

Renewable Energy:

Shredding the Magic of Nevada's Great Basin

Scott Thompson

Experiencing the Great Basin Desert in Nevada seems to involve an inner war of perceptions. Here's how it went for me.

Just after Gail and I turned our rental car due south on Alternate U.S. Highway 93 from the fortress of casinos lining the border town of West Wendover, Nevada – servicing the good Mormon sinners of Salt Lake City - into the empty salt flats, it felt like we were sliding into another world.

And a forbidding one, even to a lover of other Western deserts. I think one of the reasons is the odd, whitish hue of the low-lying salt flats, whether they're vast white playas or episodic alkaline lowlands. In large part they're remnants of land-locked lakes and pools during the last ice age. As the Holocene warmed the atmosphere they dried up; today salt-whitened playas in the Great Basin are partially filled by water from snow melts and episodic thunder boomers.

The low-down desert here is a land of saltbushes and great spreading stands of greasewood.

But the salt-flat at the southern edge of Wendover was a modest one. Within 20 miles the highway led up into the sagebrush steppe that carpets the level, wide valleys all across the Great Basin. Sagebrush runs from 4,500 feet up to 10,000 feet; once you pull up from a playa or an alkaline flat, the sagebrush is ubiquitous. The changing of the seasons makes no difference to the gray-blue hue of the landscape; the dominant sagebrush retains its leaves all year. And nothing on the desert floor towers above it. The Great Basin does not harbor the exotic, taller plants of the southern deserts, such as ocotillo, soap-tree yucca, paloverde, or Joshua-trees. The humble plants that can survive along with the sagebrush in this cold desert, such as rabbit brush, run low to the ground, leaving the landscape and the horizons long and empty.

And barren.



sagebrush-coated valley, maybe including a playa or an alkaline lowland, and then briefly thread a mountain pass stippled with pinion pines and junipers, because you're going above 6,000 feet, and then wind down into another empty sagebrush-coated valley, and then through another thin, pinyon-juniper pass, and so on, for over 300 miles.

As we cruised along that first day, surrounded by the relentless landscape, thoughts that there is nothing here slithered through my mind. I didn't give said thoughts any credence, but they were there. It was the inner war of perceptions working its way through me.

Fortunately those thoughts didn't last too long. Because a shift, completely in the background at first, happened sometime before we reached Ely or maybe just after. Hard to say when. And it involved a feeling I couldn't name: it wasn't either relaxation or relief; maybe something between or around them that was more gentle.

The difficulty with this desert, what makes it elusive, is that the inner silence that can come to you here does not involve perceiving any specific features within it or attributes of it. I'm going to repeat that: it does not involve perceiving ANY specific features within it or attributes of it. What this desert does instead is mirror any space and light that it finds within you into a world of space and light around you.

If it finds that within you.

More than any other American desert, although it's true of them all, the Great Basin is a subtle place. As long as you're searching for anything out there that excites your interest its featurelessness will rebuff you. And when that happens it will seem an alien place to you and a lonely one. And you will be tempted to

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In Ely, Nevada, 120 miles south, we turned onto U.S. Highway 50, justly named "The Loneliest Road in America," stretching east and west. Good biker territory. We explored it eastward that afternoon before checking into our eccentric hotel (hints: (1) historic firearms and a motorcycle are displayed in the lobby abutting the casino, and (2) the management states that it's more impressed with the behavior of the dogs who have stayed there than some of its human guests. We found this refreshing – but that's another story).

The Great Basin Desert is traversed north and south by a series of long, slender, mountain ranges, peaking at 10-12,000 feet. And visually splendid, as desert mountains always are. Nevertheless, it's an exceedingly redundant process to drive east or west across them on U.S. 50. You cross a wide, uninhabited

conclude, as so many have, that there is nothing here.

Meaning that there is nothing of value here, that it is a wasteland.

This is the conclusion that travelers from the mainstream American society have on the whole drawn, going back to the 19th century: "[John] Fremont wrote of its 'dreary and savage character,' its burnt appearance, and the sense of dread he felt upon entering it; Edwin Bryant, who traversed the Great Basin on mule-back in 1846, found it 'sufficiently cheerless and desolate to depress the most buoyant temperament' – with 'sable and utterly sterile mountains' and arid plains 'incapable of sustaining either insect or animal;' James H. Simpson, exploring in 1859 for the Army Corps of Engineers, reported in the

same vein on 'dark and dreary' mountains – 'fit monuments of the desolation which reigns over the whole desert' – 'wretchedly sandy and barren' country and vistas 'exceedingly forbidding in appearance.'" (Sally Zanjani, 2001, Sarah Winemucca, p. 42.)

By contrast, the diffuse bands of Paiute Indians, who were nurtured by the Great Basin Desert as hunter-gatherers for thousands of years, cherished it. For Paiute Sarah Winemucca, born in 1844, "the desert was her 'dear country,' re-entered not with horror but with joy, its secrets of sustaining life well known to her people." (p.42.)

They knew its spiritual properties well.

About 50 miles east of Ely Gail and I saw the wind farm on the far side of Spring Valley, after we crested Connors pass. Not far from the Utah line. Sixty-six gargantuan white wind turbines stood in a neat pattern on a 7,673 acre site administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Operated by a private contractor, providing the power equivalent of 45,000 homes. Commercial operation started in August, 2012. (See www.patternenergy.com.)



Now encountering one wind farm in over 300 miles along "The Loneliest Highway in America" didn't annihilate the solitude and serenity for us. But it wouldn't have taken many more. In this vein note the following from President Obama's speech about climate change on June 25 of this year: "So the plan I'm announcing today will help us double again our energy from wind and sun. Today, I'm directing the Interior Department to green light enough private, renewable energy capacity on public lands to power more than 6 million homes by 2020." In a follow-up article a few days later he wrote, "We'll encourage our businesses to deploy more clean energy, which will mean...more jobs for American workers building wind turbines and installing solar panels." ("Obama: Climate Change in the World We Leave Our Children," Charleston Gazette, 6/30/13, p. 3C.)

Let's look at a few numbers:

It would take another 133 wind farms like the one we saw in Spring Valley to power six million more homes. Not sure how many massive solar plants it would take, but you get the point. All of these are to be situated on public lands.

Just over 2/3 of Nevada's land is held by the BLM. A greater percentage than any other state. (See "Western States Data Public Land Acreage (FS & BLM), Percentage of Land Base, and Population November 13, 2007".)

The vast majority of Nevada is in the Great Basin Desert, and nearly all of the rest of it is in the Mohave Desert.

Does that give you an idea where these public lands President Obama has in mind are located, and what will become of them?

It sure gave me one, which I'll share. But first let's at least glimpse at how the larger society has treated this magnificent and subtle desert country.

You can tell a lot about a culture by examining its garbage dumps. That's how you get the complete picture.

Ask any archaeologist.

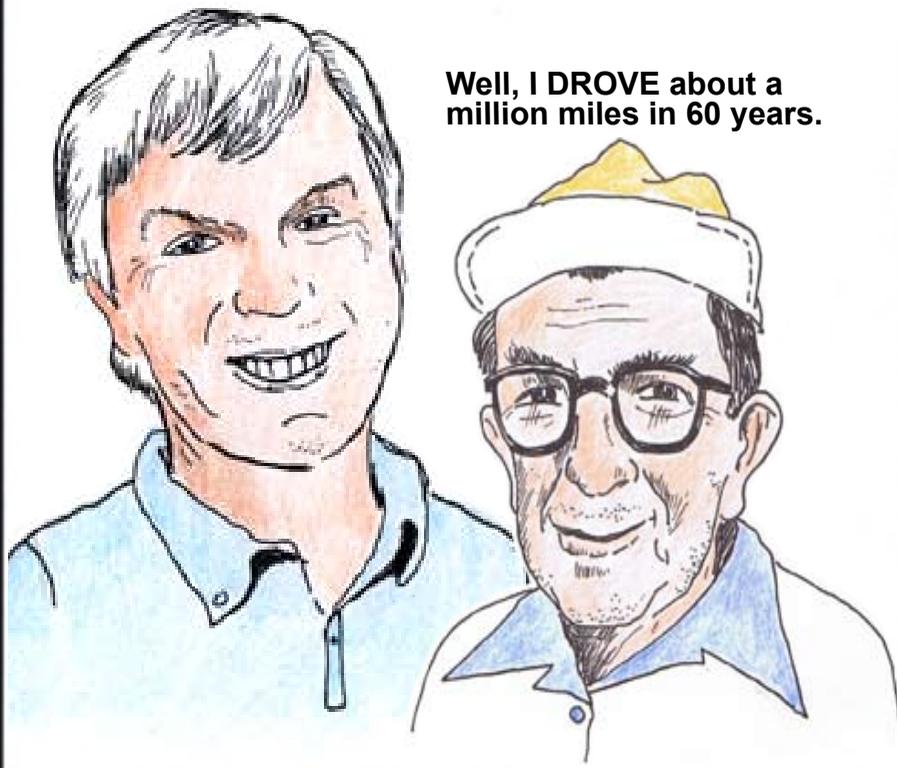
From the outset we Americans have on the whole seen the Nevada deserts as wastelands. The fruition of this is that in the last six decades these precious deserts have become designated dumping grounds both for the greater society's toxic wastes and toxic behaviors. A dumping ground for what we thought must be banished from the America we wanted to think about and wanted the world to see.

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