

For people who care about the American West

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Essay

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Epiphanies on the range

by Phil Brick

They are polite, eager, inquisitive. I can't decide if they make me feel 20 years younger or exhausted. Every teacher should be so lucky.

I'm driving around the West with 21 students from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., where I teach, and we've talked to ranchers and environmentalists, looked at forests that have been logged and some that were left alone, and seen forests under restoration. My job has been to force students to examine the foundations of their environmental commitments — their belief that intervening in nature can only endanger it, because nature knows best.

Why would I want to encourage students to critically examine their green faith? Aren't I encouraging cynicism? These are good questions, and I lose sleep over them. But I see no alternative.

If the West is about anything, it's irony, which tends to expose how unstable are the categories that we use to understand our world. At the OK Corral in Tombstone, Ariz., a sign warns visitors that guns are not allowed. Forests may have to be burned to save them. Wilderness areas around Moab require extensive management to keep them from being overrun. People with the best of intentions often end up damaging what they care about most.

Many students have come to think about people in natural resource industries as the enemy. The logger is cast as a forest rapist, while the public-lands rancher always wears the black hat. But in the field, we meet tree farmers and ranchers who not only talk the green talk, they can show us the healthy ground where they walk. Some claim they can "out-environmental any environmentalist any day of the week." Others ask only for better communication and more understanding among those with competing aims for our public lands.

These experiences make a powerful impression on students. Combined with extensive study in ecology, they show students that what we find on the ground is not untouched nature, but a nature that is complex and unpredictable, made even more so by a history of human-nature interactions that characterize all Western landscapes, no matter how empty they might appear.

All this can be confusing. One student writes, "How can I defend nature if we can't say for sure what nature is supposed to look like? I get the irony thing, but where does this leave us?" My answer is simple: Unstable categories leave us in an ideal position for an epiphany, an "aha!" moment where it seems possible to re-imagine the world.

Irony is creativity's best traveling companion. Earlier in the semester, we spent a morning with Doug McDaniel, a rancher in northeast Oregon who is spending tens of thousands of his dollars to restore meanders in the Willowa River, which were straightened by the Army Corps in the 1950s as part of an effort to conserve farmland and water. Because meanders are essential habitat for migrating salmon, we wonder aloud how people back then could have been so shortsighted.

Doug tells us something that students will return to again and again: "Look, no one wakes up in the morning and says, 'Gee, how can I screw this place up today?' We didn't know then what we know now. But casting blame isn't going to bring back the fish. We have to roll up our sleeves and find ways we can work together."

A few weeks later, we hear another message that ricochets through our semester-long discussions. It comes from Greg Neudecker, who came to Montana's Blackfoot Valley as a wildlife official, certain that his expertise enabled him to tell people how to manage their property to restore streams.

"It wasn't long," Greg explains, "until I found myself running up against a wall. I learned that if you think you have all the answers so that you don't feel you have to listen to anyone else, you are probably wrong."

Perhaps all we need is a little less certainty and a little more humility.

As the sun sinks lower, many of our questions remain unresolved. We head for our camp just above the Santa Fe River, which (ironically) begins flowing at the Santa Fe Sewage Treatment Facility. After enchiladas from the Dutch oven, we gather in a circle to share and discuss our epiphanies.

Darkness and cold descend upon us, but they don't seem to matter. Silence sometimes interrupts our lively discussions, and we pause to take in the wonder of the stars. We remain uncertain what this beautiful evening is telling us. But this does not diminish our love for it, nor can unanswered questions weaken our resolve to lead more deliberate lives.

Phil Brick teaches environmental politics at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., and is the founder there of Semester in the West.

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