

Conserving Solitude: Reflections on Sacred Landscapes

By Scott Thompson

The mountains are represented in my hogan through the main poles. In this way, my home is a reflection of the mountains and the mountains are a reflection of my home. They complement one another.

---John E. Salaybe, Jr., and Kathleen Manolescu

In June, 2005, Carolyn, a plump gregarious Hualapai woman, drove my wife Gail and I northwest across the reservation from the tribal headquarters in Peach Springs, Arizona. Carolyn's hair was short and black and streaked with gray and she spoke with those long, lake-effect vowels from Chicago or Milwaukee, betraying a childhood off the reservation.

The van bumped through shallow canyons in the intense sunlight, across the baking fringe of the Mohave Desert stippled with Joshua trees, and up hills quilted with sagebrush and juniper, to the southern rim of Grand Canyon West. We chatted as the van jostled along and as she spoke I heard the same tone of reverence and tenderness in her voice whether she talked about the plants and hills in the desert or her grandchildren and cousins.

Now I haven't met John Salaybe or Kathleen Manolescu, but I did find their magazine, *Leading the Way: Wisdom of the Navajo People*, this past summer in a Mexican restaurant in Gallup, New Mexico. What they wrote about the Navajo spiritual paths resonates with Carolyn: "...the mountains will extend their hand to me for protection, they will advocate protection for me, they will stand for me. Because of this, the mountains will always be in charge of my well-being when someone or something tries to harm me." ("Dine bikeyah," Vol. 7, No. 6, June, 2009, p.2). The idea that the land itself can be a protector, a guardian, is the way we think of trusted aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Thus the land is the ancestors. They are the same.

In North America few people outside Native American cultures think in this way. But what anthropology has been discovering about the rise and fall of a host of societies suggests that the people who make their dwellings and their lifestyles a reflection of the sacredness of their lands may well be the ones whose societies survive in the long run.

Here's how a recent anthropology textbook describes such a "worldview:" "...indigenous peoples live on a sacred landscape...the tie of kinship is extended to the animal world and...the living world as well as the physical landscape." (Stein, Rebecca, and Stein, Philip, *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*, p. 70).

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Such a holistic and frankly loving relationship with the landscape is in jarring contrast with the go-go economic growth that has swarmed many of our national parks and monuments with for-profit adventure tours, upscale resorts, RVs, hordes of mountain bikes, off-road vehicles, cars, SUVs, helicopters, and in adjacent towns a plethora of condominiums, oversized luxury homes, motels, restaurants, and new residents with Brontosaurus-sized carbon footprints.

As a cumulative, escalating phenomenon, all this buzzing, bloating, and crowding is the opposite of a holistic reflection of the sacredness of the landscape. At best it is a cartoon version.

There are of course a multitude of short-term (i.e., short-sighted) benefits to oiling the raw beauty of the land into, let's see, a carnival site for adrenalin rushes, a scenic backdrop for carbon-greedy luxury homes, and so on: new businesses thrive, jobs emerge, many with decent pay, the tax base inflates, and local spending from tourism spirals upward.

And business boosters write paeans in praise of growth, as if there is no downside and as if there will be no long-term consequences. An example is the report, *Landscapes of Opportunity*, emitted by the National Parks Conservation Association in April, 2009. Here is a bromide from the Foreword, written by David Nimkin, the Southwest Regional Director:

"...times are changing and the parks are part of an emerging picture of greater stability and slow-but-steady growth...This report offers valuable insight to fuel the ongoing process of defining community aspirations and directing the course of growth and development."

But does a linear pattern of escalating growth, even on a gross economic level, benefit such communities over the long run? That so many otherwise insightful and compassionate people believe that it does is evidence of an ideological coup of the first order by the right wing. In this arena at least, it has driven critical thinking from the field.

Yet the social science of anthropology - to be precise, the sub-discipline of archeology

- teaches us that growth economies are not always adaptable or self-correcting. Indeed, University of New Mexico archeologist David E. Stuart describes a different and far more troubling process:

"If archeology teaches us anything, it is...that the basic evolutionary rhythms of growth, followed by complexity, come at a cost. Worldwide, the archeological record...is littered with the consequences of this reality..."

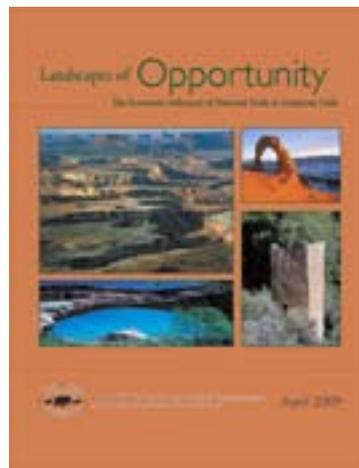
"In each of these ages, societies grew rapidly by focusing on hard work, efficiency, and incremental (and occasionally explosive) innovation. Each and every one of these societies, perhaps hypnotized by their own power, made similar errors. Growth in numbers was replaced by the rise of complexity, usually in the form of expensive infrastructure; roads, bureaucracies, and luxuries..."

"Thus, the larger and more complex a society, the less time it survives on earth untransformed by catastrophe that is, often as not, self-induced." (*The Ancient Southwest: Chaco Canyon, Bandelier, and Mesa Verde*, pp. 129-130).

As far as the amenities growth economy - the one that feeds off our national parks and monuments - is concerned, consider the following passage from Jim Stiles' book *Brave New West*: "An increased tax base in small rural communities rarely reduces individual tax burdens. The exact opposite is more likely to occur...According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in St. George, Utah, for every \$1.00 generated in tax revenue per housing unit, each house consumes \$2.70 in municipal services...It's happening all over the rural West, and that's because we never confront these changes until it's too late." (pp. 124-125). Yet time and again citizens in Stiles' hometown of Moab bemoaned the demise of any development opportunity as "a lost opportunity to expand the tax base." (Ibid, p. 124). So when it comes to an economic subculture like the amenities industry Stuart's comments seem eerily on target: as in past societies, people in small communities near national parks and monuments often do not see that the light at the end of the tunnel of growth may well be oncoming complexity and the enormous base costs that come with it.

But the impact of the go-go amenities economy goes far beyond the various aspects of complexity.

Note the very first sentence from Nimkin's Foreword: "With expansive natural beauty and palpable cultural history, southeast Utah's national parks and monuments inspire awe among more than a million visitors each year." Such an annual horde, however well intentioned many of them may be, inexorably destroys the spiritual solitude that the wildness of the land has given to us as the heart of our human identity; a solitude that is who we are. At this level the land is more than an ecological system or a series of geological features, however awesome or interesting. When we walk far enough into a huge stretch of wild land, carrying only food, water, and the barest equipment, when we stay silent in its midst long enough, we realize that the wildness of the land is like a guardian spirit, to borrow from the Navajo spirituality of Salaybe and Manolescu.



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The land is who we are. Comprehending this while out in a vast landscape is an ineffable experience; as such it eludes description. Yet the experience is as real as sagebrush and Cliff rose, and it is vital to know that such an immense human encounter awaits each of us if we protect the solitude inherent in the wildness of the land. It is in this sense that the land protects us from harm, as dutiful elders and ancestral traditions always have; at least they did in indigenous cultures. The wildness of the land protects us from the anomie and nihilism that hang like dark spider webs all over large, amorphous societies. And from the cynicism, resentment, passivity, and fundamentalist religious species that crop up as bleak compensations.

Elsewhere in the Foreword Nimkin refers to these parks as "community assets and national treasures," and to "a standard of stewardship that maintains the value of this extraordinary place for our children and grandchildren." But what will this "standard," based on continuing growth and development, actually maintain? Consider his own words: assets, treasures, and value; there is no life in them. However profitable exploiting such wild lands may be or however lovely the sunsets at the paved overlooks, they will be dead, faceless places that do nothing to guard the human spirit from immersion in

the societal mass. That is what we will leave for our children and grandchildren the way things are going.

And Nimkin's words are at loggerheads with one of Edward Abbey's keenest intuitions, written in 1967: "There may be some...who virtually identify quantity with quality and therefore assume that the greater the quantity of traffic, the higher the value received... There will be other[s]...who share my basic assumption that wilderness is a necessary part of civilization and that it is the primary responsibility of the national park system to preserve intact and undiminished what little still remains." (*Desert Solitaire*, P. 47).

On a late September weekend many years ago Gail and I lay in the early afternoon sun on a long gray and white boulder protruding from a meadow along the Blackbird Knob Trail, a quarter mile north of the tiny Dolly Sods Wilderness in northeastern West Virginia. We gazed at a delicate stream of high, white cirrus clouds; cumulus clouds floated here and there like balls of cotton.

The meadow was a tweedy carpet of grass, bushes and tiny trees extending a quarter of a mile to a tapestry of balsam fir, spruce and maple. Eight miles to the west a slender, blue-green mountain was visible just above a broad, sloping knob matted with evergreens.

But does a linear pattern of escalating growth, even on a gross economic level, benefit such communities over the long run? That so many otherwise insightful and compassionate people believe that it does is evidence of an ideological coup of the first order by the right wing.

To their right were three rounded hills atop Cabin Mountain, a sweet green ridge rising out of the western rim of the Dolly Sods plateau.

We had found solitude. I shut my eyes and let my mind wander in the white radiance of the sun.

Farther down the trail we camped beneath giant hemlocks alongside Red Creek, across from stands of fluttering aspens and red-turning maples.

After discovering Dolly Sods we often spent afternoons on the overlooks, and I ventured forth on backpacking trips in the area. One Friday afternoon in July several years later we drove up to Dolly Sods, planning an extended day hike on the Blackbird Knob Trail the next morning. But when we got to the national forest campground the thin plateau was crawling with people; there were license plates from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, as well as West Virginia.

The solitude was gone.

Many of these people had probably been seeking it, too.

We retreated to a nearby state park in Canaan Valley, pitched our tent before sunset, and walked through the amiable woods the next day.

And that's the tragedy of the East. All the rain and trees and wide rivers support millions of people, but with rare exceptions there are too damn many of us for the public lands to offer more than glimmers of wildness and solitude. That's why the impact of the amenities economy on national parks and monuments in the West, as well as the impact of land development near wilderness areas there, is crucial for everyone.

When people live anywhere near such sacred lands the way they each live - their "hogan," in other words - needs to reflect the wildness of the land. More plainly, key Western parks and monuments need buffer zones: areas of transition and cleansing. Quiet places with small homes, modest lifestyles, low density housing, and a conspicuous absence of private businesses operating inside the Park Service land. I would forbid luxury resorts or oversized homes within thirty miles of any park or monument.

In other words, communities that are carefully zoned down.

This also means eradicating privatization within all levels of the National Park Service. And closing some roads within the parks and monuments and restricting traffic on others, and fostering hiking and backpacking, limited to solo ventures or small groups. Mountain bikers (sigh): I would require them to ride bikes and wear clothing with coloration that blends into the landscape, and to travel solo or in widely separated groups of no more than three or four. In the immense Denali National Park, for example, there is one fifteen mile paved road. To go on the 75 miles of rough dirt road beyond you have to walk, bike, or go by shuttle bus.

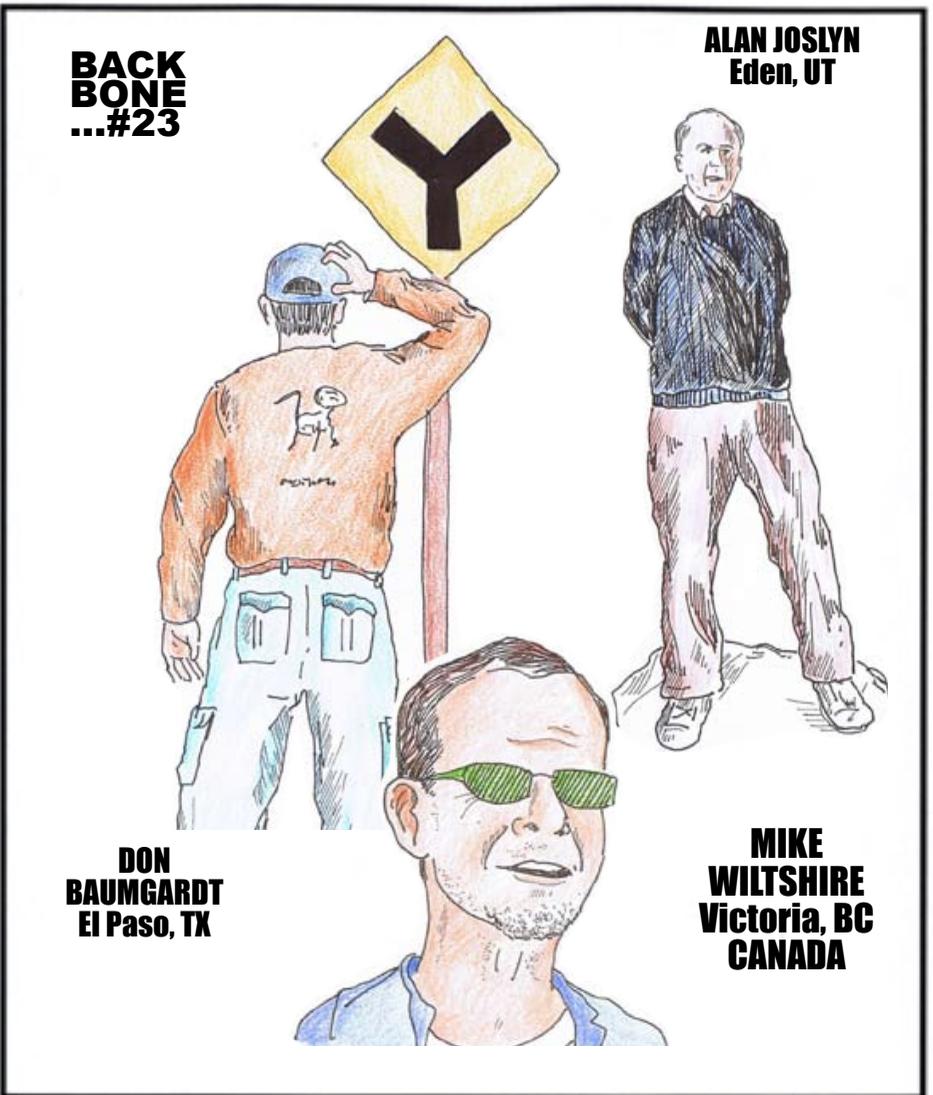
And I would forbid land development within five miles of any large wilderness area.

Buffer zones can be pieced together over a generation or two so that people aren't deprived of the use of their land during their lifetimes. Buy-out packages should be not only fair, but generous; we can insist on that.

Expect a hue and cry from local community boosters and from people in the amenities economy and to be shrugged off by mainstream environmental groups. Expect explanations like these: buffer zones would limit public access, would disregard key stakeholders, are utopian, un-American, un-pragmatic, divisive, socialist, et cetera. But I think the sticking point for many of these people is that however much they may appreciate the national parks and monuments, they are not sacred places to them. Nor are wilderness areas.

Otherwise they would fight to protect the solitude there.

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The Mojave and Great Basin Deserts -- home to a wide range of biodiverse communities, including people. Our aim is to celebrate the diversity of life here and highlight the threats to our desert home. This place is more than a wilderness, it is a living landscape, full of unique plants, animals, fungi, and people.

This site covers the geographic area of Mojave, Colorado, and Great Basin deserts centering around Nevada and California, but also venturing into Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and Arizona. We especially explore the areas ignored by others (but cherished by many): the vast creosote and sagebrush flats, white playas, rocky hills, and pinyon-juniper mountains. These are not "wastelands" but vibrant, rich, beautiful landscapes that we call home.

Contact us at: editors@basinandrangewatch.org

