

# THE 'NEW WEST/PROGRESSIVE' PARADOX

## CAN 'LIBERAL/GREENS' STILL POSSESS AN HONEST SOCIAL CONSCIENCE?

JIM STILES

NOTE: Some of the information in this story can be found in my book 'Brave New West' and in previous Zephyr articles, dating back to 1998...JS



On the evening of October 31, 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt faced a standing-room only crowd at Madison Square Garden in New York. The Great Depression continued to grip the country and millions of Americans struggled to survive; yet many of them believed they'd found an unlikely hero in the wealthy patrician who had already given hope to so much despair. His voice lifted their hearts and spirits as he delivered a fiery address to his enthusiastic supporters.

Roosevelt, who had once urged Americans to "judge me by the enemies I have made," now reminded his audience of those enemies as if they were badges of honor. He ran the list--- "business and financial

monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, organized money." The crowd was on its feet.

"Never before in all our history," Roosevelt declared, "have these forces been so unanimous in their hatred for me—and I welcome their hatred." The people cheered wildly. FDR could barely be heard over the roar. He continued, "I should like to have it said of my first administration that in it, the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match." He waited for the din to abate.....

"I would like to have it said of my second administration," he added, "that in it, these forces met their master!" A week later, Roosevelt won the greatest electoral victory in the country's history.

When FDR came to office four years earlier, the country was about to come apart. A third of its citizens were out of work, poverty and despair crossed political party lines—now, in 1936, even Utah's citizens supported him. Subsequently, Roosevelt and the Democratic Party became symbols of the hope he gave to so many Americans. Franklin Roosevelt, almost 70 years after his death, remains a hero to 'Liberal/Progressives,' the Democratic Party, and to working class people everywhere. He was, and still is, loathed by the rich, loved by the poor.

An old friend recently noted to me that, "a 'progressive,' (most often found in the Democratic Party) has historically meant supporting the oppressed against the oppressor, labor against the bosses, indigenous people against colonizers, with a progressive media that 'comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable.'" According to Wikipedia, Progressivism "asserts that advancement in science, technology, economic development, and social organization are vital to improve the human condition." But which humans? Which technology? What kind of economic development?

It would be challenging to find anyone worth their "progressive" stripes who could muster a bad word for FDR. But do his values still ring true across the broad spectrum of the Democratic Party? Within its ranks, opinions vary. Of course, there are mild dissenters—the 'Blue Dog Democrats'—who embrace a more conservative view on fiscal and social issues

But could there be a new faction within the Democratic Party ranks, especially among those 'progressive/environmentalists' who live in and recreate upon the ever-expanding demographic phenomenon called "The New West"? How would FDR's values hold up in the likes of Jackson, Wyoming, or Aspen, Colorado, or Sedona, Arizona? Or perhaps even the latest full-blown entry as a New West town...Moab, Utah in 2015?

### 'THE NEW WEST': A DEFINITION AND A SHORT HISTORY

Ever since white Americans pushed across the Great Plains, we've been creating the 'New West.' Between 1845 and 1895, we transformed the landscape, but for the purposes of this story, the New West is a fairly recent phenomenon. For better or worse, the economy of the American West has always been dominated by the extraction industries—mining, timber, grazing, energy exploration and production—these were the predominant revenue earners for western states and their citizens, going back to the mid-1800s. And the economy has always been subject to a 'boom and bust' cycle, as supply and demand for commodities waxed and waned.

Environmental activism in the West is relatively new. Serious opposition to the extraction industries and the environmental damage they can cause has only become significant in the last half century. Efforts to shut down extraction and demands for more stringent rules to reduce their environmental impacts have all been part of the 'green' strategy to protect the natural resources of the West. But the newest crop of "progressive/green" activists have embraced another tactic in

its war against the extractive economy of the 'Old West,' though it would be unfair to say they initiated it.

As resources played out across the West, many of these booming communities went bust. Once vibrant mining towns with burgeoning populations dried up and almost blew away. Communities saw their citizens move away and their economies shrink. The once bustling boom towns became quaint, run-down relics of another time.

But this is America—the free market capital of the world, where the entrepreneurial spirit burns brightly and capitalism commands more worship than any deity could hope for. In the 1960s and 1970s, as tourism and recreation became ever more significant components of the economy, investors looked for good deals—for steals—and there were plenty of them. Properties in mining towns across the West could be bought for pennies on the dollar. Land was cheap. Buildings, once full of life and energy, lay abandoned and

deteriorating.

Only the hangers-on, that stridently independent handful of survivors who had preferred to eke out a marginal existence in exchange for solitude and quiet, stood in the way. Even some of them saw the economic opportunities and profited. The rest were easily pushed aside.

And so change came, and rapidly...to places like Park City, Utah and Telluride, Colorado. And Aspen. And Central City. And Salida. And Flagstaff, Arizona. And Prescott. And Virginia City, Nevada. And Durango, Colorado. And Boise and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and Bozeman and Missoula, Montana.

And to Moab, once the 'Uranium Capitol of the World,' in the southeast corner of Utah--- my old hometown for more than 30 years. While the New West can be found in scores of places, from the Front Range of the Rockies to the Pacific Coast, this story chooses to focus on the microcosm it knows best...

### ENTER...THE 'AMENITIES ECONOMY' & WILDERNESS

In the 1980s, Grand County, Utah's economy went bust. Atlas Minerals, the massive vanadium processing mill, built by the Uranium King Charlie Steen in the 1960s, closed its doors. Falling ore prices and Three Mile Island were its undoing. Moab struggled to find a way to survive. In 1988 its elected leaders proposed the construction of a toxic waste incinerator near Cisco, 40 miles upriver, as a way of generating revenues for the county and bolstering its economy. But Grand County residents, many of them relatively new and leaning more to the Left than its older citizens imagined, opposed the incinerator via a public referendum. And they won. But how to keep the town alive?

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The term "amenities economy" was new to me in 1991, when I published a story by Moab's Lance Christie, in behalf of the Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club titled, "Wilderness Economics: Boom and Bust Baloney."

Christie noted that, "Studies done on the economic impacts of wilderness on local economies consistently support the idea that designated wilderness in an area acts like an advertisement that says: 'Here is a treasure house of environmental amenities! And, they'll be here tomorrow because some treasure-hunter with a bulldozer can't come and tear them up.' This advertising attracts people economists call 'amenity migrants,' causing twice the economic growth in rural areas with designated wilderness than in areas without wilderness." Christie added, "Once there, these energetic and educated people develop their own economic opportunities."

In addition to energy and education, Christie failed to mention another advantage the "amenities migrants" possessed over their hometown neighbors—Capital. Assets. MONEY.

To create the marketable amenities that would draw tourists to the more intrinsic 'wilderness amenities' Christie first described, those migrants must be financially well-equipped to follow through. Lance noted, "If a community uses wilderness amenities as a drawing card, then offers goods and services people want when they come to enjoy the local amenities, wilderness can make the people selling those goods a lot of money."

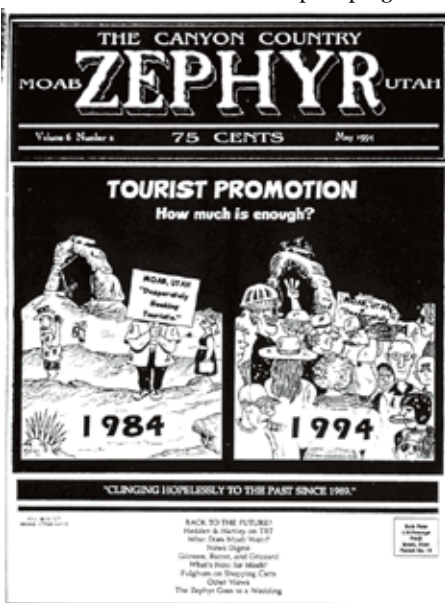
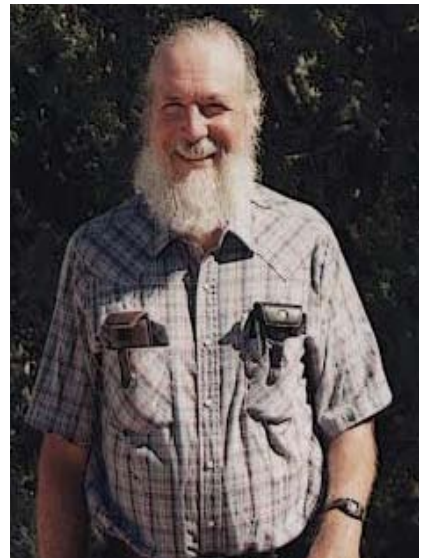
But for this kind of economy to "make a lot of money," its investors need a considerable amount of it at the start. In all of these depressed economies across the rural west, those residents who needed an economic boost the most were the least equipped to benefit from this type of growth. From the start, they were doomed to be the clerks and the servers, the tangential low-wage beneficiaries of a tourism/recreation industry whose primary rewards would be reaped by people who had not yet even arrived in these backwater towns. And in many cases, the highest profit recipients would never step foot there. The era of the New West absentee business owner was about to begin in earnest

And when it came to the idea of preserving the dwindling wilderness in the Rural West, Christie added this final note—and a warning—to the amenities dream: "The whole economic debate over wilderness tends to distract us from the fact that the major reasons for designating wilderness arise from non-economic values."

Amen. But few noticed.

The New West transformation was slow, and at least in the beginning, many environmental groups resisted the temptation to embrace it. Through most of the 1990s, grassroots environmental groups openly opposed efforts by the tourist/recreation industry to turn the beauty of the land into a marketable commodity. Few, if any, environmentalists took note when Grand County hired an economic development director to promote a strategy called, "You've come to play...why not stay?"

Grand County Councilman and Grand Canyon Trust (GCT) staffer (now its executive director) Bill Hedden noted, "Throughout the region...visitation has grown by more than 400 percent since 1980. This surge of interest has coincided with a proliferation of new recreation technologies--some





exotic like modern ATVs, humvees, mountain bikes, climbing gear, jet skis and hanggliders; and others prosaic like water filters, sunscreen and dry suits....And though it is common to blame the destruction on a small percentage of lawless visitors, my experience brings to mind the old joke that a mere 99 percent of users give a bad name to all the rest. Make no mistake—we are in this together.” Hedden concluded, “Everywhere we looked, natural resource professionals agreed that industrial-strength recreation holds more potential to disrupt natural processes on a broad scale than just about anything else. It’s a very tough problem affecting all of us.”

But in 1998, as environmentalists grew increasingly frustrated by their efforts to protect wildlands in the West, their strategies shifted. At a landmark ‘wilderness mentoring’ conference that May, attended by scores of the country’s environmentalist leaders, a more aggressive, down-and-dirty strategy was proposed. A prominently displayed quotation by Michael Carroll, now of The Wilderness Society, established the tone and direction of all that would come later:

“Car companies and makers of sports drinks use wilderness to sell their products. We have to market wilderness as a product people want to have.”

That, in its most succinct essence, was the theme of the conference. While the organizers of the event paid tribute to the wilderness activists who had come before, clearly the purpose of the meeting was to propose a new approach. “Although it is important to pioneer new wilderness strategies,” the report explained almost as an afterthought, “we must do so with knowledge of what has come before.”

With that token nod to the “importance of history” and to the “philosophical and political contexts” of the wilderness movement, the conference explored the new territories of salesmanship, marketing and media manipulation to win the legislative wilderness battle. One might think you were being taught how to sell a new Buick.

By 2003, GCT’s Hedden, seemed ready to accept and even embrace the changes. In a Zephyr interview he admitted, “We’ve had some of the most spectacular country in the world, and no one else in it. The fact that those days are just about over is sad, but there are many more people in the world, and they have found this place, and there’s no keeping them away.” And so, suddenly, the idea of embracing an unbridled recreation/amenities economy that had once worried the most enthusiastic supporters of wilderness, achieved political, if not moral, acceptability.

Add to the mix the sudden willingness of mainstream environmental groups like the Grand Canyon Trust to accept huge sums of money from some of the nation’s most celebrated capitalists—industrialists, financiers, bankers, hedge fund managers—in exchange for influential positions on their boards of directors, and anything was fair in the amenities/wilderness game.

**FEARS FROM THE ‘OLD WEST’...AND THE ‘NEW WEST’ MOVES IN**

Lily Mae Noorlander came from one of Moab’s oldest families. She was as kind and decent a woman as I’ve ever known. But she had no use for ‘wilderness,’ in the legislative designation of the word, and thought even less of some of its proponents. She could not help but note the irony as the New West came to her hometown.

In 1994, Lily wrote a letter to the Salt Lake Tribune: “Long-forgotten ranches, abandoned decades ago, are now front page fare in the full-color marketing pieces of this lucrative industry... Some of the direct consequences of their promotional activities, aside from generating profit from calendars, hiking exposes and membership dues include: more foot trails, bike trails, garbage, human waste, instructional signs, regulations, law enforcement patrols, costs to local government for crowd control, and a general loss of peace and serenity to the plaid clad, waffle stomper crowd.

“The spirit of wilderness,” concluded Ms. Noorlander, “has already been stolen by those who profess to be its savior, but who have, in fact, trampled the life out of its essential serenity and solitude in an orgy of self-indulgence.”

A few months later, The Tribune published another letter titled, “There’s Money in Wilderness.” Its author, Randall Tolpinrud, president of Groupwest Properties Corporation in Salt Lake City, wrote, in part:

“As a real-estate developer and homebuilder in Utah, I have a very strong interest in maintaining the long-term economic foundation of this region...Because of this conviction, I am concerned over the wilderness proposal suggested by our congressional delegation.

“I support the Utah Wilderness Coalition’s proposal for 5.7 million acres (in 2015, the proposal is near 10 million) of wilderness primarily because the long-term economic potential which wilderness designation will provide this state.

“The West is changing dramatically. Lands from Montana to New Mexico are rapidly being developed by people like myself in response to growing migration and population...We must look years and decades ahead. Wilderness designation will grow to represent a powerful economic opportunity as the West’s open spaces shrivel from development. Utah, with its unique beauty and abundant national parks, could be positioned to reap significant economic rewards from masses of people seeking solitude in a wilderness experience from their fast-paced lives.”

In 2002, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) weighed in with its own feature story in their quarterly newsletter. It was called “The Local Economic Impacts of Protected Wildlands: Enhanced Economic Vitality.” It was written by Thomas Michael Power, a Professor of Economics at the University of Montana. Power asserted that protecting the Rural West’s wildlands did not damage local economies; on the contrary, he believed that “protected landscapes are often associated with enhanced economic vitality.” But he followed that declaration with a curious caveat, considering the intent of the article, that was all but ignored by environmentalists. Power warned:

“This does not mean that those seeking to preserve natural areas should base their case for preservation on the economic expansion it will stimulate. That could be a dangerous strategy in the long run and one that may not be very convincing besides. In fact, in the long run, ongoing economic growth may well threaten the ecological integrity of wildlands as growing population, human settlement, and commercial activities and their accompanying pollutants isolate and disrupt natural areas. Even though wildlands may be good for local economic vitality, local economic vitality may not be good for the ecological integrity of those wildlands.”

The remainder of Power’s essay moves away from that warning. Using the data he had gathered, Power struck several blows in support of the amenities economy. He noted that “higher percentages of county land protected by national park, national monument, and federal wilderness status were associated with higher rates of employment.” He discovered that population growth in areas near wilderness areas was higher than state averages. And Power observed that Wilderness “protection was associated with growth rates two to six times those for other non-metropolitan areas.”

Power concluded, despite his early warning, “It is not clear why wildlands advocates would not want to meet the economic critics of wildland protection on their own ground, while also continuing to make the ethical, cultural, and environmental arguments. After all, if you can take away the only powerful argument the anti-environmentalists have, why would you not do so?”

It was as if he was saying, we can let the anti-wilderness people destroy the West on their terms or we can fight to destroy it on our terms. And aren’t our terms of destruction better than theirs? After all, before we destroy the wilderness, we’re going to protect it.

Environmentalists failed to see or would not acknowledge the double-edged sword Power described. In a subsequent issue of “Red Rock Wilderness,” SUWA put its own spin on Power’s report, noting that, “Total employment in Utah has increased by 45% in the last decade...What is fueling Utah’s pacesetting growth? Tourism and related services have been especially robust, and now provides more than a third of all jobs....Growth is not limited to urban Utah. In Grand County, a tourism explosion helped to make it the third fastest growing county in Utah.”

This was written with almost evangelical enthusiasm. None of Power’s warnings saw the light of day in this particular spin. Finally, SUWA noted the ballooning Utah population, which grew by 30% in the 1990s. “This tremendous regional growth, with Utah at its epicenter, is driven by Western quality of life factors like outdoor recreation, open space, and wilderness....There is a very real place for wilderness in Utah’s economic future. Protected by BLM, wilderness can serve as a modest sustainable source for economic well-being and community development.”

But who would benefit from the “economic well-being?” Would it be the people who had lived in the Rural West, in places like Moab, Utah, for generations? Or was this the beginning of a New West purge? The handwriting was already on the wall.

**THE NEW WEST’S ‘PORK BELLY’ HOUSING BOOM**

When Thomas Power set out to analyze the effects of wilderness on the rural economy, he noted an anomaly that he could not initially explain. “Researchers,” he wrote, “puzzled by the growth of population in western Montana, despite low wages and incomes, studied the location of new residential housing to determine what locational characteristics explained the decisions homebuilders were making. They found that the closer a location was to a designated wilderness area, the higher the likelihood of new construction. The same was true of national parks.”

Power’s bewilderment is old news to the citizens of small communities near parks and wilderness. New home construction, which took off in Moab during the early 90s, targeted part-time residents and retirees, who have no need to seek employment in the area. In fact, these homes and condominiums are, in a way, very disconnected from the socio-economic needs and difficulties of the community to which they have, at least physically, joined. The part-timers exist in a vacuum, oblivious or indifferent to the issues and problems that affect the town, save for the few more narrowly confined issues that affect them personally. They usually don’t know much of the community’s history and know few of its citizens. And until recently, they didn’t get involved in local politics. (That would change.)



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As the demand for New West homes grew, so did the price. An existing home in Moab that might have sold for \$30,000 in 1985 doubled its value in five years. And doubled again. And by 2008, yet again. Even vacant lots in Spanish Valley—once improbably named Poverty Flats—that sold for a thousand dollars an acre in 1985 quickly increased in price beyond the reach of most low wage earners. (A recent perusal of the real estate web sites showed unimproved quarter acre lots listing for \$65,000 and beyond—a QUARTER ACRE.)

Clearly, the housing market in Grand County was now beyond the reach of anyone of modest means and limited resources. But an amenities/tourist economy also requires a large low-wage work force to provide the services to tourists that the visitors demand—servers and cooks and bus-boys and maids and store clerks and other low-paying tourist amenities jobs. Where would they live and how would they afford it? Even in the early 2000s, a small home in Moab/Grand County could be rented for \$500-600. By 2010, the rent had doubled.

This publication reported on the speculative nature of home prices and their stunning rise in Grand County as far back as the early 1990s. Few heeded the warnings or cared. And by 2000, no one among the ‘green/progressives’ was willing to even offer the slightest of misgivings, much less opposition, to the way the recreation economy was affecting the community. The problem would only grow more critical.

Housing data for the 2008–2012 period shows that the “median house value has grown by 96.43% since 2000. The growth rate for the price of a house in the 84532 zip code is much higher than the state average rate of 49.08% and is much higher than the national average rate of 51.67%.” The data also revealed that of the 5,016 housing units available in Grand County, 4,080 were occupied, with almost 20% of them, 916 units, vacant. Of the occupied housing units, about 2700 were owned and 1300 rented.

<http://www.usa.com/84532-ut-housing.htm>

Home prices continued to rise, rents doubled. Low income citizens attempting to find economic relief in low cost trailers and mobile homes along the river road were evicted for violation of zoning laws. Once affordable rental homes became flophouses, as renters were forced to pack as many