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A West that works

There's a new conservation movement across the West that favors cooperation, not conflict, to restore the land

By Courtney White
for Headwaters News

Editor's note: Headwaters News is pleased to introduce a new feature that will focus on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

Courtney White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the key approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

Once a month or so, White will spotlight people who are making the ideals work, on their ranch or elsewhere, and by their example, show the rest of the region what is possible.

This first column, which starts below and continues to the right, illustrates White's own conversion from the tactics of mainstream environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, to a collaborative approach that he says is much more likely to heal scarred lands, prevent more abuse, and in short, create a West that works for the long haul.

In 2002, I wrote the following letter to Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, explaining why I had resigned from a leadership position in New Mexico:

Dear Carl,

On June 11, I resigned from the Executive Committee of the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club. I did so principally in order to create more "elbow room" in my life for my family.

However, I have also moved on to a new type of environmental activism, one that does not fit well with the club's current policies and approaches.

In fact, I have deep concerns about the future effectiveness of

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Several lessons

We have a lot more to learn from the James ranch than grazing practices.

It took someone outside the ranching culture to show us how to think outside of our traditions. The Holistic Management model led the James's to a better way and I would ask, "Can those of us in the ranching culture overcome our traditional nature enough to follow James's example?"

Sam Western, in his book "Pushed off the Mountain, Sold Down the River," has explained how this nature has caused us to huddle behind our myth. Even though his book is set in Wyoming, it addresses how tradition can prevent our adapting to changing times.

Western points out, uncomfortably I might add, that myth becomes our excuse to avoid the discomfort of change. Now, the James' family demonstrates how Holistic Management can jar us toward making decisions differently than our traditional practice dictate.

In this revolt against traditional practice, we might save our traditional values.

First, the James ranch does not sell commodities like most ranchers, yet they have taken responsibility for the processing and marketing of their products, whether a home site or a pound of beef.

Accepting accountability for the end product requires commitment to community. The development done on the James Ranch was not a haphazard, willy-nilly development because they knew the family would be neighbors for generations. They

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the Sierra Club on issues related to the public lands in the West."

I want to explain this last thought, gleaned from nearly eight years of intensive environmental activism at the grassroots level, in hopes of nudging the Sierra Club, an organization I still greatly admire, in a new direction.

The American West has witnessed tremendous changes in the past 15 years. These changes include the rise of models of sustainable use of public and private lands, the widening threat of recreation to biodiversity, the emergence of a "land health" paradigm from the scientific community, the shift of conservation strategies from "protection" to "restoration." and the expanding role of collaboration to resolve resource conflicts.

However, these changes, which are here to stay, are not yet reflected in the work of most mainstream environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club. As a result, environmentalists have begun to marginalize themselves in the debate over the future of our public lands.

If the Sierra Club desires to remain a player at the grassroots level – by that I mean the level of grass and roots – significant changes will be necessary. I will use the issue of public lands ranching as an example.

It is critically important for the environmental community to understand that a model of sustainable use of public rangelands by livestock has emerged over the past 15 years.

Its takes a number of shapes – herding, planned or rapid-rotational grazing, grassbanks, dormant season grazing – but its underlying principle is the same: Controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of livestock impact on the land can yield positive ecological and economic benefit to resource managers.

The science supporting this principle is strong and diverse, as is the small but growing number of ranches who put the principle to work with demonstrable results.

There is also a growing body of evidence that says well-managed ranches harbor as much biodiversity, or more, than "protected" landscapes, such as wilderness areas.

This is not to excuse overgrazing, which remains a persistent problem in the West. But the existence of ecologically sensitive ranch methods means the goal of activists needs to shift from extermination to reformation.

However, this requires a big first step – an admission by environmentalists that work is no longer a dirty word.

The history of the environmental movement is chiefly the story of the struggle against bad management. Clear cuts, strip mines, overgrazed rangelands, toxic dumps, poisoned rivers, and, now, rampant oil and gas drilling – the catalog of abuse is all too familiar.

> **The goal of public lands environmentalism can no longer simply be to "protect" the land from human activity.**

As a result, a prejudice against commercial use of public land developed among activists, and rightly so. Ed Abbey was on

designed covenants and sold to buyers with that in mind.

Their beef customers will be seen on the street every day and they know Kay and David's phone number. This type of accountability is a lot different than unloading your calves at the sale barn each fall.

How many of us that call this marketing, knowingly look the end consumer in the eye? Selling to our neighbor leverages the concept of "a sense of place."

Second, the idea of children bringing an enterprise with them, if they return to the ranch, could transcend our culture's tendency to self-destruct in the third generation.

Since I was a child I have heard the mantra, "The first generation puts it (the ranch) together, the second generation keeps it together, and the third generation loses it."

I think this is because the first generation defined the dream and found self-actualization in that dream. In too many cases, subsequent generations are subjugated to living the fathers' and grandfathers' dream, with no latitude to find their own self-expression and actualization.

The idea of each child returning with an enterprise may be a way to allow later generations an avenue for personal growth. If proved successful, this will build diversity and complexity into our rural communities social and economic structures.

It will be interesting to see what happens in the third or fourth generation under this model.

By coming in from an outside culture, David was not smothered by traditional practices and was able to better appreciate our traditional values of independence, family working together, community, and accountability.

He was able to change traditional practices in ways that support our traditional values.

**- Tony Malmberg,
Lander, Wyo**

Stereotypes don't work

The notion that people in conservation organizations don't target in his outrage when he called the West "cowburnt."

But it is not the 1980s anymore. The emergence of the progressive ranching model across a wide variety of western landscapes, including those that receive less than 12 inches of precipitation a year, means the goal of public lands environmentalism can no longer simply be to "protect" the land from human activity.

Instead, its goal should be same as the progressive ranchers' - to figure out how to live sustainably in our native landscapes.

In the fall of 1999, 22 environmental groups (not including the Sierra Club) took out a full-page advertisement in the New York Times entitled "End Welfare Ranching." It called public lands ranching "ecologically and economically unsustainable" and proclaimed livestock production to be "the single largest source of water pollution, soil erosion, and species endangerment in the western U.S."

In support of its call for the abolition of ranchers, the advertisement cited an article published in the peer-reviewed journal Bioscience, which claimed that livestock grazing had contributed to the decline of 22 percent of endangered animal species and 33 percent of endangered plants in the U.S.

This article reported the conclusions of a study conducted by a group of scientists who had analyzed the effects of various extractive industries on the viability of endangered plants and animals and ranked them according to their severity.

Contrary to the claims of the ad's authors, however, the greatest threat to endangered plants and animals, according to the researchers, was NOT ranching. At the top of the list was water diversion, principally dams. Ranching checked in at number three, ahead of logging and mining.

In second place was recreation.

Although the chief recreational threat to wildlife was identified as off-road vehicles, the underlying message of the study was clear: Recreation is officially an "extractive" industry on public lands and should be treated as such.

Naturally, there has been no full-page ad in the New York Times calling for an end to public lands recreation. The reasons are obvious, including a huge case of denial. However, the 800-pound gorilla called "recreation" can no longer be ignored, and if the environmental community does not begin to put play on public land under the same microscope as it does work, then its credibility will continue to erode.

Work and play need to be treated equally and fairly. To do this, environmentalists should heed Aldo Leopold's advice – that any activity that degrades the quality and quantity of an area's ecological integrity should be curtailed, changed or stopped; while any activity that enhances, restores or expands ecological values should be supported.

It should not matter if that activity is recreation or ranching.

There is a chunk of BLM land west of Taos, N.M., that will never be a wilderness area, national park or wildlife refuge. It is modest land, mostly flat, covered with sage and very dry.

In its modesty, however, it is typical of millions of public land across the West. It is typical in another way too – it exists in a degraded ecological condition, the result of historic abuse and recent neglect.

As humble as this land is, it is not unloved. The wildlife like it,

believe in work has as much validity as assuming that all ranchers and farmers don't believe in conservation.

There are some in every walk of life who have a high and some who have a low work ethic or respect for the land.

In my time, and I'm now 83, I know a lot of ranchers and farmers who do a great job of managing their land as well as a number of conservationists who appreciate what others do that is good land stewardship.

It's impossible to put whole groups of people into a single category.

- Bob Wolf

Author's blog:

Ranching with a plan

I just returned from a quick trip to the James Ranch, where I was reminded how the West can work.

David and Kay James own 400 acres of prime bottomland along the Animas River, north of Durango, Colo. They used to own more, but in the late 1970s times became tough economically and they were forced to sell a portion of their ranch for subdivision development.

"I never want to do that again," says David, which is good news for those who value open space.

David estimates that a developer could put 1,600 new homes on their ranch today, if they opted to sell it.

But selling the ranch is no longer an option. That's because the James family has figured out to make a good living by practicing economic and ecological sustainability.

There was a time, not so long ago, when that wasn't true.

David grew up in Southern California, attending the University of Redlands where he majored in business. But he spent every summer on a cattle ranch, and it got into his blood.

After he met Kay, a city girl, and they moved to Durango in the early 1960s, David secured a permit on nearby public land and began to manage his cattle in the manner to which he had been taught: uncontrolled, year-round continuous grazing.

certainly, but so do the owners of the private land intermingled with the BLM land, some of whom have built homes there. The two new ranchers to the area also have great affection for this unassuming land, and want to see it healed.

These ranchers intend to use cattle as agents of ecological restoration. Through the effect of carefully controlled herding, the ranchers intend to browse and trample the sage and bare soil, much of which is capped solid, so that native grasses can get reestablished again. The ranchers are calling this act of restoration a "poop-and-stomp."

Using cattle to restore rangelands is not as crazy as it sounds. In fact, Aldo Leopold once remarked that wildlife could be restored using the same tools that had destroyed it: "cow, fire, gun, axe, and plow." The difference, of course, is the management of the tool, as well as the goals of the tool user.

The goal of the Taos project is ecological and economic restoration, and two of the tools are qualitative and quantitative assessment and monitoring.

The science community has developed new protocols over the past decade to measure range health, focusing on the functionality of ecosystems. These protocols do not measure "wildness" or "pristineness"

Instead, they ask a fundamental question: Is the land healthy at the level of soil, grass and water? If the answer is "no", then we need to look into our toolbox for a new, or old, tool to repair the damage.

This project is emblematic of a new conservation approach in the West. In fact, I am convinced that land health and restoration, not wildness and protection, will become the principle paradigms of a new environmental movement in the not-so-distant future.

I was encouraged to learn that Wendell Berry spoke recently to the Sierra Club's Board of Directors. His invocation that "You cannot save the land apart from the people - to save either, you must save both" has been the guiding principle of my environmental activism.

I believe the ecological crisis confronting us is, at root, a cultural crisis. Poor human behavior caused much of the environmental damage that surrounds us today, and only good human behavior will restore the land to health.

I believe the ecological crisis confronting us is, at root, a cultural crisis.

Isolating people from nature, a current trend of thought among some activists within the club, will only further alienate us from our roots, and compound the environmental challenges confronting us.

Take the homesteaders, ranchers and BLM managers of the "forgotten" sageland near Taos, for example. They love the land and have developed a strong sense of place by living on it, working it sustainably, and acting collaboratively to restore it to health. Each values the land in a different, but legitimate, way, with the common goal of seeing it become healthy and productive for wildlife and people.

"In the beginning, I ranched like everyone else," says David, "which means I lost money."

David followed a cattle management style sometimes called the "Columbus school" of ranching: Turn the cows out in May, and go discover them in October. It often leads to overgrazing, especially along creeks and rivers, where animals like to loiter.

Plants, once bitten, need time to recover and grow before being bitten again. If they are bitten too frequently, especially in dry times, they can die.

The plants weren't the only thing in trouble. By the late 19070s, his business was in a downward spiral.

"I thought the answer was to work harder, David recalls, "but that was exactly the wrong thing to do." Instead, he needed to try something new.

In 1990, David and Kay took a gamble and enrolled in a seminar taught by Kirk Gadzia, a certified instructor in holistic resource management, where they learned that their problem wasn't with their knowledge, skills or energy. What was lacking was a proper goal for their business.

"We really didn't have a goal in the early days," notes David, "other than not going broke."

Today, the goals for the James Ranch include:

- Lands that are covered with biodiverse vegetation.
- Lands that boast functioning water, mineral and solar cycles.
- Abundant and diverse wildlife.
- A community benefiting from locally grown, healthy food.
- A community aware of the importance of agriculture to the environment.
- Open space for family and community.

The James clan accomplishes these ambitious goals in many different ways. Years ago, David and Kay told their kids that in order to return to the home place each had to bring a business with them.

Today, son Danny owns and

Their sense of place, along with the new toolbox and scientific protocols for measuring land health, is the key to the future of the environment in the West.

This is something difficult for the average city-bound Sierra Club member, much less an activist, to understand – that our western lands, all of them, need more, and better, stewardship, not less.

The Sierra Club's sense of place needs to expand beyond wilderness and national parks. It needs to include the "forgotten" lands and the people who live there; and it needs to expand beyond knowing a place principally through recreation.

Club members, and leaders, need to support reasonable rural people and encourage good stewardship. There are plenty of both out there, as well as a ton of common ground, literally, where urban and rural people can meet to bridge their differences.

As the saying goes, the only constant in life is change. Ranching is enduring big changes to its very nature, but so is public lands environmentalism.

Where this evolutionary process is headed is anyone's guess, but I remain hopeful the club will develop a new sense of place to go along with the changing times.

Sincerely,
Courtney White

Convictions deepen with time, examples

I never received a response to that letter.

I included a "cc" to three sympathetic board members, but never heard a word from them either.

This new movement emphasizes collaboration over conflict, restoration over protection, land health over land segregation, watersheds over Washington, and prosperous communities over perpetual crisis.

I wasn't surprised. People lead busy lives. There is a great deal of activism to do, especially in the current political landscape.

They also get a lot of mail, I'm sure. That's the risk of writing uppity letters from remote locations – there is a good chance they will be ignored. Maybe I should have kept my thoughts to myself.

In the intervening 20 months, however, my conviction that environmental critics of public lands ranching are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater has only deepened.

So has my concern that a cultural and economic "functionality" crisis is spreading across the West to go along with its ecological ills. Whatever your role in the region, it is hard to argue that the West is working properly anymore.

Ranchers, struggling to stay in business, are on the verge of becoming an anachronism in America; the conservation

operates an organic cheese diary on the ranch; son Justin owns a local BBQ beef business; daughter Julie and her husband John own and manage a successful tree farm on the property; and daughter Jennifer and her husband grow and sell organic vegetables and plan to open a guest lodge nearby.

Today, David holds grazing permits for more than 2,000 head of cattle on 220,000 acres of public land spread across two states. He carefully controls the timing, intensity and frequency of the cattle impact on the land – often moving the animals, bunched up in a herd, every 10days or so.

"The goal," says David, "is to give the land plenty of rest before it gets grazed again. That's how it stays healthy."

Another of David's ecological goals is to cover as much as possible of the soil with litter, or grass stalks, so that moisture, in the form of rain or snow, can seep into the ground, rather than run off.

One way to get litter on the ground is to knock it down with animals – dead or dormant grass can be spread around efficiently by grazing animals, including cattle.

"Getting bare soil covered is critical to the water cycle," notes David," which is critical to everything that lives on grows."

And by all objective indications that I have seen, including a "land health" assessment done by the BLM in Utah on David's allotment there, he "walks the talk" on good land stewardship.

Additionally, in the past 10 years, David and Kay have started a grass-finished beef company that sells "grass only" meat to stores and restaurants in Durango for premium prices.

"Not only is grassfed beef better for you personally," says Kay, "but it also lets you vote with your pocketbook."

And judging by how well their grass-finished business is doing, the vote looks to be a landslide.

David puts their success this way:

"When local people are supporting local agriculture, you know you're movement, struggling with its vision, has fallen into a rut; the federal management agencies, struggling with their courage, have appeared to lost their heart; and everyone else, struggling with political and social gridlock now endemic to the West, appears to be pretty much exasperated.

There is reason for optimism, however. In various nooks and crannies across the West, positive change is taking place. Land is improving and people are resolving their differences collaboratively – one acre at a time.

Take the case of Jim Williams, a third-generation rancher from Quemado, N.M., located at the northern end of notoriously cranky Catron County.

Eight years ago the Forest Service cut the number of cattle they allowed Jim to run on public land because of overgrazing by his animals. The cut made Jim angry; not only did it wound his pride, but it also threatened his livelihood.

His first response was typical "Catron County" - he sued the feds and prayed for relief from the courts. But when that failed his next response was not typical: he asked for help.

It came in the form of advice on a new way of managing his cattle. He learned that overgrazing occurs when a grazed plant is not given enough time to recover before being grazed again. To avoid this, he agreed to bunch his cattle together and kept them on the move so that all parts of his ranch are allowed to rest and recover for most of the year - which is how nature intended things to be.

Additionally, Jim agreed to graze his privately owned stretch of Largo Creek, an ecologically significant riparian area, only in the winter, which allows the grasses and sedges to grow tall in the summer.

In other words, contrary to what the critics of public lands ranching will tell you, Jim demonstrated that overgrazing can be corrected without requiring that the rancher go out of business.

In fact, Jim Williams is so pleased with the improving condition of his ranch that he has embraced a variety of restoration activities.

He has voluntarily thinned and burned parts of his overgrown woodland; he has actively assisted in the physical repair of his damaged riparian area, working side by side with "greenies" from Albuquerque and Santa Fe; and he has helped a bird-watching conservation group locate and study ferruginous hawks on his ranch – and become a fan of the beautiful bird in the process.

And all this work took place on his private land – unlikely eight years ago, but a virtual impossibility today if he had been driven off public land.

The economic hit Jim would have taken if his cattle had been removed from the national forest would likely have driven him out of business, thus jeopardizing this vital restoration work.

In other words, eliminating the public lands rancher means removing a valuable steward from the land. Who, after all, is going to do this important restoration work if not the very person who lives there and has great affection for the land?

And what about the fate of Jim's substantial private land?

Critics of public lands ranching like to remind us that one-half of the West is public land and therefore should not be in the grip of a handful of commodity interests. But they rarely mention the

doing something right."

- Courtney White

column | analysis
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other side of that equation – that one-half of the West is privately owned, much of it controlled by ranchers.

This private land is critical to the recovery and maintenance of wildlife populations, especially the riparian areas, which were the first areas to be homesteaded.

By one estimate , more than 100 million acres of private land are owned by public land ranchers, who need the public forests and rangelands to maintain a viable economic operation. Much of this private property directly abuts public land and all of it is vulnerable to disposal the old-fashioned way – by sale to developers.

Take Jim Williams' private land, for instance. It borders a national forest, has a paved highway, tons of cottonwoods along the creek, and views to die for. It is worth big bucks – but not as a cattle ranch.

In fact, when I first met Jim, there was an offer on his kitchen table from a subdivider. At the time, he said, he was sorely tempted.

Others have succumbed. In the Quemado area alone, more than 50,000 acres of private land have been subdivided in the past five years, with more being "plowed" under every day.

That it is a lot wildlife country busted up for a long time to come.

Taken together, the progressive ranching model, the big job of ecological restoration, and the rapid loss of open space, tell us that the goal of eliminating the public lands rancher is a bad idea for the environment. Overgrazing can be fixed, as can damaged riparian areas and uplands, without putting the rancher out of business, or forcing him to sell his private land.

There are many stories of a similar nature across the region – of individuals and organizations using new knowledge and new methods to heal land and repair relationships.

They are slowly, but steadily, figuring out how to make the West work again, ecologically, economically, and politically.

The Taos restoration project, ranchers like Jim Williams, plus the work of many other individuals and organizations across the West, are all signs of an emerging conservation movement in the region.

This new movement emphasizes collaboration over conflict, restoration over protection, land health over land segregation, watersheds over Washington, and prosperous communities over perpetual crisis.

It seeks tangible improvement on the ground and in the lives of people – demonstrable and long-lasting.

It asks not what the land has done for you, but asks instead what you can do for the land.

Aldo Leopold once wrote that "the only progress that counts is on the back forty." This is where a new conservation movement is coalescing. Whether the Sierra Club decides to get involved on the back forty or not, and I pray that does, I hope all of us can find a role in this new movement – fixing creeks, buying food from local producers, relaxing on "wild" ranches, measuring progress, ranching sustainably, making friends.

The road to creating a West that works will be long and bumpy, but if we join together there is a real possibility that we can fulfill author Wallace Stegner's famous instruction "to create a society to match the scenery."

Courtney White is the executive director of The Quivira Coalition, a Santa-Fe-based nonprofit organization.

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