

Nate Marx

Charlie Blumenstein Stewardship Intern Final Report

Carpenter Ranch Preserve, Colorado

Summer 2019

## **Internship**

The 2019 Blumenstein Stewardship Internship had its inaugural year in Colorado at The Nature Conservancy's Carpenter Ranch Preserve. The internship emphasized water conservation along the unique Yampa River Basin, in addition to maintaining the historic ranch property. Working alongside Matt Ross, Carpenter Ranch Manager, and Geoff Blakeslee, former Ranch Manager and now the Yampa River Project Director, I was responsible for ensuring the ranch property was in adequate condition for all visitors. My daily responsibilities included setting and cleaning mousetraps in the Ranch House, lawn mowing and landscaping, trail clearing, running errands in the small town of Hayden, and providing education for visitors. Over the course of the summer, Matt and I were able to clean out the Ranch shop that had accumulated over twenty years of tools and materials in order to build new shelving and storage. I also oversaw the groups of Rocky Mountain Youth Corps that visited the Ranch every week and created garden weeding and fence painting projects that allowed hands-on learning about conservation issues to young students. I very much enjoyed being able to provide experiential education to the next generation of conservationists.

I was also able to benefit from attending several community water conservation meetings with Jennifer Wellman, a hydrologist who is TNC's Freshwater Technical Project

Manager. These included grassroots conservation conferences such as the Yampa and White Rivers Basin Roundtable Meeting, the Upper Yampa River Watershed Group, and the Yampa Integrated Water Management Plan. These meetings provided me with firsthand insight into the various water users and players in the watershed I was living in. Witnessing conversations that focused on balancing the needs of agriculture, recreation, and environmental conservation over such an essential yet highly contested resource as water was a valuable addition to my academic studies. Attending these meetings provided much insight into potential future career paths while also demonstrating the power of local organizations in conserving water and ensuring future flows in the West.

### **Impressions**

As my summer internship in the Yampa River Valley began to wind down, I found myself observing the land I have been privileged to live and work on with a learned understanding that the lens I observe it through is deeply rooted in a moment of modernity. As I developed my own sense of modern environmental stewardship, I found myself meditating on the phrases those in the business of protecting areas of land incorporate into their identity to understand (or manifest) the necessity of the work we do; phrases like *preservation*, *sustainable practices*, *restored ecosystems*, and *resource conservation*. I have found that the field of conservation is inherently tied to restoration, guided by the intention of restoring an exploited ecosystem to a more balanced state. My greatest takeaway from the summer has been in the realization of the importance of grounding oneself in the place you are striving to protect. Without place-based knowledge enriched by a historical understanding of an area, conservation work can be left hollow or perfunctory.

Carpenter Ranch was established over a century ago with the construction of the colossal white barn that remains prominently standing in tribute to the generations of Western settlers who developed and reaped the land in its modern context. Situated in Routt County, Colorado, nestled between Highway 40 and the Medicine Bow/Routt National Forest, and currently under the ownership of The Nature Conservancy, it is a land of vast expanses; a pale, sandy-brown landscape peppered with teal green sagebrush, rolling hills framed by rugged exposures of cliff faces, molded and scarred by the irritable floods of the Yampa River. Modern agricultural priorities have cultivated the landscape predominantly into operations of pasturing cattle and fields of hay.

From a conservation standpoint, the Yampa River Valley presents a unique case-study among riparian ecosystems in the West. The trifecta of towering cottonwoods, box-elder maples, and red osier dogwoods is found in few other places in the world. These intertwined species are maintained by the ability of the Yampa River to flood its banks each season, which encourages self-pruning and the recycling of nutrients for shared benefits to the entire ecosystem. The relatively untamed and undammed nature of the Yampa River makes it one of the least trammelled rivers remaining in the country. Among these reasons were some of the incentives for a global organization like The Nature Conservancy to focus its energy into the Preserve. As the summer resident and intern at the Preserve, it was my responsibility to educate visitors to the Ranch about the necessities of protecting such an ecosystem.

As has been my experience in many subsistence-based work environments, time runs a little slower here. Unlike the hustle & bustle of modern cities, where trains are missed by seconds and timeclocks stamped by the minute, I find time is measured here more by the

passing of clustered clouds casting shadows over yonder hills, by the collective movement of a grazing cattle herd munching and digesting breeze-blown grasses, occasionally bellowing an emotive signal of acknowledgment. I often found myself cringing at the work required to maintain this private, historic, unceded piece of land; the roaring mower, the screaming weed wacker, the chugging brush hog, the gnashing chainsaw. Although I see much of this labor as the incessant desire for modern humans to carve out our perfect pathways, trimmed trails, and grooved gravel roads, I remind myself that in my disruptive cultivation of this small piece of land I am allowing the preservation of several hundred acres of a totally unique riparian ecosystem, for at least the brief moment in time that my footprints will remain on these muddy riverbanks.

And yet despite the tools we may use to attain our goals, I am grateful beyond expression for the connection I am once again able to feel towards land. It is rare in my life that the cyclical & interconnected nature of all living things becomes as apparent as it does when I am privileged to live by, on, and among the land. I am allowed to breathe in the ineffable when I watch the clouds meander across this expansive sky, witness the explosion of poppy flowers bursting from their pods, glimpse the snow-peaked flat-topped mountains on the horizon, run my hands through the smooth hairs of horses before bounding off in graceful gallops, feel the prickle of acknowledgment of my existence when surrounded by distrustful cows all with still & staring eyes on me. In these moments of pure blissful insignificance, I am reminded of the smallness of my world, of the indifference the sky looks down on me with, and most importantly of the role I play in connection with all these other creatures of life. But out of the minutiae of my very existence, what remains constant through it all that allows me some

semblance of worth? To me, what is constant is the only form of the ineffable worth worshipping: Mother of All, Mother Earth. For with all the accolades and titles we give ourselves, all the colors we use to differentiate one human from another, there shall always remain acceptance from that which bore us and that which sustains us.

This land is a fertile land, kind to cattle and alfalfa, utopian in nature for mosquitoes that buzz, ripe with a pale green hue of native grasses scattered among receding hills. This sun that casts rays and throws shadows across the topography shines down on nothing new, and the light that reaches me shines on modernity. For this land which touches me in my senior summer is an amalgamation of the moments in history that have led Carpenter Ranch and myself here. It is my belief that all who seek a relationship with place must first situate themselves onto the contemporary layer of sediment their soles rest on, while remaining diligently cognizant of the buried memories and erased stories concealed within.

This land is a fertile land, yet it is a stolen land, torn from the hands of Núu-~~agha-tuvu~~-pų (Ute) peoples, particularly of the Parianuche and Yamparika bands, the original stewards of the Yampa River Basin since time immemorial. This pastoral land I am grateful to live on is the product of a specifically motivated concept of development formulated by a white, entrepreneurial, patriarchal philosophy pushed by any means necessary and unnecessary; built with the onset of vicious instruments of barbed wire and gunpowder, sowed in checkered homesteaded properties tilled by metal teeth, a wasteland of rusted wrought iron and obsolete machinery merely decays into its epochal decomposition. How can I consider myself a

caretaker of any land when I am a descendent<sup>1</sup> of the very people who so violently and duplicitously ruptured everything offered by the land and its inhabitants until the entire course of history radically diverged? Mustn't we redefine our notions of *restoration* or *conservation* in light of the now unfavorable historic laurels we rest on? Maybe it is the modern steward's responsibility to learn to reconcile the fact that our actions as settlers have always included wanton violence and exploitative resource use while displaying a painful obliviousness to a sense of balance or long-term repercussions to the environment that we are intricately a part of.

While we strive diligently to preserve something apparently *natural*, the layers upon layers of undernourished soil, violence-borne blood, and ghosts never allowed an honest burial reveal a landscape far divergent from my desired conception of that saturated term, *natural*. Rather than self-righteously declaring to be in the practice of saving a prelapsarian image of nature, it appears to me a more fitting definition of this work is in the maintenance of a landscape of our own ideation.

In attempting to reconcile the destructive history of this land with the prevailing beauty of the environment and its modern residents, I find myself influenced by the words of the brilliant poet and activist Eli Clare. He has eloquently written his way into my mind over the past few months with the following passage:

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<sup>1</sup> Descendance occurring either genealogically through a familial line or ideologically through the indoctrination of ideas or philosophies.

“I think about *natural* and *unnatural*, trying to grasp their meanings. Is an agribusiness cornfield unnatural, a restored prairie natural? How about the abundance of thistle, absence of bison, those old corn furrows? What was once normal here; what can we consider normal now? Or are these the wrong questions? Maybe the earth just holds layer upon layer of history.”<sup>2</sup>

And if the earth will forever hold our layers of history, the responsibility for developing a modern environmental ethic falls on us. For it is not the grazing herds of cattle that are to blame, who merely desire dense grasslands and close-knit comradery, for their presence is a product of our own creation, brought to replace the slaughtered North American buffalo. It is not the browsing elk migrating down from the mountains, or the bounding crickets fleeing from my feet as they rustle the tall grasses, or the orange-striped box-elder bugs who curiously seek companionship before they fall to the floor still and fetal that are to blame. Nor is it the generations of toiling farmers and laborers that have adapted to radical alterations to seeds, food and farming infrastructure, and demands for new crops, for it is their knowledge generated over decades that continues to nourish our hungry populations (although disproportionately).

Rather, the need for conservation falls on us as collective modern humans as we continue to relate to Mother Earth in far removed ways as never before. As we face the greatest threat Western civilization has ever encountered, we must remember it is a pestilence of our own creation. It is a predicament that has taken root and thrived in the very ideologies

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<sup>2</sup> Clare, Eli. (2017) “Brilliant Imperfection; Grappling with Cure.” *Duke University Press*

and morals of unrelenting progress and consumption we continue to hold today. And so, it is my belief, after a mere summer living as closely in conjunction with land as I am presently able, that as environmentally concerned individuals, we must start with where we have been. Only in this self- and social introspection will we be able to grasp the ideologies of progress and exploitation that we need to evolve away from, and only from there we can begin to formulate our conception of the direction in which we shall head. Yet even as we look ahead, we must remain truly rooted in our past. For if we know not where we have been, it will always be impossible to agree on where we are going.

### **Gratitude**

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Blumenstein family for continuing to support the Charlie Blumenstein Stewardship position with Colorado College. It is due to their generosity in creating and maintaining this internship with The Nature Conservancy that has allowed me such an influential summer. I am confident the skills I was able to practice and the discussions I was a part of will continue to be a foundation for my future in environmental work. Additionally, I am so excited to see the direction the Ranch will head with the Ross family as the new permanent residents. I am confident future CC interns will benefit as I did, especially as the Blumenstein Internship further establishes itself at Carpenter Ranch.

I am truly grateful to the individuals I worked alongside at Carpenter Ranch for spreading their passionate knowledge and dedication to conserving the Yampa River Basin. Geoff and Betsy Blakeslee have been integral in establishing the vivaciousness and beauty of the Ranch and provided invaluable insight into the operations of cattle ranching, gardening, and

general self-sufficiency. Matt Ross held an endless amount of knowledge for me in machinery maintenance, Forest Service opportunities, woodworking, and general craftsmanship. I so enjoyed living vicariously through him and his family as they transitioned themselves to enter a new chapter of their lives on the Ranch. And to Jennifer Wellman, I am incredibly grateful for her accommodating my personal interests with the internship research project, and for providing much appreciated conversations regarding environmental work as well as my own future. I can definitively say that the stories each of these individuals shared and the values imparted on me while at the Ranch will continue to influence my senior year and endeavors beyond.