

## Feature

# Crossing the Great Divide

by Curt Meine

## Ghost Signs

You've seen them, in older city neighborhoods and along Main Street in rural towns: those large ads, painted decades ago on the sides of brick buildings, promoting (in three-foot font) cigars and lumber, bread and shoes, Fine Meats and Dry Goods, Gold Medal flour and General Merchandise. "Ghost signs," they are sometimes called. They are spectators from worlds that have disappeared. Their flaking paint and fading colors tell tales, of lapsed businesses and defunct economies, of storefronts abandoned and lives moved on.

My favorite ghost sign was noteworthy for its prime location, at the intersection of Lake and Washington Streets in downtown Chicago. Inconspicuous in the shadows of neighboring skyscrapers, it adorned the east-facing wall of an antiquated building. You could see it best from the adjacent El train platform. Its barely-readable text read: **"HIDES PELTS AND TALLOW."** That terse script told an epic story, of the bonds of exploitation and exchange that once tied North America's inland empire of prairie farms, northern forests, and Western rangelands to the stockyards, factories, mills, and markets of Chicago and beyond.<sup>1</sup> In its economy of words, the sign captured the economy of the mid-continent, and the relationships that transformed city and country-

side alike. It displayed both the close connections and the vast distances between them.

During a recent visit to Chicago I walked to the corner of Lake and Washington, intent on photographing the sign before it grew any fainter. But Chicago's restless economy had finally caught up to the relic. The old building had lost its tenure in the high-rent Loop district. It had been demolished. New construction was underway. The brick walls had returned to dust, hauled off and deposited anonymously in some landfill out amid the cornfields of Illinois. Disappointed, I stepped into a nearby outlet of Caribou Coffee for a cup of consolation. The credit card display on the coffee shop door jokingly noted: **"Sorry: Beaver Pelts Not Accepted."**

Like ghost signs, the relationship—historic and contemporary—between our urban centers and our rural lands and communities seems to fade inexorably from our consciousness. The globalizing economy rushes ever onward, obliterating the past, burying stories, building over the remains. The consequences for land stewardship are momentous. The less visible the links, the more vulnerable becomes our commitment to conservation as a shared societal goal, crossing boundaries and connecting people and places.

Over the last century—even during the best of



(Photo by Nicholas Thompson.)

1. William Cronon tells the story in his sweeping account, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).

times—appreciation of conservation as an expression of individual and community responsibility across the landscape has been provisional at best. These days it ranks low on the list of civic concerns. Few elected leaders seem able or willing to examine the connections between urban and rural, and between conservation and the major issues of the day: national security, fiscal responsibility, economic well-being, affordable health care, energy demand and production, immigration, education. More than a few are willing to score political points by exploiting the rural-urban divide, and leaving the bitter residue of distrust for others to clean up.

The task of defining, understanding, and overcoming the urban-rural divide is obviously important to

ing, breathing, providing services, producing and processing goods, and otherwise existing in a world whose ecosystems (however altered) they depend upon. Rural people, even those furthest off the grid, are to some degree urban by virtue of the social, economic, technological, and communication systems (however stretched) they belong to. We all co-inhabit a world that is part rural and part urban. We are not separated by an insurmountable divide. We are inherently and deeply connected. It is the changing nature—and the nature-changing impact—of those connections that we find problematic.

When we look across the plain reality of our landscapes, we see in fact that we do not live on two discrete sides of a neatly partitioned and polarized rural-

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those of us who care about land, human communities, and the connections between them. The significance of this task, however, is not limited to conservation per se. It is a test of our capacity to reclaim and reinvigorate the very idea of the common good in America.<sup>2</sup> It is an indicator of our commitment to the lately much-maligned public interest—the “general welfare” of the U.S. Constitution’s preamble. The divisions in our landscapes and the deep ideological rift in our body politic are reflections of each other. It follows that conservationists must be leaders in crossing this great divide and reasserting the promise of the common good.

## From Divide to Spectrum

A first step toward overcoming the urban-rural divide is in fact to note that the idea itself is superficial. The fundamental connections remain, they are inescapable, and they work both ways. Urban people, even those most removed from the realities of country life, are to some degree rural by virtue of their eating, drink-

urban divide. That sharp dichotomy allows us to think simplistically about our conservation problems and our broader political problems. It does nothing to help solve them. To do that, we need to discard the simple dualism, and recognize the complex reality of a land-use continuum or spectrum.

At one end of the spectrum, beyond the rural, we encounter the wild: those parts of the landscape that have been relatively less affected by human activity, over relatively large areas, for relatively long periods of time. The human influence is present in wild lands—no place is without some degree of human impact—but it is less intense, extensive, conspicuous, and persistent. The idea of wilderness has taken many hits in the last two decades. Its traditional opponents continue to question the notion that wilderness protection has any legitimate role within conservation’s broader mission, and avoid serious consideration of the benefits of conservative land-use and economic self-restraint. Critics have reexamined the theoretical Achilles’ heel of the wilderness idea: that it ignores the reality of the historic human presence in, and impact on, “wild” places and biotic communities.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, defend-

2. Peter Brown covers this territory in his book *Restoring the Public Trust: A Fresh Vision for Progressive Government in America* (Beacon Press, 1994). Eric Freyfogle comes at the same questions from a conservation angle in his books *The Land We Share: Private Property and the Common Good* (Island Press, 2003) and *Bounded People, Bounded Lands: Envisioning a New Land Ethic* (Island Press, 1998).

3. See J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (University of Georgia Press, 1998); Thomas Vale,

ers of the wild have been reclaiming the idea and defining a revised role for it within conservation.<sup>4</sup>

Next we come to the rural: the farms, grasslands, rangelands, and forestlands where people have, to varying degrees, reshaped the land and its community of life to meet assorted economic goals. The customary term for this portion of the landscape these days is “working lands” (not forgetting, let’s hope, the ecological “work” that wild lands perform). Rural lands are of course far from uniform. Our ways of deriving food, fiber, fuel, and fun from them are arrayed along their own spectra of scale, intensity, and thoughtfulness. This piece of the land spectrum also includes the smaller cities and towns whose fates have traditionally been tied to the farms and ranches they serve—and whose character changes as the economics and demographics of rural life change.

We come then to the suburban: one concentric ring of development after another, annexing the space—physical and psychic—between the urban and the rural. As many observers have noted, the growth of suburbia (and now exurbia) since World War II has altered the very character of America’s lifestyle, politics, and culture.<sup>5</sup> For present purposes, a few basic points bear mentioning. Suburban and exurban development is neither urban nor rural. It has consumed both, depleting inner cities while chewing its way outward into rural lands. It has done so during an unprecedented period of development-friendly policies and cheap, abundant oil. It has changed how and where Americans live. We may think of ourselves as a nation

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ed., *Fire, Native Peoples, and the Natural Landscape* (Island Press, 2003). Charles Mann presents the view of the western hemisphere as fully “humanized” in *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (Knopf, 2005).

4. At the interface with agriculture and ranching, for example, see Daniel Imhoff and Roberta Carro’s *Farming with the Wild: Enhancing Biodiversity on Farms and Ranches* (Sierra Club Books, 2003); and Nathan Sayre’s *Working Wilderness: the Malpai Borderlands Group and the Future of the Western Range* (Rio Nuevo Press, 2005).

5. See James Howard Kunstler’s books *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (Simon and Schuster, 1993) and *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of the Oil Age, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century* (Grove Press, 2006); Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (North Point Press, 2000); and Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

of landless city-dwellers and landed country-dwellers, but by 1970, more Americans lived in suburbs than in cities. By 1994, a majority of all Americans lived in suburbs. And the suburbs served as important spawning grounds for the baby-boom environmental movement that supplanted the older rural-based conservation tradition.

We come then to the cities. Older cities and newer cities, bustling cities and decaying cities. Some more compact around their older cores; others spread out every which way. Some utterly dependent on automobiles and the oil that runs them; others with more diverse transportation networks. Some now making efforts to fit better within their landscapes, others hardly cognizant (it seems) that any larger landscape exists. In her classic study *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the late Jane Jacobs wrote, “The point of cities is multiplicity of choice.”<sup>6</sup> Over the last century, however, the range of choices offered in urban areas has been subject to the same revolutionary changes in technology, communications, transportation, and finance that have reshaped other parts of the landscape.

Within this land spectrum, the dynamics have been too wrong for too long. Our remaining wild lands have become increasingly isolated and threatened islands within fragmented landscapes, hemmed in by development, vulnerable to invasion by exotic species, degraded through the disruption of ecosystem processes. In the face of ever-narrower economic margins, “working” farms, ranches, and forestlands must be worked ever more intensively, at larger scales—or turned over to the final crop of subdivision, sprawl, and exurban development. Rural places with dramatic scenery, an attractive waterfront, access to transportation, and perhaps a nearby college, become magnets for intensive tourism and higher-end development. At the other end of the socio-economic scale, far from the hotspots of upscale development, rural poverty grips regions where the extractive economies have played out.<sup>7</sup> The concentrated capital has been channeled onward, upward, and outward.

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6. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House, 1961), p. 340.

7. For example, see Erik Eckholm, “Rural Oregon Town Feels the Pinch of Poverty”, *New York Times*, 20 August 2006.

Meanwhile, two generations of Americans have grown up with the conversion of open space to suburb as the standard trajectory of land-use change. Now, as the first rings of suburbs grow older and poorer, those who can't get no satisfaction in their current place move on to the gated communities and fortress homes of the exurban edge and beyond.<sup>8</sup> Urban flight and deindustrialization has hollowed out many



Aldo Leopold on farm, Lake Mills, Wisconsin.  
(Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Foundation.)

older cities. Among the nation's major cities, only Las Vegas, Nevada, has gained in population in recent years. Even as the increasingly globalized economy has worn down the American middle-class in general, urban middle-class neighborhoods have eroded at an even faster pace.<sup>9</sup> The "working lands" of the cities, unless blessed by special cultural and environmental amenities, fall easily into neglect and disrepair. The unglamorous work of reclaiming contaminated brownfields, rehabilitating industrial zones, and restoring deadened waterways too often simply goes undone.

There are obvious exceptions to these trends, but the main feedback loops are all wrong. Economic subsidies, jurisdictional jealousies, and wedge-driving politics pit one part of the landscape against another. Degradation in one portion of the land spectrum exacerbates degradation in other portions. Governmental policies at all levels feed the trends. Those who seek a healthier relationship between people and land face a sobering challenge. We can not achieve sustainable farms, or ranches, or small towns, or suburbs, or cities, within an unsustainable landscape. To be an effective conservationist—whether as a protector of wild land, a caring steward of working land, a restorer of damaged

8. Rick Lyman, "In Exurbs, Life Framed By Hours Spent in the Car," *New York Times*, 18 December 2005; D'Vera Cohn, "Inner Suburbs Fall Through the Cracks: Study Says Cities, Exurbs Get the Help," *Washington Post*, 15 February 2006; Bruce Lambert, "'First' Suburbs Growing Older and Poorer, Report Warns," *New York Times*, 16 February 2006; Ford Fessenden, "Americans Head Out Beyond the Exurbs," *New York Times*, 7 May 2006.

9. Blaine Harden, "U.S. Losing Its Middle-Class Neighborhoods," *Washington Post*, 22 June 2006.

ecosystems, an innovative designer of urban environments, or a builder of healthier city neighborhoods—requires attention to the landscape as a whole, and to the broad social, economic, and environmental forces that drive change within it.

None of us as individuals can conserve entire landscapes. But

all of us can and must take time to look up from our own place and recognize the ties that still bind. Only then can we build what we desperately need: a coherent conservation vision that reaches from the innermost city to the outermost wilds, and that recognizes the dynamic connections across the land. We must somehow turn the internal dynamics around and rejigger the social, economic, and political feedback loops. Reinvigorated urban cores and neighborhoods; reclaimed industrial districts; suburbs retrofitted and prepared for a post-peak-oil future; vibrant smaller towns and cities; sustainably managed farms, ranches, forests, and fisheries; coastal waters, surface waters, watersheds, wetlands, and aquifers that are carefully conserved, monitored, and restored; lands whose wildness is recognized, honored, and vigorously guarded: these are the parts of the whole that conservationists of all backgrounds and interests must be leaders in drawing together.<sup>10</sup> All of us feel more comfortable in, and more committed to, different parts of the whole landscape. But we will all lose what we care for unless we step outside our own comfort zone

## Growing from the Radical Center

The work of The Quivira Coalition takes place at the heart of the matter, at the point where conservation and agriculture intersect. This is the critical link within the land spectrum, the keystone in the arch. If this connection fails, we can expect more of the

10. Curt Meine, "Leave No Acre Behind: Renewing the Conservation Consensus," *Wingspread Journal* (The Johnson Foundation, 2004), pp. 3-7.

same: further loss and degradation of land, rigidly polarized politics, predictable environmental conflict, squandered opportunities for restoration, corrosion of community values, neglect of the public interest. If, however, common ground is secured here, a new conservation consensus may emerge.

In his book *Citizenship Papers* Wendell Berry observes, “The most tragic conflict in the history of conservation is that between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers. It is tragic because it is unnecessary.”<sup>11</sup> Berry’s comment is a painful reminder that we are far from achieving—or even defining—a shared vision of land health and community well-being. Rather, we remain a society at odds

with itself over the value, meaning, and use of land, and over the proper relationship between the rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities.

For Aldo Leopold, of course, the “community” included not only people, but “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”<sup>12</sup> He saw the human community embedded within the land community, and understood that their histories and destinies were bound together in complex ways. The exercise of individual rights, and the recognition of responsibilities, are reflected in the health of the soils, the flow of the waters, and the diversity and dynamics of plant and animal populations. The state of the land, in turn, influences the durability and health of the human communities that depend upon it.

In Leopold’s day, these relationships played out dramatically in the agricultural arena. By the 1930s the rural lands of the upper Midwest, and much of the

nation, reflected the hard use they had endured since European settlement: broad swaths of deforestation and overgrazing, widespread soil erosion, polluted and sediment-choked waterways, unchecked drainage of wetlands, depleted wildlife populations, faltering rural communities. Leopold and his contemporaries in the

conservation movement labored to find new ways to treat not just the symptoms of dysfunction, but the root causes. In particular, this entailed new approaches to conservation on the nation’s private lands.

In a visionary 1939 essay, “The Farmer as a Conservationist,” Leopold defined the challenge that farmers and conservationists together faced: “It is the individual farmer

who must weave the greater part of the rug on which America stands. Shall he weave into it only the sober yarns which warm the feet, or also some of the colors which warm the heart and eye? Granted that there may be a question which returns him the most profit as an individual, can there be any question which is best for his community? This raises the question: is the individual farmer capable of dedicating private land to uses which profit the community, even though they may not so clearly profit him? We may be over-hasty in assuming that he is not.”<sup>13</sup> During those years of economic and ecological crisis, a paramount goal of conservationists was to develop new techniques, programs, and policies through which landowners could protect “the public interest in private land.”<sup>14</sup> And everyone had a stake in that goal.

Conservationists in the 1930s experimented with a diverse array of arrangements that allowed individual landowners to coordinate their conservation



Historical marker at Coon Valley, Wisconsin with Hugh Hammond Bennett, first chief of the Soil Conservation Service (second from the left). (Photo courtesy of USDA/NRCS.)

11. Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), p. 125.

12. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 204.

13. Aldo Leopold, Susan L. Flader and J. Baird Callicott, eds., *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 261.

14. Aldo Leopold, *The River of the Mother of God*, p. 215.

actions for mutual benefit. Leopold's own activities in Wisconsin provide some sense of the ferment. At Coon Valley, in the steep-ridged coulee country along the upper Mississippi, hundreds of farmers signed up as voluntary participants in the nation's first watershed-scale soil conservation demonstration area.<sup>15</sup> Leopold advised on the project. At Riley, a railroad crossing west of Madison, Leopold and his hunting friends from town worked in partnership with a dozen farmers to enhance game and wildlife habitat conditions.<sup>16</sup> Along the Wisconsin River north of Madison, Leopold and his students conducted long-term studies in wildlife population ecology through close cooperation with the area's farm families.<sup>17</sup> At Faville Grove, half-way between Milwaukee and Madison, other students carried out pioneering research on wildlife management and prairie ecology on some of Wisconsin's most progressive dairy farms.<sup>18</sup>

Such projects were representative of efforts nationwide that brought farmers, ranchers, and conservationists together to address both immediate ecological problems and long-term land stewardship needs. This surge of innovation was a response to crisis, opportunity, and new ecological understanding, as the dire conditions of the 1930s evoked commitment and creativity from all parties (today, we would call them "partners" or "stakeholders"). It was during this time of change that the USDA's Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was created, with the sole aim of working with the nation's private landowners. In a 1936 address reviewing these experiments in private land conservation, Leopold wrote: "I still get a letter a week asking

for a copy of 'the best' way to organize farmers. I no longer worry much about mechanisms—they will come when the farmer is as proud of his prairie chickens as he is of his silo. It may well be said that the search today is for 'the best' way to change the land philosophy of America."<sup>19</sup>

Fast forward, from the 1930s to Wendell Berry and the "tragic conflict...between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers." The history of that conflict has yet to be written.<sup>20</sup> When it is, it will record the wilting of the tender shoots of cooperative conservation effort that Leopold and his generation nurtured. It will explore how two generations of population growth, easy mobility, intensified resource management, academic specialization, land development and fragmentation, increasing wealth and consumption, and hard environmental politics undermined the emerging pre-war consensus. It will examine the changing economics of land use and agriculture after World War II; the advent of new agricultural technologies (including synthetic pesticides); shifting demographics and the growing tensions between rural and urban America; the aforementioned flight from the cities and spread of suburbia; the growing chasm between producers and consumers of agricultural products; and the fraying fabric of community life in America, in urban, suburban, exurban, and rural settings alike.

But this to-be-written history would conclude, hopefully with an account of the key role that agriculture has played in the recent renaissance of community-based conservation. Since the early 1990s these initiatives have flowered in profusion. They go by many names: ecosystem management, watershed councils, land trusts, cooperative conservation.... They have varied aims: protecting significant natural features, restoring native plant and animal communities and ecological processes, co-managing large landscapes, securing

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15. See Leopold's essay, "Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation", in *The River of the Mother of God*, pp. 219-223.

16. See Leopold's essay, "Helping Ourselves," in *The River of the Mother of God*, pp. 203-208; and Bob Silbernagel and Janet Silbernagel, "Tracking Aldo Leopold through Riley's Farmland," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 86, 4 (2003), pp. 34-45.

17. Julianne Newton describes the Prairie du Sac study in detail in her newly published book, *Aldo Leopold's Odyssey* (Island Press, 2006).

18. Art Hawkins, Aldo Leopold's student, recorded the history of the site in his paper, "A Wildlife History at Faville Grove, Wisconsin," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* (1940), pp. 29-65. Hawkins, a leading waterfowl biologist and conservationist, passed away in March 2006 at the age of 92. I dedicate this essay to his memory.

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19. The statement is from Leopold's 1936 paper "Farmer-sportsmen Set-ups in the North Central Region," published in the *Proceedings of the North American Wildlife Conference*.

20. But we do have important foundations for such a study. See, for example, Berry's own classic, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (first published in 1977); Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Wes Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Counterpoint, 1996); and Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (University Press of Kansas, 2001).

open space, preserving farmland and rangelands, improving urban neighborhoods, rehabilitating waterways. What they have in common is a commitment to involving people directly, in new ways, at the local level, in the stewardship of their home places.<sup>21</sup>

Increasingly these diverse “mechanisms” recognize and build upon the conservation value—actual and potential—of the agricultural part of the landscape. Private land conservation has re-emerged after being in eclipse during the rise of environmentalism. This has happened as other factors have begun to reshape agriculture as we have known it, including the dramatic increase in demand for locally and or-

again, agriculture is the arena in which large social, political, economic, and environmental forces will play out, where the relationship between public and private interests will be negotiated, and where the fate of the land will be forged.

Wendell Berry followed his observation with a cautiously realistic prognosis: that the conflict between farming and conservation was not in fact insurmountable, but that it “can be resolved only on the basis of a common understanding of good practices.”<sup>22</sup> On landscapes across the United States and beyond, farmers, ranchers, and conservationists seek to work out those “good practices” and the policies to support them. In



(Photos courtesy of *Photohome.com*, University Corp. for Atmospheric Research, USDA/NRCS, Curt Meine, and Alaska Coalition.)

ganically produced food; the meeting of that demand through local farmer’s markets, community-supported agriculture, and other alternative means of connecting producers and consumers; growing concern over childhood obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-related public health issues; increasing appreciation of farms not simply as a food factories, but as dynamic agroecosystems; profound uncertainties connected to the future availability, use, and sources of energy and the world’s changing climate; and the far-reaching impacts of international trade agreements and policies. Once

doing so, we try again to achieve conservation as Leopold once defined it, as a state of harmony between people and land. In his wisdom, Leopold wrote: “Let’s admit at the outset that harmony between man and land, like harmony between neighbors, is an ideal—and one we shall never obtain.... But any man who respects himself and his land can try.” In bringing agriculture and conservation together—again—we demonstrate our respect, and we try.<sup>23</sup>

### All Over the Map

As much as any organization, The Quivira Coalition has fostered useful communication across the great divide, and all over the map. These conversations are desperately needed. Over the last generation, American culture and politics has brought us to

21. The literature on decentralized and community-based approaches in conservation has grown voluminous. A small sampling would include: Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); William Vitek and Wes Jackson, eds., *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place* (Yale University Press, 1996); Ted Bernard and Jora M. Young, *The Ecology of Hope: Communities Collaborate for Sustainability* (New Society Publishers, 1997); Robert Keiter, *Reclaiming the Native Home of Hope: Community, Ecology, and the American West* (University of Utah Press, 1998); Philip Brick, Doug Snow, and Sarah Van de Wetering, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Explorations in Collaborative Conservation and the American West* (Island Press, 2000); and Peter Forbes, *The Great Remembering: Further Thoughts on Land, Soul, and Society* (The Trust for Public Land, 2001).

22. Berry, *Citizenship Papers*, p. 125

23. The statement appears in Leopold’s original version of “The Farmer as A Conservationist,” which was given as an address. A revised version of the statement was included in the essay “Conservation” in *Round River* (Oxford University Press, 1953), and in the essay “Natural History” in the 1970 Ballantine paperback edition of *A Sand County Almanac*.

a state of what some have called a “cold civil war.” We find ourselves divided between rural red and urban blue (buffered by shades-of-purple suburbs). With little questioning of the premise, we willingly place ourselves (and demonize others) somewhere along a one-dimensional right-wing vs. left-wing axis. That other axes and dimensions might exist; that common ground might be reclaimed; that a radical center might serve to emphasize connections over divisions: these possibilities demand respectful conversation among those who care.

Our ways of valuing, using, managing, protecting, and thinking about land have contributed to the discord. Our ways of caring for and restoring it must contribute to reconciliation. To do so, however, a renewed conservation consensus must gain ground. And that will require building new constituencies, creating differ-



Public Service Company of New Mexico (PNM) volunteers learn from Bill Zeedyk about low tech riparian restoration practices during a volunteer workday on Cedro Creek near Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 2006. (Photo by Tamara Gadzia.)

ent alliances, and providing greater technical capacity. Above all, it will require taking seriously the precept that land is “a community to which we belong”.<sup>24</sup> A land divided against itself cannot be conserved.

How can we encourage growth of a new consensus? By doing more of what The Quivira Coalition and like-missioned organizations are already doing; highlighting that which connects us across the landscape. This begins with the basics: food, soil, water, air, ecological relationships, migratory pathways. It includes shared

24. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. viii.

goals and values: human health, economic vitality, responsibility to future generations. It embraces the intangible things that are harder to articulate: beauty, memory, identity, spirit, hope, citizenship, community, meaning, trust, mystery, wonder. We can dwell upon that which divides us, but we dwell within landscapes that connect us.

**Revisiting our history.** It’s a long story.... Human beings began to disperse outward from our ancestral Africa more than 60,000 years ago. Agriculture has shaped human civilization for ten millennia. The first cities arose a few thousand years after that. The industrial revolution gathered steam two centuries ago. Conservation became a self-conscious movement in the U.S. a century ago. Ecology matured as a science in the middle of the 20th century. Environmentalism emerged only a generation ago. Conservation biology and restoration ecology are just infant fields. How we reconcile the needs of people and land depends on how we understand and resolve these layers of history. Only in conversations across the great divide can we build such understanding.

**Removing the wedges.** It’s a political reality: in recent years, elections have been won and careers advanced through ferocious campaigns of divide-and-conquer. Appeals based on emotional wedge issues and narrow identity politics have left a gaping hole in our political center. Political differences are inherent—even necessary—in any functioning democracy, but only shared values and a robust notion of the common good can hold democracy together so that it can function. To build consensus, we need to reject the wedges and the fear that provides them with their points of entry.

**Education, education, education.** Arguments about land are emotional precisely because people care deeply about it. And the more they know about it, the more they care (even when their ways of knowing and caring differ greatly). Meanwhile, however, we live at a time when the general public’s level of land literacy is low and, we fear, yet to bottom out. A new generation has grown up with an abundance of diversions, but fewer opportunities to interact meaningfully with land.<sup>25</sup> Informed education about land is scarce. It is

25. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from*

our job to teach about land anytime and anywhere we have the opportunity, through workshops, field days, forums, conferences, conversations, classes, involvement in local issues. The radical center can expand outward only as far as the circle of education grows.

**Providing leadership.** There would be less need for The Quivira Coalition, or this journal, or the radical center, if we had more effective and visionary leadership in the public arena, uniting us across the great divide. But the absence of leadership has left a vacuum that only dedicated citizens, reaching out to one another, can fill. Leadership in building the radical center will not come from above. It is more likely to be sitting in the chair next to you at your next meeting. We are at a time in our history when leadership has little to do with title or position or budget; it has everything to do with vision, passion, knowledge, imagination, skill, independence, and generosity of spirit.

These are basic themes, common sense even. But in identifying them we see why the radical center is in fact so radical. For the record, recall the alternative definitions of the word. There is the core botanical meaning: *of, relating to, or proceeding from the roots*. There is "radical" as a synonym for "fundamental": relating to or affecting the basic nature or most important features of something. It is a synonym for "pervasive": far-reaching, searching, or thoroughgoing. It is a medical term: a treatment intended to remove the source of a disease, rather than simply treat the symptoms. And there is also the valley-speak usage: excellent, admirable, or awe-inspiring. To work in the radical center is to do more than merely triangulate between two points to find a point of comfortable moderation or compromise. It is to reject short-term political opportunism, band-aid fixes, and the language of division. It is to build up the foundations of trust and pragmatic progress by bringing diverse people together, examining the roots of problems, and moving forward from there.

To be in the radical center is to take land seriously as both source and reflection of our lives upon it. In "The Farmer as a Conservationist," Leopold wrote that

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Nature-Deficit Disorder (Algonquin Books, 2005); Oliver R.W. Pergams and Patricia A. Zaradic, "Is love of nature in the U.S. becoming love of electronic media? 16-year downtrend in national park visits explained by watching movies, playing video games, internet use, and oil prices," *Journal of Environmental Management* 80,4 (September 2006), pp. 387-393.

"The landscape of any farm is the owner's portrait of himself." We can expand the gist of Leopold's comment: the landscape of America is our group self-portrait. When we look upon our cities, suburbs, rural lands, and wild lands, we see ourselves. The land reveals us for who we are: our values and priorities, our faiths and philosophies, our policies and technologies, our economic and educational systems, our ways of governing ourselves. Those working in the radical center strive to make a fairer portrait of ourselves. We do so by challenging orthodoxy, inventing tools, and building relationships. In the end, the land itself will show the results.

Paul Johnson, former chief of the NRCS and a contributor to The Quivira Coalition's "Invitation to the Radical Center"\*<sup>26</sup>, once noted: "A nation that ends up with urban islands on one side, and islands of wild land on another side, and a vast sea of food and fiber factories in between, is not a geography of hope."<sup>26</sup> In offering that troubling vision, Johnson challenged us to aim for a higher conservation goal, to seek more than geographic isolation, ruthless efficiency, and crumbs of wildness from the land-use table. He was pointing toward a conservation future that would find citizens, landowners, and land-users working in concert, across the map, to build health, diversity, beauty, productivity, and community well-being into and across our landscapes. It is an expansive vision, worthy of the deep longing that brings those who care for land and people together in the radical center. ☺

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26. From a presentation by Paul Johnson at the symposium "Preventing Extinction: Advances in Biodiversity Conservation," American Museum of Natural History, New York City, 18 April 1997.

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*\*Invitation to join The Radical Center can be found at [www.quiviracoalition.org](http://www.quiviracoalition.org). Click on Radical Center Invitation.*

*Photo of Curt Meine by Sharon Dana.*