How the West was one

American environmentalists, farmers and ranchers learn to say ‘Howdy, partner’

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Abstract: *As in many industrialized countries, non-industrial-scale agriculture in the western USA faces severe economic challenges. Many farmers and ranchers experience great difficulty earning a living from the land. Huge areas of western American landscapes have been converted from agriculture to commercial and residential use (the much-dreaded phenomenon of ‘sprawl’) as farmers and ranchers have been forced by economic realities to sell their land for development. With an increasingly conservative political orientation and fiscal constraints, effective programmes by the federal government to help non-industrial-scale farmers and ranchers to survive have largely disappeared in recent decades. During this same period, however, environmental organizations and large numbers of relatively wealthy new ‘ex-urban’ residents in rural areas have recognized that helping farmers and ranchers to survive is crucial for protecting open spaces and rural and environmental qualities. As a result, there have emerged a large number of highly innovative and effective partnerships between environmental organizations and farmers and ranchers. Today, these locally based, grassroots collaborations may represent the best hope for the survival of farmers, ranchers and the unique open landscapes and environmental qualities of the American West.*

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In the USA, as in many industrialized countries, non-industrial-scale farming and ranching appear to be poised on a trajectory toward extinction. In the year 1790, only 5.1% of Americans lived in urban areas (United States Census, 2006). Historically, as farm prices and social and economic opportunities in rural areas declined, the bulk of the population shifted to urban areas. Today, fewer than 2% of Americans farm for a living, and only 10% of Americans now live in rural areas (USDA, Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, 2005). Some rural areas are growing in population, but almost wholly through in-migration by non-farming ‘ex-urban’ residents seeking a higher quality of life in rural areas (Johnson, 1999).

Yet America’s farmers and ranchers still control vitally important resources that defy their tiny numbers and their precarious demographic and economic status. American farmers and ranchers produce not only food: in addition they often protect open space, provide wildlife habitat, and support environmental services such as watershed functions. In the American West, less than 2% of the population still controls almost half the undeveloped land – land that provides ecologically, economically and culturally vital resources that are highly valued by America’s non-farm population. Yet farmers and ranchers are often paid nothing for providing these vital services. Much attention has focused on the need to preserve the quickly-vanishing American farm from rapid non-farm (usually residential or commercial) development (Maestas *et al*, 2001). It is time, many

Americans argue, to bridge the rural–urban divide and heal the conflicts between farmers, ranchers and environmentalists that have characterized the region in recent decades. These groups share a common interest in ensuring the survival of healthy agricultural landscapes (Knight, 2006).

Farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, rural residents and local governments in the American West have, largely on their own initiative, found innovative and promising ways to bridge the urban–rural divide (for example, see Pooley, 1997). These responses may provide ideas and lessons for coping with similar changes in rural areas of Europe and other regions. Of course, these particular stories of innovation and collaboration in the American West are specific to the region. This article provides only a brief overview of the history of these innovations; the reader can assess whether and in what ways these stories may inform efforts to address similar problems in other regions.

Nevertheless, these challenges and responses in the American West seem worth noting. On the one hand, there has been a disappointing failure by the United States federal government to provide leadership on these issues in recent years. In fact, under the current administration the federal government has in many ways moved backwards, away from innovation and towards older patterns of land use based on narrow ideologies of resource extraction. However, even while the federal government has in some respects moved backwards, private citizens as well as non-governmental organizations and regional, state and local governments have initiated a rich variety of innovative approaches that promote agriculture and healthy environments.

The changing American West

To put it simply, the rural American West is no longer (if it ever was) primarily the domain of the cowboys, loggers and miners that long occupied so much of the popular imagination of these places (Riebsame and Robb, 1997). Cowboys and loggers and miners are still there, to be sure. But they are fewer, and they must share the rural American West with computer programmers, high-tech industries, tourists, skiers, hikers, retirees and those who simply choose to move away from the crowds, pollution and crime of urban places.

What unites these diverse groups that make up what is often called the 'New West' is a shared interest in the qualities of the rural landscape. This interest in scenic landscapes, ecological values and rural amenities often puts the 'New West' in tension with the 'Old West' cowboys, loggers and miners who still value the landscape primarily as a source of economic production through resource extraction (Power and Barrett, 2001). For a variety of reasons, economic conditions for farmers and ranchers in the rural American West were already unfavourable before the 'New West' newcomers arrived, but the arrival of these relatively wealthy ex-urban migrants, recreational tourists and high-tech industries created sharp political and cultural conflicts that have further endangered traditional rural livelihoods.

Possibly the most famous of these conflicts were the so-called 'spotted owl wars' in northern California and southern Oregon during the late 1980s and early 1990s (for an excellent discussion of these conflicts, see Brown, 1995). In other areas, the transition to a new, diversified economy and culture was less contentious, and in some areas this transition has yet to begin. For example, in places such as the chichi ski resorts of Aspen, Colorado, or the artists' colonies of Santa Fe, New Mexico, the 'New West' now dominates overwhelmingly. In other areas, such as the economically depressed ranching areas of eastern Oregon and Washington state, or the mining areas of Nevada (far from the glittering lights of Las Vegas), the 'Old West' still survives. But overall, the tensions between natural resource extraction and preservation of rural and environmental qualities have become the overarching political and cultural struggle in much of the rural American West today. A few statistics illustrate the point:

- The largest private landowner in the USA is not a rancher or a timber company: it is Ted Turner, the cable television pioneer and ardent conservationist, who owns 7,284 square kilometres in 10 western states (Clemence, 2005).
- The Fannie Mae Foundation (a federally sponsored agency that promotes home ownership) has identified what it calls 'cowboy' counties and 'cappuccino' counties in the rural West (cappuccino is a popular drink among affluent urbanites and 'ex-urban' rural residents in the USA). Fannie Mae found that between 1950 and 2000, counties dominated by cappuccino-loving ex-urbanites grew in population nearly twice as fast as counties dominated by traditional natural resource-based economies. Today, 'cappuccino' counties account for a quarter of the region's population, and this proportion is growing (Rengert and Lang, 2001).
- Since 1980, the population of the 13 western states has risen by 47%, approximately twice the growth of the USA as a whole. Most of that growth is composed of ex-urban people moving into rural areas. In a dramatic shift from earlier decades, non-metropolitan counties are growing faster than metropolitan counties (Colorado State University geographer David Theobald, cited in Christensen, 2005).
- The rate at which timber, farm and ranch land is being converted for residential and recreational uses more than doubled (from 81,000 square kilometres per year to 170,000 square kilometres per year) between 1970 and 2000 (Colorado State University geographer David Theobald, cited in Christensen, 2005).
- The commercial value of farmland in the USA grew at an average of 6% per year in the 1990s (USDA, 1997) despite the long-term decline in agricultural commodity prices – reflecting both the decline in the agricultural economy and the resilience of the newer non-farm rural economy (USDA, 2000). With this increase in the value of agricultural land and declining farm incomes, many farmers and ranchers feel under intense pressure to sell their land.

The previously mentioned spotted owl wars in rural northern California and southern Oregon in the 1980s and

1990s can be seen as only the most dramatic illustration of the conflicts that arose. These conflicts emerged across the region as the new, diverse populations of rural areas in the American West began to compete to define the vision of the future for these areas (Walker and Fortmann, 2003). Bitter conflicts emerged about how both public and private lands should be used – for natural resource production, or for 'consumptive' uses such as recreation, tourism and environmental services and amenities (eg clean water, scenic landscapes, etc).

This shift of rural ideologies occurred in a context of broader ideological and political shifts in the USA as a whole. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan brought a renewed emphasis on the role of local, as opposed to federal, control – and along with it a renewed optimism about the ingenuity of communities and individuals to solve problems better than government. Reagan famously claimed that 'government is not the solution, it is the problem'. A somewhat darker side of this ideological vision was the emergence of a new, sometimes militant – indeed, violent – form of anti-government property rights activism that became known as the 'Wise Use' movement (McCarthy, 2001).

Yet these changes also occurred at a time when powerful environmental organizations became much more aware and active in fighting to protect rural landscapes that were home to many unique and rapidly-disappearing species and habitats of the West. Many of the new and relatively highly educated and affluent residents, tourists and recreational users of rural landscapes in the American West became active supporters of efforts by environmental organizations to help preserve rural and agricultural landscapes.

There were strong, and in some ways countervailing cross-currents in political, social and environmental ideology in the rural American West during the 1980s and 1990s. The region clearly confronted a need to rethink its future, yet it was also clear that the concerns of the New West could not be addressed using only the old tools of top-down federal policy. In the face of powerful new anti-government sentiments, and with the experience of disasters such as the spotted owl conflicts, it became clear that new strategies were needed that did not rely so heavily on federal leadership and control.

Alternatives had to be found, and new and innovative strategies did emerge. These strategies did not sever all ties to centralized control, but built upon a new faith in the capacities of private individuals, businesses, non-governmental organizations and regional, state and local governments to work together to achieve common goals. These efforts centred on the creation of partnerships between farmers, ranchers, environmentalists and local governments to preserve open spaces and environmental qualities, often through the creation of what are known in the USA as 'land trusts'. Another key trend has been the creation of place-based initiatives to support struggling farmers and ranchers by promoting greater access to regional and national markets. An overarching and deliberate theme in these efforts has been a general downward shift, or 'devolution', of political power in conservation policy that occurred largely during the 1990s and 2000s.

Devolution

In the 1980s and 1990s, the new rural residential landowners in the American West added to the growing political momentum for greater protection of natural environments and endangered species. However, this shift occurred at a time when the political effectiveness of the major strategies of federally led environmental protection pioneered in the 1970s was being sharply questioned. For example, the 1973 federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), which prohibits activities that harm an endangered species or the habitat that it needs to survive, became a lightning rod for political conflict. The ESA was widely viewed by people whose livelihoods depended on the rural natural resource economy as a 'sledgehammer' approach that paid no attention to the needs of local communities. The ESA came to be seen as an expression of allegedly high-handed federal power that put the needs of endangered animal and plant species over the needs of people. The antipathy towards the ESA, and towards federal environmental regulations in general, came to a head in the spotted owl conflicts, with loggers and rural residents claiming that the federal government had sacrificed 'jobs' for 'owls'. President Ronald Reagan and his successor George H.W. Bush led the rhetorical charge against the federal government they headed. Tragically, the conflict went beyond rhetoric, as both loggers and environmentalists were assaulted and in some cases died in confrontations related to implementation of the ESA.

As a consequence of such conflicts, environmentalists and officials at all levels of government began to question seriously the utility of 'top-down' species protections, and of federally managed conservation programmes in general. Resource managers at the federal, state and local levels began to speak of avoiding the political 'train wrecks' often associated with top-down policies. A major push emerged by the early 1990s for 'collaborative', 'community-based' programmes that would, it was claimed, give local land users greater participation in and 'ownership' of the conservation process, and therefore minimize confrontations and enhance the effectiveness of conservation efforts. Today, these collaborative, community-based natural resource management programmes have become the dominant approach (in concept, if not in actual practice) in natural resource management in much of the USA. (For a much fuller discussion of this political shift, see McCarthy, 2005). In Oregon, for example, in the mid-1990s then-governor John Kitzhaber initiated the Oregon Plan for salmon protection, specifically to avoid federal listing of endangered salmon populations by using state funds and coordination to assist local farmers, ranchers and environmentalists voluntarily to initiate habitat restoration activities. (In a 1998 legal challenge by environmentalist organizations, Kitzhaber's plan was deemed inadequate to meet the terms of federal policy, and the ESA was applied. However, Kitzhaber continued the community-based plan as a supplement to federal policy and it remains today the primary vehicle for salmon habitat restoration in the state. See State of Oregon, 2005.) The Oregon Plan and similar pioneering efforts such as the Malpai Borderlands Group in southern Arizona and New Mexico (Sayre, 2005), and

the Quincy Library Group (Duane, 1997) of northern California became models of a new generation of conservation programmes built upon the idea that former rivals (ranchers, environmentalists, government agencies) can and must find common ground to achieve conservation that serves the interests of all parties.

The common theme was that experiences such as the spotted owl conflicts showed that local people cannot be *forced* to protect or restore habitat – they have to *want* to do it. Rural people tend to resist policies designed by distant bureaucrats in big cities. As Oregon's governor John Kitzhaber observed in his efforts to protect the salmon, when coercive conservation laws are applied, landowners 'fight the regulations in court, but not much happens on the ground to save the fish' (Collette, 1998). Moreover, Kitzhaber and other advocates of the collaborative approach had bigger ambitions: by working together as communities to restore the landscape, it was hoped that modern Americans who had grown up alienated from nature would regain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural environment that ultimately sustains them. The following section examines a case study from New Mexico where these lofty goals appear to have been achieved.

The Quivira Coalition

During the Spanish colonial era in North America, mapmakers used the word 'Quivira' to refer to unknown territory beyond the frontier – and also to an elusive golden dream. The goals spelled out by advocates of the collaborative approach – of farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, businesses and government working together to achieve shared goals – seem to fit this description. In 1997, two conservationists and a rancher outside Albuquerque, New Mexico, set out to find this elusive territory. The goals of their organization, the Quivira Coalition, are to promote ecological, economic and social health on western landscapes through innovation, collaboration and public–private partnerships for conservation (Quivira Coalition, 2006). Today, the Quivira Coalition is at the leading edge of a broader movement across the western USA that seeks, and often finds, effective solutions to once seemingly intractable environmental problems.

More than half of all land in the western USA is owned by the federal government, but much of the most ecologically important land is private, and a very large part of that land is ranchland and farmland. Since the Second World War, large areas of ranch- and farmland have been converted to residential and commercial use – 'sprawl'. Ranchers and farmers have been caught between declining commodity prices and increasing land values. Many have been effectively forced to sell their land for development. At the same time, however, long-standing environmentalist critics of ranching began to view ranches and farmland as a lesser evil compared with uncontrolled sprawl. Ecological research, although still far from conclusive, has generally supported the view that having relatively open spaces on farms and ranches is ecologically superior to breaking the land into many small parcels for residential or commercial use (Knight *et al*, 1995). Environmentalists who once fought farmers and ranchers began to look in earnest for ways to keep ranchers and farmers on the land.

The key principle that unites environmentalists, ranchers and others in the Quivira Coalition and similar groups across the region is the belief that promoting ecological health enhances productivity for both the natural and human economy. Ranchers in New Mexico had long suffered not only from unfavourable market conditions, but also from drought, catastrophic fire, invasive species, soil erosion and decreased soil productivity. Restoring ecological productivity is the key to regaining both ecosystem health and economic productivity, and can sustain both at higher levels if the land is managed well. The Quivira Coalition coined the term 'the New Ranch' to describe lands where pastures are more productive and diverse, erosion is reduced, once-dry streams and springs flow, wildlife is more abundant, and where this more productive land is also more *profitable* for its owners. The same natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat and biodiversity also enhance economic productivity.

Through relatively simple but scientifically informed management techniques that include better monitoring and timing of the frequency and intensity of grazing and the recovery periods of pastures (Sayre, 2001), the Quivira Coalition claims that the New Ranch concept has contributed to the restoration of tens of thousands of acres of ranchland that might otherwise have become economically as well as ecologically unviable, leading almost inevitably to development for commercial or residential use. The Quivira Coalition has been successful in bringing environmentalists and ranchers together for a common cause – to restore the land for *both* economic and ecological benefits. For example, the Quivira Coalition sponsors annual conferences that attract hundreds of ranchers, environmentalists, biologists, writers, journalists, political leaders, environmental activists, scholars and many others. The Quivira Coalition has had virtually no leadership from the federal government, and it has been successful in bringing former adversaries in the 'range wars' to sit and talk together. While the ecological science of the New Ranch concept is not yet conclusive (Davis, 2005), organizers of the Quivira Coalition argue that the landscape cannot afford to wait: the threat of uncontrolled development is immediate, and the experiences of hundreds of ranchers indicate that the methods – both social and ecological – are effective. Perhaps most importantly, it appears that a critical threshold has been crossed in which former enemies are learning, if for no reason other than necessity, to work together to protect the land that they all value. The apparent successes of these 'new' ranches suggest that this diverse grassroots movement and other similar groups (for example, see Sayre, 2005) may indeed have found 'Quivira'.

PlacerGrown

Apart from its technical goals of enhancing land productivity, the core concept of the New Ranch is to keep ecologically responsible ranchers on the land and ecologically irresponsible developers off. A similar goal is shared by the PlacerGrown project in California's Placer

county. Whereas the Quivira Coalition seeks to keep ranchers on the land, the PlacerGrown project seeks to keep farmers who produce a diverse array of crops (fruit, vegetables, poultry, meat, grain, flowers and others) in the business of managing the land for the benefit of both humans and nature. The key mechanism for achieving this goal is the linking of local farmers and ranchers to local consumer markets. The aim is to create an integrated system of *local* production and consumption that benefits farmers and ranchers, rural residents and the environment.

Placer county is the heart of the historic Gold Rush region of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Since 1849, when it was first occupied on a large scale by European Americans, Placer county has been one of the most important natural-resource-producing areas in the USA. In addition to gold mining, Placer county was heavily logged and grazed to supply California's growing urban markets. By the early 1970s, however, a new Gold Rush began. Placer county is less than an hour's drive from Sacramento, and about a two-hour drive from the San Francisco Bay area. With some of the nation's most majestic mountains, as well as world-class ski resorts at Lake Tahoe, Placer county is one of the fastest growing counties in California. Land sales to ex-urban migrants, skiers, hikers, retirees and long-distance commuters have become the new Gold Rush.

Ironically, the sheer numbers of these new rural residents (along with their cars, large homes and their demand for shopping centres and services) threaten to destroy the aesthetic and ecological qualities that drew so many of them to the area to begin with. Placer county has been a pioneer in work to integrate principles of conservation biology into county-level planning through a programme known as Placer Legacy. An offshoot of the Placer Legacy programme, PlacerGrown, is a private non-profit corporation created in 1994 and is partly coordinated and funded through the county's Placer Legacy programme. It is a partnership between private environmental groups, agricultural associations and the county government that seeks to protect rural qualities.

PlacerGrown functions largely by helping farmers find a local market, and by helping local consumers to find high-quality, locally produced food and other agricultural products. A key problem for many local farmers and ranchers is that there is almost no way for small producers to gain access to the large, corporate-owned supermarket chains where most residents buy their food. Consumers generally prefer the higher quality of farm products grown locally, but often do not know how or where to buy these products. PlacerGrown brings producers and consumers together, with the goal of making the purchase of locally grown farm products part of the local lifestyle, and thereby supporting economically threatened farmers and the aesthetic and ecological qualities and open spaces that their land provides.

More specifically, PlacerGrown achieves these goals by establishing connections between local farmers and ranchers and local grocery stores and institutions such as hospitals and restaurants. PlacerGrown has a very active marketing programme that includes putting the 'PlacerGrown' label on all farm products grown locally. PlacerGrown also promotes what has become known as 'farm tourism' – bringing consumers directly on to local farms to learn and enjoy, and to re-establish a connection with the places that produce the food they eat. The programme operates a sophisticated Web page (http://www.placergrown.org) that features a link called 'Find a Farmer', which enables consumers to find farms, ranches, vineyards, outdoor grocery stands and grocery stores that participate in the programme.

PlacerGrown is conceptually related to a broad movement in the USA known as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). This movement promotes the health and environmental benefits of buying local produce, and also raises awareness of the advantages of protecting the local genetic diversity of crops and farm animals, as well as the benefits to the global environment of reducing dependence on food shipped across the planet. PlacerGrown is somewhat distinctive in its relatively sophisticated use of information technology and marketing techniques to bring together consumers and producers.

PlacerGrown is also distinctive from much of the CSA movement in that it is directly supported by county-level government, which initiated the programme. The embracing of this government-initiated programme by both farmers and local consumers suggests that government *per se* is not the problem after all; rather, problems occur when governments fail to innovate and create programmes that promote values shared by a wide array of local constituents (or, worse, when governments stand in the way of those private individuals and non-governmental organizations that *do* create innovative programmes). The PlacerGrown project suggests that imagination, rather than institutional structure, may be the key ingredient that can either limit or inspire the kind of social and technological innovation that promotes thriving natural ecosystems and human economies.

Conclusions

Conservation policy in the USA has experienced a truly revolutionary shift over the last two decades. Since the 1980s, pro-business conservatives and liberal environmentalists alike have lost faith in the capacity of centralized, top-down political authority to make policies that are effective and politically, socially and ecologically sustainable. The new paradigm in the American conservation movement is decentralized, participatory, innovative policy. Even with an extremely large-scale problem such as global warming or climate change, truly innovative and significant policies in the USA are emerging today from almost every scale of government, business and civil society *except* the federal government. This article has presented only a few examples, but these were selected from literally hundreds of similar examples from across rural America that suggest that these sorts of local initiatives are where the real traction in the environmental movement in the USA can be found today (for many other examples, see Beatley, 2004).

This shift towards community-based initiatives and

collaborative partnerships led by a range of governmental and non-governmental actors is related to a deep crisis within the American environmental movement. Despite winning many small battles, the American environmental movement is facing the prospect that it is losing the larger struggle to create a sustainable relationship between society and nature. In 2004, a now-famous essay called 'The death of environmentalism' (Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 2004) argued that the American environmental movement had failed to achieve many of its goals because it had failed to create or nurture a deep cultural connection between ordinary citizens and their natural world. Some, but not all environmentalists see the kinds of locally based, participatory models of conservation described in this article as a way to escape the 'death' of the movement. Over the last 25 years, very few innovative environmental policies have emerged from the US federal government, despite millions of dollars spent on lobbying activities by large environmental organizations. Moreover, since hurricane Katrina in 2005, not only the political capacity but also the competence (or will) of the federal government to solve *any* complex problems seems increasingly open to question.

The potential for community-based initiatives to stimulate innovative environmental and agricultural partnerships is particularly relevant for the rural American West today, because this region contains many of the fastest-growing communities in the country and also includes the vast majority of the nation's relatively open, biologically diverse and ecologically intact places. These places are now facing increasing political division and friction as the 'New West' rubs up against the 'Old'. Competing visions of nature – as a source of livelihoods, or as a fountain of aesthetic, ecological and even spiritual values – struggle socially and materially to shape the rural landscapes of the future. The conflict is as much economic as cultural: citizens of the 'Old West' typically have land, but relatively little money, while those from the 'New West' typically have little land, but are relatively wealthy. The two occupy the same landscapes, but often have very different visions for its future. Collaborative initiatives seek to find a common vision for a future that can benefit all members of rural communities. This article has suggested that there is ample evidence that finding common ground between farmers, ranchers and environmentalists is indeed possible if communities learn to work together creatively.

Indeed, such collaborative efforts may be the *only* way forward. Under volatile social conditions, top-down policies that pay little attention to local social and ecological factors seem largely doomed to failure. Gradually, in one local area after another, a picture is emerging of a future in which, whether they like it or not, local people with often opposing political ideologies simply must learn to solve their problems themselves as communities. Local people in government and non-governmental organizations such as the Quivira Coalition, PlacerGrown and hundreds of similar innovative, community-based partnerships (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000) are heeding this lesson because it is becoming clear that the cost of failing to work together as one, or waiting for leadership from above, is simply too high.

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