

SAVING THE WIDE OPEN SPACES:
How to Conserve Biodiversity and Sustainable Ranching,
Forestry, and Farming in the American West

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A symposium to be held in Tucson, Arizona, on May 13-15, 2005, cosponsored by The Southwest Center of the University of Arizona, the Anthropology & Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association, the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, New Mexico State University, the National Park Service, the National Forest Service, and the Quivira Coalition.

Goal

To promote working landscapes in the American West
that conserve biodiversity and sustainable ranching, forestry, and farming.

Objectives

To bring together anthropologists, conservationists, land managers, ranchers, farmers, and forest workers to:

- Assess the state of conservation in the region and identify the barriers to maintaining the viability of the region's biodiversity
- Assess the state of sustainable ranching, farming, and forestry in the rural West and identify the barriers to their viability, especially on public lands
- Develop strategies to remove or reduce those barriers and to create incentives for the preservation of biodiversity and sustainable resource use
- Expand the network of people and institutions who support our goal

Context

World War II and the postwar boom transformed the American West from a rural to an overwhelming urban region characterized by the domination of the automobile and the proliferation of low-density urban, suburban, and exurban growth. Urban sprawl now devours the West's wide open spaces while urban needs threaten to obliterate rural communities struggling to make a living off Western lands. With the rise of the environmental movement, ranchers, forest workers, and farmers, once symbols of productivity and rugged individualism, now are often demonized as environmental scourges.

Some of the criticism is well deserved. Western ranges have been overgrazed, Western forests over cut, Western rivers domesticated, and Western aquifers over pumped. But many ranchers, forest workers, and farmers are developing strategies to make their livelihoods more sustainable in ecological as well as economic terms. Tired of the bitter polemic that characterizes so many battles over Western lands, a growing number of environmentalists, scientists, and people who make their living off those lands

are searching for what rancher Bill McDonald calls the “radical center.” Conservation NGOs like The Nature Conservancy and the Sonoran Institute, whose mission is to preserve biodiversity by protecting lands and waters, are realizing that one effective strategy to do so is the preservation of large, unfragmented working landscapes. Grassroots organizations like the Quivira Coalition and the Malpai Borderlands Group are recognizing that the conservation of biodiversity is essential to sustainable resource use. Across the West, conservationists, ranchers, farmers, and forest workers are acknowledging their common ground and joining together to protect the wide open spaces from the economic and demographic forces that are fragmenting landscapes and destroying the habitat and watersheds upon which people, plants, and animals depend. A new vision is arising that perceives conservation of biodiversity and sustainable resource use as compatible and symbiotic, not antithetical.

Such a vision calls for a more inclusive and expansive environmentalism that encourages local food and forestry production while preserving biodiversity and the large, interconnected landscapes upon which biodiversity depends. It also envisions a rural West that is more than an urban playground -- a West where scientists, environmentalists, and communities of ranchers, forest workers, and farmers join together to nurture healthy communities and healthy landscapes.

Structure

The two-day symposium, with an optional field trip on Sunday, will bring together a small working group (40-50) of anthropologists, conservationists, federal land managers, ranchers, forest workers, and farmers. There will be four introductory sessions

devoted to the state of biodiversity, sustainable ranching, sustainable forestry, and sustainable farming in the rural West and the strategies ((habitat conservation plans, conservation easements, certification programs, local food networks, etc.) designed to preserve them. These will be followed by break-out discussions organized around the themes below and a summary session involving the entire group. Three scholars will be commissioned to write overviews/assessments of sustainable ranching, forestry, and farming in the American West. The three overviews/assessments will be distributed to all participants a month before the symposium to provide all of us with a common foundation of information before we convene.

The symposium is part of an ongoing effort by the Conservation and Community Working Group of the Anthropology & Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association to create a dialogue between conservationists and anthropologists to ensure that the needs of local communities are understood and respected by conservation projects across the world. The symposium also seeks to extend efforts by the Quivira Coalition, the Arizona Common Ground Roundtable, the Malpai Borderlands Group, and other organizations of the Radical Center by bringing ranchers, forest workers, and farmers together to share their experiences and to discover their common ground.

Break-Out Group Themes

- Beyond “Stakeholders” and the Zero-Sum Game: Towards a Holistic Vision of Conservation and Community in the Rural West

- Creative Stewardship: Encouraging Incentive-Driven Environmental Land Management
- Breaking Barriers: Developing Strategies to Reduce or Eliminate Disincentives to Sustainable Ranching, Forestry, and Farming
- Getting the Message Out: Educating the Public about Conservation and Sustainable Resource Use.

Break-out groups will address these themes by sharing their own experiences and by examining case studies in the American West where people have tried to promote sustainable resource use and the conservation of biodiversity.

Outcomes

- Create/maintain/expand a network of individuals and organizations that support sustainable ranching, forestry, and farming compatible with the conservation of biodiversity in the American West through the development of a webpage and listserv – or expansion of existing webpages and listserves
- Develop an action agenda to promote sustainable ranching, forestry, and farming, perhaps through the Radical Center Initiative if participants agree that would be the most effective strategy. Such an agenda might also include the creation of mentoring, exchange, and student research programs.
- Decide whether the best way to summarize the conclusions and recommendations of the symposium is to produce a proceedings or publishable volume. If so, assign responsibilities. If not, determine other venues.

Organization and Needs

At this stage in planning, we face three major challenges:

- Determine the list of participants to be invited, approximately 15 apiece to address sustainable ranching and the conservation of grasslands, sustainable forestry and the conservation of forests, and sustainable farming and the conservation of rivers and riparian habitat. Each subgroup must include conservationists, scientists, grassroots activists, and practitioners. These individuals must be committed, or at least sincerely open-minded, to collaboration.
- Invite those individuals.
- Raise the necessary funds. Co-sponsors can support the symposium through outright grants or the payment/reimbursement of the travel/lodging expenses of participants from their institutions or regions.

Budget

- Transportation and lodging for all invited participants who don't live in Tucson (ca. \$15,000-25,000)
- Honorariums for four synthesis papers (\$2,000)
- Meals: continental breakfasts, lunches, one dinner (???)
- Organizational (\$500)