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Conservation and Resource Management in the West

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Natural Resources Affected by Human Activities

Today many things threaten the air we breathe, the soils, plant life, animal life and water we need for survival. Ecosystem services on which we rely are inevitably disrupted by human activity, not only by resource extraction and use, but also by trends in population growth, consumption, and lifestyle. Human migration and community expansion affect not only natural resources, landscapes and ecosystem services, they also lead to a shifting political, social and cultural climate.

These changing trends are very apparent in the western United States, the eleven states from Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico to the west coast. Historically, the West has been an area of agrarian development, energy production, and mineral extraction. Oil and gas mining, cattle and sheep farming, and large-scale crop production have long been viable economic industries and the West is home to most of the public land in the United States. This land—owned and managed by federal agencies including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the National Forest Service (NFS), and the National Park Service (NPS)—dominates landscapes and provides the acreage on which much of the resource extraction occurs. A growing global economy and population growth in the West have created new cultural and socio-economic conditions and increased pressures for adequate land management.

Changes in Western Conditions

There is a significant shift in economic structure: the global economy has changed the environment in which we work, play and do business. Extractive industries are increasingly outsourced to places where labor and natural resources are less expensive than in the United States. In the year 2000, mining, wood products, agriculture and ranching collectively constituted 2 percent of personal income in the West. This does not mean that western states have to compete in the global marketplace against countries with cheap labor and abundant natural resources. Instead, we see that services and non-labor income have become the two most important industries; one out of every two dollars earned is in services, and one out of every three is in non-labor. While services are often considered low income, also included are such businesses as finance, insurance, real estate, medical services, engineering, and management, which represent high-wage professions. Non-labor income is made up of rent, dividends, interest and transfer payments.

Population growth, primarily due to migration from the more heavily populated coasts, has also affected the West. Retirees, immigrants from other countries, and young people have all chosen

to relocate in the West, often drawn by the beautiful landscapes, the natural amenities and the proximity to recreation opportunities unavailable in urban areas.

“The 1990s were a period of rebound in rural and small town population growth as more people moved into non-metro counties than moved out. The non-metro population, as defined at the start of the decade, grew by 5.3 million, or 10.3 percent, during the 1990s compared with just a 1.3-million increase from 1980 to 1990.” —Economic Research Service, USDA¹

As new people move into these areas and into towns where extractive industries used to rule, there are inevitable conflicts over land use management, protection, and planning. Different groups of people value and use the land and natural resources for different activities. In addition, this fast-paced growth is increasingly happening in the interface between urban areas and wildlands. American Wildlands, a science-based conservation organization focusing on the northern Rockies, identifies five impacts that human development has on wildlife: habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, reduction of habitat quality, loss of wildlife migration corridors, and road construction.

“Once wildlife habitat is developed, its ecological and open space values are severely diminished, and it is generally impossible or very expensive to replicate these values. Thus uncontrolled growth in the form of roads, buildings, parking lots and associated activities, has become one of the most serious threats to wild animals and landscapes in all of the United States.” —American Wildlands²

New Methods for Natural Resource Management

Given this background, it is easy to understand how conflicts over land use erupt in the western states. One parcel of land could be equally valued by ranchers, conservationists, public land managers, and recreation users (keeping aside for the moment any intrinsic value for wildlife, ecosystem services, soils, water and biodiversity). Competition for private lands in the West is especially fierce. As land values skyrocket, and property taxes rise, landowners are increasingly inclined to sell out and parcel land off to be split up for housing development. But the management of public lands is equally important since, for example, an ecological buffer zone may also have grazing permittees and tourism opportunities that compete for priority. Land uses are often indicative of locally contextual values, as well as prosperity and quality of life for residents. What methods are being used now for land use and resource management? How can all competing interests be represented and given their due in decisions that affect the long-term health of the environment?

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The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an earth restored.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to the earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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Clearly, the consideration and inclusion of many diverse interests is of utmost importance. The conditions of the American West demand that public and private lands be considered together. In 2003 the Center for the Study of the American West at Stanford sponsored a Land Use workshop, bringing together planners, environmental scientists, economists, historians and legal scholars, in an effort to begin to puzzle out what is unique about the American West and how to plan for effective land use in the future. The participants touched on three overarching themes: governance, geographical distinctiveness, and the role of urban planning, all of which are interconnected.³ These themes are also clearly evident in the methods used by various organizations and agencies as they pursue common goals.

Citizen-led groups are often at the forefront of success as communities work towards effective governance and preserving geographical distinctiveness. Community-led collaboration allows for local issues and concerns to guide resource management decisions. Not only are many diverse stakeholders brought to the table in a process that engages them all, but it provides space for citizens to advocate for local stewardship of resources and specific conservation goals.

Guiding Principles for Community-led Collaboration

Collaboration is a process that is driven by method and there are ways to identify successful and effective results from that process. In 2000, the non-profit Sonoran Institute, convened a group of public land managers to identify some of the hallmarks of successful collaboration:⁴

1. **Build Lasting Relationships:** Trust and credibility are crucial to successful working relationships and can be built in part through safe and friendly environments. It is also important that stakeholders feel that all parties are investing equitable resources and time, and that the playing field is level.
2. **Encourage Diverse Participation and Communication:** Through locally accepted techniques of communication, leaders can encourage a wide range of participants to join an initiative.
3. **Agree Upon Group Restrictions:** The limitations to land management decisions may be legal in nature, or they may be dependant on private boundaries or other regulations. By agreeing early on in the process to a mission statement, group goals, group functions, and collaborative efforts can be kept on track.
4. **Work at an Appropriate Scale:** It is often beneficial to start with a specific geographic area, or with a specific issue, before a collaborative group tackles larger or more regional conflicts. Likewise, a sense of place is part of what can hold collaborative groups together to get goals accomplished.
5. **Empower the Group:** Training, capacity building, and information sharing are all good ways to empower local citizens to make decisions on their own. In some situations, building a common base of knowledge can be very important.
6. **Build on Local Leadership:** Community leaders, both formal and informal, can help to guide, shape and create an identity for a place and can encourage more participation.
7. **Build Connections Beyond the Local Scale:** Often resources are available to communities through a wider spread network of experts and specific initiatives in other locales.

Watershed Councils

Since water is a scarce resource in the West, the protection of sources—surface and ground water—and water rights are vital to residents. A watershed council consists of a local organization, convened and designated by local government, to address the goal of watershed protection, enhancement and sustainability. Watershed councils are made up of citizens who bring diverse backgrounds and have ties across many spheres of the community. The approach of addressing an entire ecological boundary, such as a watershed, enables

these organizations to work more holistically, across jurisdictional boundaries and agency mandates, to achieve the best outcomes and significantly influence watershed management decisions.⁵

Owyhee Initiative

The Owyhee Initiative in Idaho has worked collaboratively in a multi-year process to include ranchers, conservationists, county officials, recreation users, scientists, agency officials and others to do research and to negotiate a proposal.

The goal of the Initiative is “to develop and implement a landscape-scale program in Owyhee County that preserves the natural processes that create and maintain a functioning, unfragmented landscape supporting and sustaining a flourishing community of human, plant and animal life, that provides for economic stability by preserving livestock grazing as an economically viable use, and that provides for protection of cultural resources.”—Owyhee Initiative⁶

The Owyhee Initiative has created a plan that would result in congressionally designated Wilderness Areas—almost 400 miles of river corridors, and 500,000 acres of flatlands, including vital wildlife habitat and wild landscape. If approved by Congress, the Owyhee Initiative would use the Wilderness Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to preserve and maintain these areas.⁷

Rocky Mountain Front

The Nature Conservancy’s Rocky Mountain Front work in Montana brings together private landowners, like ranchers and agriculturalists, with the Fish and Wildlife Service in an effort to increase the purchase of conservation easements. These easements provide financial incentives for landowners to keep their land, rather than sell it for development and subdivisions. Conservation easements are proving to be effective tools across the West because they rely on the established land stewardship mentality for permanent conservation. Thousands of acres have been purchased to date, supplying local revenue, maintaining open spaces, and giving ranchers options other than selling their land in parcels.⁸

Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP) was awarded the Outstanding Planning Award by the American Planning Association in 2002. Based in the Tucson area, the goal of the SDCP is to manage growth while protecting biological and cultural resources and maintaining open space. To achieve these goals, the planning process brought together divergent interest groups to create a balanced planning and decision-making process. Participating citizens, agencies and organizations numbered in the hundreds and included planners, scientists, and resource experts from local governments, universities, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Services, and The Nature Conservancy. The Plan includes measures of ecological preservation, conditions for urban and population growth, and provisions for continued collaboration among the plan’s contributors.⁹

Sonoran Institute

Realizing the strength of collaboration and social capital, the not-for-profit Sonoran Institute works to “conserve and restore important natural landscapes in western North America, including

the wildlife and cultural values of these lands. The Institute’s efforts create lasting benefits, including healthy landscapes and vibrant livable communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their economies and quality of life.” The Sonoran Institute works all over the American West, as well as in northern Mexico and western Canada. The approach to conservation taken by the Institute focuses on commitment to local processes, capacity building, and trust building. Sonoran Institute believes that when people of local communities are given respect, information and the right kind of assistance, they can make sound conservation decisions. This honors a process by which communities set their priorities and develop solutions that address their individual circumstances.¹⁰

By focusing on the method, rather than on a specific ecological issue, Sonoran Institute is able to work throughout the West on various conservation projects. Research done by the Sonoran Institute has shown that economic prosperity across the western U.S. is highly correlated with public lands and open spaces. There was no evidence that setting aside these lands for conservation is detrimental to economic and community development.¹¹

Challenges Faced by Community Groups

Community groups across the West face a number of challenges. Although these vary based on specific contexts and geographic locales, it is beneficial to outline a few of them here. It is clear that collaboration is only one tool in the tool box of the conservationist. Many issues are not appropriate for a collaborative approach, especially those that require the execution of policy change or litigation. Federally chartered Resource Advisory Councils (RACs) allow policy-based and collaborative approaches to work together. RACs represent specific categories of local residents and all meetings are open to the public. In this way, RACs provide information and input into a land management decisions.¹²

Community groups need systems of accountability and evaluation. Collaboration on a community scale relies heavily upon volunteers, and the expectation that the responsible parties will fulfill their duties. It is difficult to determine if collaborative efforts have been legitimate, or if all stakeholders have been adequately represented within the process. This difficulty with measuring and ensuring the success of collaborative efforts highlights the importance of working within existing environmental laws and regulations, and with federal agencies which remain legally responsible for outcomes.

Finally, collaborative community-led organizations often face the challenge of diversity. People are drawn to work with like-minded individuals, hence we congregate in organizations that are in accord with our own beliefs: environmental groups, cattlemen’s associations, human rights organizations, pro-choice groups, etc. Collaboration requires us to work with people of diverse and often opposing mindsets. The method challenges its supporters to step outside of their own opinion and create compromises that benefit all interests. There are serious challenges to be faced in creating and maintaining a space or framework in which people can disagree and still work together. This challenge is one that is particularly suited to the strengths of Friends’ groups and service work.

Policies and Friends' Involvement

As mentioned already, much of the land in the western United States is owned and managed by federal and state governments. As community conservation efforts progress, it is critical that citizen leaders understand the opportunities for collaboration that are inherent in federal, state and local laws. Any proposed plans for growth or management must be written with an understanding of local, or in some cases, national governance. Citizens may work towards conservation goals through the public involvement clauses in laws that govern decision-making processes. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Federal Advisory Committee Act both have provisions requiring public participation, which open the door for community conservation efforts. NEPA has clearly outlined processes that affect all the federal land use management agencies in their long-term planning for public lands.

In addition to these federal laws, the National Forest Management Act, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act each provide ways for communities and citizens to work towards goals of the various stakeholders.¹³

As Friends around the country and the world work to protect ecosystems for the benefit of future generations, they must stay aware of the best methods for doing so. Community-led conservation efforts in the western United States have many characteristics of processes that Friends would find familiar and compatible with Quaker values. Community-based conservation efforts solve problems that result from conflict over land use, and from cultural and social differences. These efforts are often led by a desire to represent all stakeholders—a respect for both the earth and the life on it.

It is also important for Friends to recognize how crucial the citizen-led process is in the western states because it enables communities to redesign resource use, infrastructure and management in ways that enhance and preserve ecosystems. By having many diverse interests at the table, conservation can be developed in ways that go hand in hand with government, economic development, trade and job creation, so that ecosystems are sustainable and communities are livable.

What Friends Can Do

- Learn about local conservation efforts. Conservation is best done at appropriate scales, so Friends should explore the opportunities in their own areas first.
- Learn more about collaboration as it relates to land-management decisions and conservation goals. By supporting efforts and organizations that are using collaborative methods, and building national networks, Friends can spread the success stories.
- Be active in civil dialogues in local communities. Participation is key to the success of collaboration.
- Invite representatives of successful collaborative conservation initiatives to speak at Monthly Meetings or other Friends Gatherings.

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- ⁶ Owyhee Initiative: History <www.owyheeinitiative.org/history.htm>
- ⁷ Owyhee Initiative: Protected Areas <www.owyheeinitiative.org/protection.htm>
- ⁸ The Nature Conservancy: Where We Work <www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/montana/news/news1792.html>
- ⁹ Pima County Government: Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan <www.pima.gov/cmo/sdcp/Awards2.htm>
- ¹⁰ Sonoran Institute: About Us <www.sonoran.org/si_about_us_main.html>
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- ¹³ *Laws Influencing Community Based Conservation in Colorado and the American West: A Primer*. Natural Resources Law Center, University of Colorado Law School, 2000.

Additional Sources

- Red Lodge Clearinghouse**—a website devoted to collaborative conservation, tools, methods, and case studies in the West. <www.redlodgeclearinghouse.org>
- U.S. Department of the Interior**—Cooperative Conservation Initiative <www.doi.gov/initiatives/conservation.html>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture**—Natural Resources Conservation Service <www.nrcs.usda.gov>
- The Nature Conservancy** <nature.org>
- Sonoran Institute** <www.sonoran.org>
- Sustainable Northwest** <www.sustainablenorthwest.org>