

Scott Thompson...

(continued)

Meanwhile the short-sighted mainstream perspective dominates the management of our public lands as it does almost everything else. This is shown in spades by the explosion of recreational tourism there in recent decades, bolstered by a wide range of commercial enterprises and accepted either openly or mutely by conventional environmentalism. The key businesses involved and the local governments backing them up seek to maximize the number of visitors on public lands, happily embracing all the crowding, noise, and frenetic activity accompanying them, and providing sundry recreational adrenaline spikes – stimulation, remember? – in order to keep the majority of those tourists happy, pacified, and coming back (never mind what other tourists want). ‘Cause business growth, local jobs, and all that revenue depend on such.

As a result the experience of solitude on the public lands is dying a slow, gurgling death. In more and more places there is no room for it.

To see where all this is taking us, pull out an atlas. Run your finger down the western half of the Dakotas, straight south to West Texas. To this area add eastern Montana, most of Wyoming, south central Utah, Nevada outside Lost

tians went to live in the Egyptian desert; to isolated places the massive Roman system wanted no part of, seeking solitude. They were called the Desert Fathers, and they gave to Christianity some of its most decent features, especially in its first millennium.

Most of what they contributed now lies buried under centuries of institutional and dogmatic misunderstanding and is as alien to the commercial mindset of conservative American Christianity as another star system.

But spiritual solitude, which was the real point, is perennial.

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Vegas and Reno, and selected spots in Arizona, New Mexico, western Montana, elsewhere in Utah, and (maybe) Colorado (I’m not familiar with Idaho and the eastern areas of Oregon and Washington State). Now black out ANYWHERE, no matter how magnificent, that recreational tourism is focused on, as well as areas infected by fossil fuel development and large-scale logging, and that are contaminated by radioactive wastes, uranium mining, and other hazardous wastes, and that are covered over by military bases and bombing ranges. And the like.

The isolated spaces that remain, many of which are not on public land, are where the deepest experiences of spiritual solitude will take place in the future. Most of them will not be places of heart-stopping beauty. Some may at first seem forbiddingly desolate. The small towns along the roads may be occupied by tiny clusters of hardy people and lined by worn, empty buildings.

In a way, what is happening now has an analogy in the 4th century Roman Empire. Appalled at its corruption and decadence, a growing number of Chris-

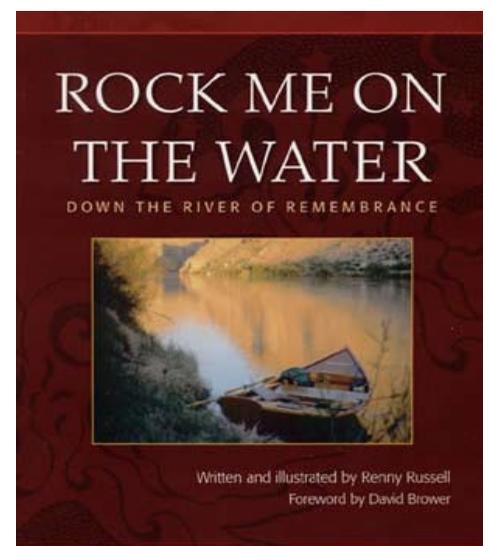
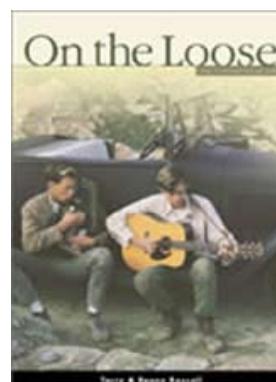
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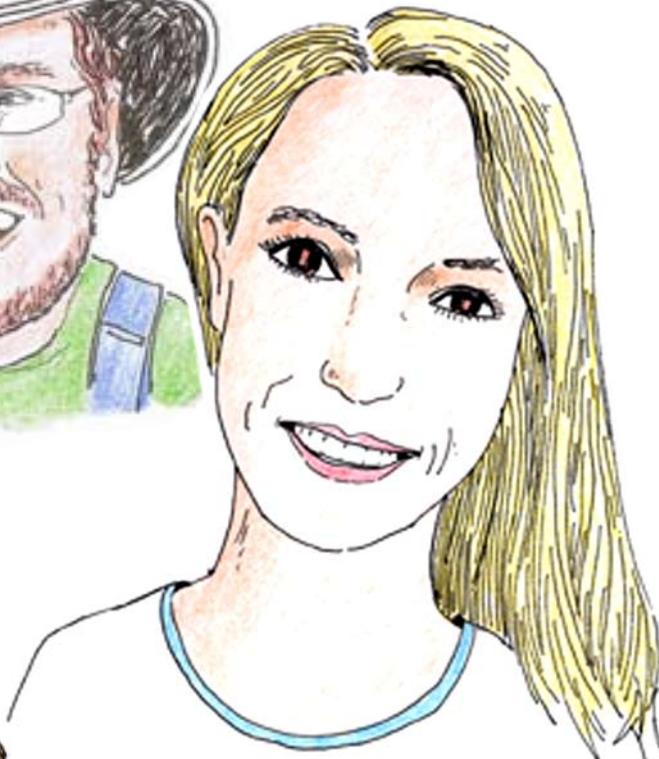
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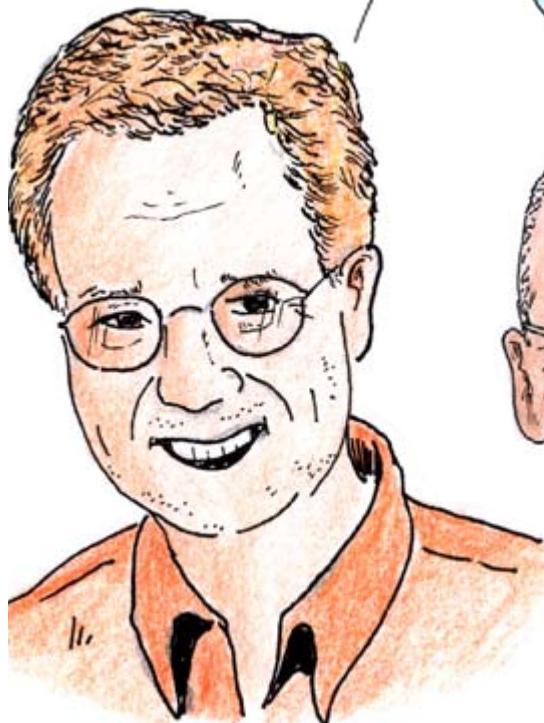


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