

# Sagebrush in Four Directions (continued)

commercialization of wild areas on the Colorado Plateau and to the hypocrisy of having wealthy tycoons as directors of environmental groups has made him a persona non grata to well paid, compromise-prone environmentalists in the area.

In other words, Jim Stiles loves the Earth the way Chief Lyons says the rest of us need to.

That's why he pisses people off.

A stark depiction of our obsession with the bottom line is the planned auction of Pe' Sla, a Sioux sacred site in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It is comprised of 1,942 acres, described as both "pristine prairie grass" and as "prime real estate." The former by those who find delight in it and the latter by those who seek to grind money out of it.

What brought the matter to a head is this. The South Dakota Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration have been studying the feasibility of paving one of the roads running through Pe' Sla. A paved road would mean ready public access, greatly enhancing the land's potential for "development." Word was out that it might sell for \$6-10 million. I don't know who generated the idea of paving the road, but I suspect some booster was thinking about profits from tourism, increased tax revenues, or both.

None of this would have come about, however, had our government not stolen Pe' Sla from the Sioux tribes in 1877 and converted it into private property. Yet even this hadn't seemed to be an insurmountable barrier for the Sioux, be-



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cause the legal owners both cared for the land and gave the tribes ready access to it. The coup de grace proved to be Pe' Sla's proximity to two popular tourist locations: Mount Rushmore and the 19th century gold camp of Deadwood, where Wild Bill Hickok was shot in the back of the head while playing cards.

The two business-as-usual strategies for killing this sacred site and then turning it into money emerged from the prospect of a paved road. One was the slaughterhouse approach: slice it into lots along the new road: motels, restau-

rants, condos, houses, maybe a golf course. The other approach was taxidermy: let the public pay for paving the road and then sell it as an upscale ranch, keeping its boundaries, i.e. its hide, intact. The heavy volume of traffic whizzing by on the paved road would easily dissipate the pristine energy that Pe' Sla has always emanated, thus killing its spirit, but revenues for the campground and store nine miles down the line would shoot up.

As of early September, 2012, however, another approach to Pe' Sla's future has emerged. A Sioux tribe asked a federal agency to intervene in the matter and it also put up \$1.3 million as an offer of earnest money in an effort to buy

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the sacred site from its legal owners. As a result of these overtures the auction originally scheduled for August 25 was cancelled. Nevertheless, whether the tribes can seal the deal by coming up with the rest of the money remains to be seen.

Note that this third approach involves draining funds from the tribes that they can ill afford in order to preserve a sacred site that was stolen from them in the first place. There is only one honorable solution here, which is for our government to give full ownership of Pe' Sla back to the tribes, together with a declaration of profound apology for confiscating it, while also paying the legal owners a decent sum from the federal treasury as compensation. But that would require thinking outside the dominant paradigm, so it won't happen.

In all of this it has made no difference how important Pe' Sla has been in helping the Sioux bond with the land. Nor has it mattered how special, even unique, its energy is. It certainly hasn't mattered what precious lessons this sacred site could teach the rest of us, even if those lessons could play a part in helping us survive. (See "Sioux Tribes Upset Over Sale of Sacred Site in S.D.," *Charleston Gazette*, 8/19/12; "Pe' Sla Purchase: Not Out of the Woods Yet," *Indian Country Today Media Network*, 9/7/12).

What would we have done differently if we had never lost our love for the land? Would we have sawed down our forests like a boundless army of termites? Would we have stuffed our bruised ecosystems with seven billion humans? Would we have riddled the countryside with concrete and clogged it with motor vehicles? Would we have farted out enough CO<sub>2</sub>, methane, and nitrous oxide to bring on a global warming calamity?

I don't think so.



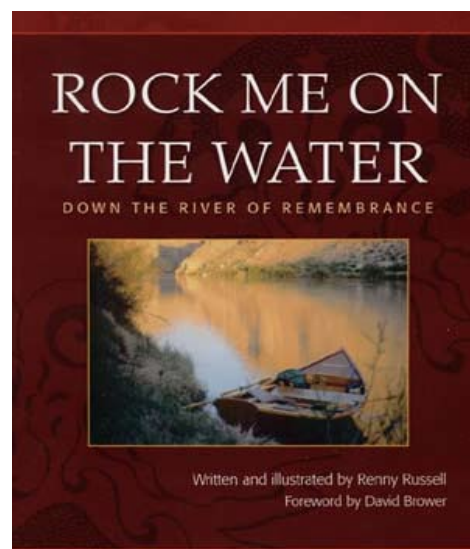
SCOTT THOMPSON is a regular contributor to *The Zephyr*.

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Robert Redford

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