

SURVIVAL IS A TEST OF THE RIGHT

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A student named Jessica came to my office two weeks looking for some help with an article she was writing. School was just beginning, and Jessica carried with her a writing project left over from her summer job. Her essay, a short one, was not a school assignment but rather an assignment from a small newspaper in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where she lives. Knowing that Jessica had spent the summer as a seasonal hydrology technician working for the Routt National Forest, the editor of a local paper asked her to write an article about the hydrological impacts of the mountain pine beetle.

The article was to be part of a series on the havoc being wreaked by Colorado's favorite insect.

Jessica, an environmental studies student, a senior, had never before written anything for an audience outside of school, so she came to me for help. She wanted a critique of her first draft, which was well past deadline. Now, I had never met Jessica, but I immediately liked her. Anyone who misses deadlines as widely as I do is apt to be a friend of mine, and she was way past due.

As I talked with her about her newspaper article, I became interested in her story, the story of how her family came to live in Steamboat and what they found when they got there.

Jessica and her parents were newcomers to Colorado just a few years ago when they moved from Florida to a new home in the mountains. Her father was a doctor, her mother a medical administrator, and for various reasons they had both grown disenchanted with the health care industry. They wanted a big change, and they boldly engineered one for themselves. For years, the family had used Steamboat Springs as the site of their favorite vacations in winter and summer – so at about the time Jessica was entering high school, her parents left their jobs in Florida and moved to Steamboat. A main street bookstore was up for sale, and Jessica's parents, with no background at all in retail trade, bought it. So her family made one of those classic moves of the adventuresome: they risked everything and decided to go live where they loved to play.

Unfortunately, they arrived in Steamboat Springs just in time to witness an unfolding ecological catastrophe – or so it seems to many people who came lately to the Colorado Rockies to enjoy their own ideas of a “pristine nature.” If you have traveled

recently to the West Slope of Colorado or the mountains of the Southwest, you know that a pine beetle epidemic is underway. Beetles are killing forests at elevations where they have never before had such effects, and they appear to be spreading faster than ever recorded. As one recent article in the *Rocky Mountain News* put it, “The extent of the spread stunned even foresters who say the invasion is rewriting the scientific literature. Centuries-old lodgepole [pine] at the highest elevations, once seen as impregnable because of extremely cold temperatures that kill the beetles, are dying” (Hartman, 2008).

Since 1996, when this most recent infestation of pine beetles began, one-and-a-half million acres of Colorado’s 22 million acre pine forest have been devastated by this insect. The year 2007 alone saw a half-million acres brown out (Hartman, 2008). Much of this is occurring across the heart of Colorado’s ski country. Skiing and tourism represent a \$2.6 billion dollar annual industry in the state (second only to agriculture), so the scenery-spoiling effects of the beetle kill are of great concern, but of even greater concern is the extraordinary fire hazard which millions of acres of dead trees create (Williams, 2008). With mountain real estate exploding in and around Colorado resort communities, the threat of wild fire presents an extraordinary challenge. People do not come to the Rockies to build vacation homes overlooking dead forests, and they surely do not come to have their lives and property threatened by fire.

Mountain real estate is an even more lucrative industry than skiing and tourism. Steamboat Springs lies in Routt County, and Routt County’s neighbor to the south, Eagle County, is home to both the Vail and Beaver Creek ski areas. In 2007, residential real estate sales ran to a whopping \$2.9 billion dollars in Eagle County – a record one-year total for any mountain county in Colorado (Williams, 2008).

When Jessica speaks about the beetle-scorched forests of Steamboat Springs, she gets a faraway look in her eyes. I don't think this girl is much for tears, but she is clearly affected by the sudden spectacle of her home forests dying. She knows a lot about the pine beetle – she knows that the current epidemic is the latest in a number of such occurrences, stretching back at least into the 19th century. She has read the Forest Service websites and a few technical reports, and she knows that a number of factors, not just one factor, are likely contributors to the epidemic. A hundred years of aggressive fire suppression have left the national forests vulnerable. Dendrochronologists point out that the Rockies have enjoyed a long wet cycle, relative to the past. We now may be entering into a more “normal” cycle of less precipitation, and the forests may thus be overstocked; hydro-stress weakens them. Global warming is mentioned by everyone, but in the same breath the experts tell her that the die-off occurrence is cyclical – that lodgepole pine forests are often even-aged stands, and these mature trees are now at the peak of susceptibility.

Still, amid all the cold facts & theories, when Jessica talks about her home forest, I get the sense that she feels something has been violated – something is terribly wrong – and she is scared. She imagines a holocaust burning dozens of Routt County homes. She and her parents will be safe, she thinks. They built their new home in the center of moist aspen grove.

As I listen to her, and watch her, and struggle with her to make her essay better, I feel my age, as I so often do, teaching and talking with my eager and hopeful students. They are young environmentalists, and I am an old one. I am old enough to know that in

our country, science and politics rarely line up in an effective parallel. The often mystifying complexities of our scientific understanding – an understanding that can heal the land – will normally be ground into a useless powder by the gross simplifications of our politics.

But Jessica. Jessica has not yet been jaded by the brutal simplifications of American politics. She has not come to feel the chill I feel when I watch the united delegates of the national Republican convention shouting, en masse, “Drill, Baby, Drill!” Or the tinny sense of hollowness that rings for me when Joe Biden, for the third time in the same speech, calls up the threadbare images of the assembly line worker fearing for his job, or the weary single mother who worries that her children have no health insurance. Like all of my students, young Jessica has not been out in the world enough yet to realize that most of the political rhetoric we have taught ourselves, and keep reinforcing election after election, is a counterfeit rhetoric of extremes, of black and white, good and evil, saint and sinner. But Jessica’s grown-up neighbors know this rhetoric, and some of them love to use it on one another, even in tiny Steamboat Springs, apparently not realizing how cheap and worthless, and how dangerous such rhetoric is – how the rhetoric of brutal simplification distracts us from the real and necessary work, the complex work, of an effective politics.

After Jessica left my office, I visited her hometown by way of the Internet. I immediately found my way to a Steamboat Springs blogosphere which seems to hover like a mist above the dying forest. These exchanges were stimulated by a local newspaper article on the infestation, but as you will see shortly, the actual issues of the pine beetle, forest health, planning for wildfires – and the overarching issue, the issue of

land stewardship – stands nowhere in sight in the heated interchanges which an innocuous news story stimulated. While I was reading these, I thought to myself, “No wonder young Jessica seems depressed.” [All postings below appeared as readers’ comments to Brandon Gee, “Dealing with Denial: Communities Cope with Unprecedented Beetle Epidemic,” *Steamboat Pilot and Today*, July 27, 2008.

Punctuation and spelling are as in the original.]

On July 28, 2008, a person with the cyber-name “isuedocs77” (that’s “I sue docs,” as in “doctors”) wrote the following:

i guess i would call myself one of the often criticized second home owner's in steamboat—we fell in love with routt county more than 10 years ago—now, the sea of dying trees and all of the development, its just a different place, a place we may very likely sadly leave—will it hurt tourism—of course it will—i haven't been to . . . [Steam] boat since christmas—kind of dumb to have an empty house there.

Two hours later, a person nicknamed boatmaster responded:

Dear Isuedocs77,

Its always better to have less lawyers, so see ya.

The next morning at 8, “isuedocs” shot back:

well BoatMaster—if that's what you think—i will leave—and take my tax money, and all the money i spent building that nice house and the second condo i own, and all the money i spend on the mountain, and all the money i spend in the restaurants and bars, and . . . buying cars from steamboat motors, and bicycles, and ski equipment, and

all the money i spend on locals taking care of the grounds, and the houses, and the snow removal, and all the money my guests spend when they come to visit, on ski lessons and lift tickets, and all the money i spend on golf memberships, because, boatmaster, the nice thing about being a lawyer is i can go someplace else where i feel welcome—and good luck with your local economy and your ability to live this wonderful life which is largely possible because “lawyers” like me drop a lot of money in your town.

At that point, a new voice, “steamboatyahoo,” weighs in:

the problem, Isuedocs77, is that you are threatening to leave for somewhere “prettier” I assume, and take your money with you because of our red, dead trees. You built your expensive house and now you're going to go off somewhere else and build another one and if that doesn't suit you I'm sure you'll do the same somewhere else.

Too bad you don't realize that those trees are just like the canary in the coal mine - a warning sign that something might be wrong, not just here but all over the world . . . glaciers all over the world are melting away.

Soon there might not be any “pretty” place left to escape to with all your money for those adoring locals to cherish.

Someone named “Cmducks” now weighs in, on behalf of the “old” Steamboat:
Luckily I was born here, and I do love the valley, a couple of red trees isn't going to change that. The people who “just fell in love with the valley” and are deterred by a couple of red trees, aren't the ones who build playgrounds, and have hot dog cookouts for a friend of a kid that is sick. That's what's lovable about the community, not how much

your second home in the mountains is worth. Let the fickle leave, or not come, life will go on, and the untracked snow will remain. They didn't sell me my land, and they aren't going to buy it, so the imposed "value" isn't going to change me either.

Plus the beetles are devastatating the lodgepole pines. It's a bummer, and it's going to kick our butts, but there are other pine trees that make up a lot of our forrests around here, that seem to be unaffected by the beatles.

To which the newcomer "constant1" responds,

i love the beatles.....john,paul,ringo and george.

I'll let "isuedocs" get the last word here, though the buzzsaw rhetoric droned on for several more entries:

wow—we are a little sensitive aren't we?—gee i wish rather than working to make a living to invest in "your" local economy i could be like all you guys—enlightened, wise, perfect, with a monopoly on community, and able to spend my days skiing or hiking or biking and not have to tolerate . . . "money mongering" jerks like myself—

It didn't take much reflection to realize that the story Jessica brought to my office, and my little adventure in the rarified air of a Steamboat blogosphere, were microcosmic. Steamboat could be any community in the West undergoing the stresses of biological and social systems in flux. Perhaps any sense of certainty or security is always a human illusion, but it seems we have entered into a period of truly wild oscillations. We have no idea where the national and world economies are headed. The presidential election has

been a roller coaster ride which seems to have begun a hundred years ago, and yesterday, all at the same time. And the natural world – the world that Aldo Leopold in 1949 tried to describe in terms of “beauty, integrity, and stability” – seems to be sliding away beneath our very feet (Leopold, 224). Too many mornings now I wake up to the thought that Bill McKibben may have had it right in the title of the book that made him famous: *The End of Nature*. (By which he meant, of course, the end of nature as we have known it.)

Steamboat Springs, though a resort town attached to a major ski area, is still very much like dozens of other places in the West. And Jessica’s family is not at all different from thousands of others who have relocated to the beauty spots of the Rockies, or the desert Southwest, or the coasts and valleys of our great Northwest. Lewistown, Montana, is feeling exactly same development pressures the people of Steamboat are feeling. The scale may be a little different, but the tensions and pressures are identical. What we’re seeing in these places is the history of a New West being written before our eyes. And what is most remarkable about is how much the history of this New West resembles the Old.

Take the phenomenon of “turnaround migration,” for example. Turnaround migration is a term rural sociologists use to describe the phenomenon of newcomers to a rural area rather quickly pulling up stakes and heading back to where they came from. I first heard the term in the mid-90s when a Montana State University sociologist named Patrick Jobes released a study of Montana’s Gallatin County (Bozeman) showing that over a ten year period of rapid growth and in-migration, 80 percent of the county’s

newcomers had moved away (Jobes, 2000). The average length of stay was only four years. Jobes' study crashed like thunder when I first heard of it in 1994. What were the implications to community stability when a small town like Bozeman sees a cavalcade of new migrants more or less rushing though as if on extended vacations? On reflection, however, one realizes that in the West there is nothing new about turnaround migration. In fact, without the academic terminology, it was the central story of homesteading, an era lasting from 1862 until 1934. That story is still going on today, but all dressed up in chinos and arriving behind the wheel of an SUV instead of a Conestoga wagon. The landing at both ends of the homesteading experience may be softer today, the pain of parting less severe, but the phenomenon is identical. People come for the land, and the land often breaks their hearts.

Now, I don't think a few bloggers arguing in the cyber-sphere above a small western town is in any sense definitive, but when I think about the situation more broadly, I find some real instruction in the story Jessica brought to my office. Let's call the story "Jessica and the Bloggers." It's a story about homesteaders, and speculators; "old-timers" and newcomers. People with dreams, people with dollars, and people with both. The story is centered upon the land, but as is the case in nearly every story about the modern West, the land itself plays the role of the Cassandra (the prophetess) or perhaps the Greek Chorus, the strange set of mystical voices that emanate from the edges of the action, and comment on the errors of our heroes, and call out warnings. The Chorus is never part of the action, yet absorbs it all.

It is our mission, the job of stewards and conservationists and communitarians, to change this fundamental story of Western places. The biggest change we can make is to

move the land into the *center* of the action. The condition of the land can no longer be the silent and passive instigator of tensions and feuds. It can no longer be Cassandra or Chorus, the mere beetle-burned oracle of dark warnings. The land needs a speaking part, and a major one. The new homesteaders, and the old ones, too, must somehow be encouraged to hear the voice of the land, and accept that voice as making statements as valid as their own – perhaps more valid.

I heard something on the radio last week which re-set the frame for me – the frame of how I think about new opportunities for stewardship and sustainability. I was driving to class when a spoken line issuing from my car radio arrested me: “We privatize profits; we socialize losses.” That was the succinct, pencil-point-sharp assessment delivered by law professor Michael Greenberger last week on Terry’s Gross’s National Public Radio program “Fresh Air” (Gross, 2008). “We privatize profits; we socialize losses.”

Greenberger was of course talking about the Wall Street meltdown, but I realized he could just as well have been describing the saga of the American West ever since Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery discovered the core of the Louisiana Purchase.

How might we think about Greenberger’s remarks in an ecological frame?

In a good book about the Endangered Species Act, legal scholar Shannon Peterson makes the case that one major socialized cost following the profit-frenzy of the American bison slaughter was regulation. The near-extinction of the buffalo late in the 19th century outraged urban Americans and helped propel our nation toward the modern regulatory state. Peterson draws a solid line from the buffalo nadir in 1883 to the passage

of the Endangered Species Act in 1973 (Petersen, 2002). We're *still* arguing about those costs.

The privatizing of the profits of timber companies throughout the last century helped build the nation and the West, but the gravy days of high harvests from the national forests did not last long, while the socialization of the *costs* may well go on for generations.

The billions of dollars the federal government has lavished on the Columbia River basin in the name of salmon restoration add up to a failed subsidy approaching hemorrhagic proportions, while residents of the Northwest still blithely compliment each other on keeping electricity rates “the lowest in the nation.” No less a figure than Aldo Leopold, in 1941, warned us about such tendencies. Leopold wrote, “Our credit rating in the bank of nature is not what it used to be” (quoted in Meine, 1997).

If we keep thinking of such examples – bison, timber, salmon – we will quickly realize that the socialization of costs, in the manner Michael Greenberger suggests, while presenting us with a mind-numbing burden, also gives us extraordinary opportunities. A good share of the environmental future of the West may indeed lie in working through the calculus of socializing the costs of earlier, profitable management blunders. And maybe this is a useful frame for thinking about the tasks of restoration and stewardship.

Except for those waiting for the Rapture, the Wall Street debacle gives all of us pause – Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians alike. The brutal simplifications of American politics led us to new extremes of free-market optimism and profit-plundering, and now the very capital foundations of our economy may be threatened. I see the same thing happening with the *natural* capital base of so many of our beautiful Western places.

We hate government, we westerners, and so want the largely unfettered development of mountain and valley communities that have been “discovered” by the new homesteaders. The massive scale of land subdivision across the most beautiful landscapes of the Rockies has left residents of places like Steamboat Springs snarling at each other with unconcealed rage and contempt. Meanwhile, in the last six years, 17,000 new oil and gas wells have been drilled on public land in the Rocky Mountain energy basins (with thousands of additional wells on private lands) (The Wilderness Society, “Natural Dividends,” 2007). Uranium mines are booming again. Gold is moving back toward a thousand bucks an ounce, and the pressures to re-open old gold digs and dig new ones will grow unbearable. And to top it all off, “Drill, baby, drill!” The consumers are angry. The rhetoric is growing hotter.

But brutal simplifications will not help us.

I want to return to Aldo Leopold and the tradition of wisdom he helped point us toward. And then, in a moment, I’ll circle back at the end to the question of socialized costs in matters related to stewardship and sustainability.

Leopold understood the phenomenon that economists today describe as “high amenity value.” The American West in Leopold’s day was an unknown region; today, it is the nation’s vast, coveted reservoir of high amenity values. Stunning landscapes; inspirational vistas; fast, cold rivers; wildlife galore; livable towns; the last big wild places in the lower-48; and best of all, open access to more than half the land. The great heart of the amenity West is the sheer vastness of the public land, and the public land, remember, was an accident of history. Elsewhere, I have called it “the happiest accident in American history.” Some conservationists today who invoke the power of amenity

values to chart an economic future for the West seem to urge a land retirement agenda, especially for the public lands. After how hard those lands have been worked for the last century and a half, I can surely understand, but I wonder if this is the best course of action. Leopold, too, would have understood our contemporary arguments about the amenity values of open spaces, and perhaps he would have embraced a land retirement agenda for Western public lands as the best agenda for the West's economic future.

But Leopold also understood the perils of applying simplistic *economic* thinking to nature in its undeveloped state. When conservationists began to reduce the scope of their concerns to fit under the rubric of economics, Leopold suggested, they were making a potentially fatal mistake. They were innocently contributing to a language of exploitation. Nature cannot afford such innocence.

Here's Leopold writing in 1947:

The Flambeau [River] case illustrates the dangers that lurk in the semi-honest doctrine that conservation is only good economics. The defenders of the Flambeau tried to prove that the river in its wild state would produce more fish and tourists than the impounded river would produce butterfat, but this is not true. We should have claimed that a little gain in butterfat is less important than a large loss in . . . a distinctive form of outdoor recreation.

Leopold was calling attention to a brutal simplification, one his conservation colleagues may have justified on the grounds of the shortcut: the language of economics was the only language Americans really understood. Leopold wisely saw this position as fundamentally cynical. It undercut the aptitude of ordinary people to comprehend extraordinary questions of ecology. But worse, the comparison of fish to "butterfat" emphasized exactly the wrong values about fish and their habitat. As soon as the game becomes a counting game, the wild things lose.

The harder and better work, Leopold knew, lay in the insistent promulgation of ecological *values* and the ways in which the true stewardship of natural systems (as best we can accomplish this thru applied science) contributed to our concepts of ethics and morality.

There are thousands of ways to pay the socialized costs of a damaged American West. When I ran the Northern Lights Institute in Missoula in the mid-1980s, I was lucky enough to be part of early efforts in what soon became the collaborative conservation movement. We were trying then to work our way around all manner of roadblocks that stood in the paths of land stewardship. A great deal of our work – when I look back on it – was a concerted response to the balkanization of natural resource management, and the heavily guarded structures (laws, policies, customs and codes) that held agency powers in place. And sometimes we had to struggle as well with public interest groups who were masters at using the balkanization of decision-making to their advantage.

Well, today when I look across the West, I am astonished to see the flourishing of collaborative and community-based conservation. I bring examples and stories of it into the classroom, and I discover that students are keenly interested. The Jessicas of my world want to take it home right away and put it to use. Collaboration is one great means of helping to pay the big bill by sharing the costs and responsibilities of ecological restoration – and what is restoration if not a socialized cost of ecological harm?

Maybe a big shred of silver lining in our current financial crisis will be another form of restoration, the restoration of public faith and interest in the processes of governance – for it was specifically the abdication of governance, coupled with the

triumph of greed, which put us in the crisis we now enjoy. Nearly eighty years ago, when the U.S. found itself in the greatest economic crisis of its history, it dug itself out through public investment. The mirrors and illusions of unbridled privatization for a brief time shattered, and people went to work and invested themselves in the public good. Today we still enjoy some of the fruits they planted. The trails and bridges of the Civilian Conservation Corps, Social Security, rural electrification. And yes, it's true: a great deal of Depression-era public investment drastically missed the mark in terms of ecological stewardship. Right now might be a good time for conservationists and others to review that record, to glean what wisdom we can find in it.

I want to bring Jessica back to my office and tell her not to despair. The people of her mountain community need her help. The forests and streams and rivers also need her help. It's true that the forest will resolve its own issues, given enough time, but it's also true that the forest can help us resolve *our* issues, given enough care. The brutal simplifications of our politics will not repair forests or build communities. Only a patient culture of stewardship and the wisdom such a culture implies will be able to do so. The huge task ahead is to unite stewardship with citizenship, and to kindle a new commitment to both.

Let's let old Aldo have the last word here:

It takes all kinds of motives to make a world. If all of us were capable of beholding the burning bush, there would be none left to grow bushes to burn. Doers and dreamers are the reciprocal parts of the body politic: each gives meaning and significance to the other. So also in conservation. Just now, conservation is short of doers. We need plants and birds and trees restored to ten thousand farms, not merely a few paltry reservations. (Game Cropping in Southern Wisconsin, 1927. Quoted in Meine, 121.)

Thank you.

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