching give way to urban economies and

their denser populations.

Since most of us live in or on the fringes of the land conversion, we see urbanization as endemic. It is not.

Of the West's 500,000 square miles of federal land, approximately 420,000 square miles are grazed under permit by 22,000 ranchers. In order to graze cattle or sheep on federal land, a rancher must own private base property. So attached to these 420,000 square miles of grazed federal lands are another 170,000 square miles of private land on which hay is raised in the summer and on which the mother herd then winters, living off the hay. 170,000 square miles are almost Colorado and Utah put together. In addition, the interior West has a large number of ranches with no attached federal grazing land.

In addition to the ranchlands, there are also huge expanses of private forested land in the hands of the timber companies.

At an accelerating rate, we are converting private ranches and industrial forests into urban settlements: ski resorts, subdivisions made up of 40-acre "lots," ranchettes made up of a few to 20-acre lots, and so on. Pretty land goes for the highest prices, but there is an urban market for any piece of undeveloped land in the West.

Environmentalists, some of whom think about the West as a whole, especially as an ecological whole, are torn. On the one hand, they see roads as the major enemy of ecological integrity, physical fragmentation of the land as the beginning of the end.

On the other hand, many of them look at the decline in species and water quality, and have decided that grazing is the enemy of ecological health. And so they do what they can to drive ranchers and cattle off the land. On other fronts, they do what they can to end logging and mining.

In the name of a pristine and unfragmented landscape, some environmentalists fight land use economies and practices that keep land open and that minimize roads. They look at the way ranching and logging and mining are done today, and decide that those econo-

mies cannot be reformed. Large parts of the environmental movement have morphed from a reform movement to a revolutionary movement, abetting the transformation of the West from a place of rural economies that depend on an open landscape to a place of intense, urban development.

But this is not a French Revolution kind of revolution. This is a revolution that pits well-educated environmentalists against working people in ranching and extraction. Environmentalists have failed to develop a strategy that distinguishes corporations from their employees. And in the case of ranching, of course, there are very few corporations to be distinguished.

So in drawing up a report card for the West, I would give C's and D's to ranching and logging and farming, and I would give F's to oil and gas development. But I would also give a D-minus to environmentalists who would drive rural economies and rural people off the land, rather than work to reform them and thereby keep the land open.

But not all environmentalists get D-minuses. The nation's 1,200 land trusts are working to keep rural places rural. In some places, land trusts protect open space around urban areas. This is mostly esthetics and recreation. But a significant number of land protection outfits are concerned at least in part with protecting working landscapes and their economies. The Nature Conservancy, for example, owns a vast amount of land. Some of that land is purely species protection, but many of its ranches try to protect species and rural economies.

Just as it is hard to define the West with boundaries, it is hard to say who and who is not an environmentalist. Land trusts, for example, are not confined to capital-E environmentalists. Cattlemen's associations, such as those in Colorado and New Mexico, have land trusts designed to keep ranches in business. And the Montana Land Trust Alliance, which few have heard of, holds 515,000 acres (800 square miles) of conservation easements from ranchers.

If you define environmentalism as a movement to protect landscapes and biodiversity, then land trusts that focus on ranching are one of

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its most vital parts, lying at the intersection of more healthful food and healthy land. And land trusts are simply one part of a broader movement.

In eastern Oregon and western Idaho, there is a ranchers' cooperative called Oregon Country Beef. Something like 70 ranches with something like 70,000 mother cows, raise beef cattle without hormones and antibiotics, with the co-op's ranchers pledged to enhance rather than just protect the land.

They sell their beef under long-term contract at stable prices into upscale West Coast markets, like the Whole Foods chain. The success of this 15-year old co-op refutes the claim that public land ranching is doomed for economic reasons. The scale of this operation, which covers several hundred thousand acres of public and private land, refutes the argument that ecologically and economically sound ranching is found only here and there.

A different example is provided by the Malpai Borderlands Group in southern Arizona and New Mexico. To make a very long and beautiful story short, ranchers in that very dry territory were being driven out of business by brush, which was taking over their range, driving out vegetation palatable to cows and wildlife, and destroying watersheds.

The fires that had kept the land healthy for millennia had been stamped out by overgrazing. Lightning still struck, but dry, standing grass to carry the fires was gone. The ranchers couldn't afford to take the cattle off the land long enough to grow grass long enough to carry fire.

They were caught in a death spiral until Drum Hadley, a lifelong cowboy and heir to the Budweiser fortune, bought the Gray Ranch and let his neighbors graze their cattle on the land for the three years it took to restore their land through burning.

Instead of cash payment for his forage, the Gray Ranch requires that those who use its grass bank put conservation easements on their property equal to the cost of the three years of grazing.

The grass bank has created both a community and a vast and spreading circle of protected land. It's western-style land-use planning, done by agreement among neighbors.

Which brings us back to sovereignty, which is really the question of the West's relationship to its own metropolitan areas and to the rest of the nation.

As we noted in our report card, Johnny West lacks sovereignty because the nation does not trust him to manage or even live near the federal lands. This would be bad enough if it only affected the West. However, the region has 20 U.S. senators, and so the West's choleric disposition, as expressed by its U.S. senators in reaction to our loss of sovereignty, is a problem for all Americans.

Can progressive ranchers, driven by their own economic needs, alter this tragic dynamic? Not

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by themselves. But if a significant number of non-ranchers recognize what is at stake, and work with ranchers, I think the movement I have sketched can spread.

The movement has two parts. From one side, the so-called extractive industries have to figure out how to extract wealth in ways consistent with the health and beauty and openness of the western landscapes. Ranching is interesting not just because it controls so much private land, but because some ranches are figuring out exactly how to do that. They are showing the way for logging, water development, oil and gas and mining.



From the other side, the environmental movement has to figure out how to achieve its goals without acting like the British colonists dealing with an uncivilized people. The movement has to recognize that it has created a conflict with the region's working people, which should long ago have sent it a very loud warning signal.

If we can't each do this, we doom the West to the suburban, big-box sameness that characterizes, that suffocates, so much of America. But if we do have the largeness of spirit and imagination to undertake this effort, then we face a much brighter world.

By

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