

Goodbye Preservation, Hello Recreation

Hal Rothman, 1-15-06

In the American West the age of preservation has ended and that of recreation has begun.

Preservation is predicated on what is now a more than century-old, class-based value system. It began as conservation in the age of Theodore Roosevelt, when it was easy to separate sacred space and that fouled by humans, and even easier for those who fouled that space to accept the distinction and throw their energy into preserving places that were beautiful and remote. No wonder conservation and preservation were watchwords of the American elite for the first half of the 20th century and beyond.

These values turned into environmentalism, a heady set of ideas during the 1960s and 1970s, when Americans embraced a vision of the world that was frankly complacent and just a little bit flushed with its own affluence. Environmentalism placed an incredibly high premium on the idea of wilderness, tacitly implying that prosperity had created a world in which all who deserved affluence had attained it. At the end of the American industrial economy, this premise led to great pressure to add existing wilderness.

These principles have now grown stale and even archaic. Environmentalism is a set of values, not the Ten Commandments. As a value system, it has to compete for adherents.

In the 1960s and 1970s, its version of authenticity held center stage.

Of late, it hasn't.

It's not that young people today don't understand what these values are; they do. What they don't understand is why these values are better than what they think is important. Today's young people have a different idea of what is authentic. They are post-literate, twelve-images-per-second beings. The IMAX in high definition gives a better view than anything they can do themselves. And they don't have to get cold or wet. From the point of view of an awful lot of young people today, why not? Why endure when technology can provide a visually better experience without the discomfort?

This is a profound and remarkable change that substantially alters the physical and psychic landscape of the American West. It means, among other things, that recreationalists, motorized and otherwise, have won. Wilderness is dead; not as reserved land, but as a movement or a viable political strategy. It's constituency is aging and it is losing political support to recreation by leaps and bounds.

As a result of political change, wilderness advocates can no longer get a hearing; twenty years ago, they simply swaggered to the table, pulled out maps and the rulebook they'd written, and achieved results.

Now they are supplicants, coming hat-in-hand, pleading their case, and threatening legal action. As annoying as federal agencies may find lawsuits, they're evidence of a loss of political power and support. In the 1980s, public outcry overturned Secretary of the Interior James Watt's administrative reforms of policy; Watt himself was ousted. Today, advocates resort to threats and the figurative bomb blast of a lawsuit. What is this, Guatemala? In the U. S., throwing bombs, real or otherwise, reveals a lack of power.

Recreationalists have become the new conservationists, and with that comes a great deal more responsibility than the recreational community has ever before assumed. Having easily juxtapositioned themselves as victims of the excesses of wilderness advocates, recreationalists of all kinds must now assume the onus of power.

This is especially true for motorized recreation, the fastest-growing dimension of the outdoor world. Recreationalists prize scenery, beauty, and the challenge of the outdoors; they just tend to do so more and more with technology. In this they are no different than the rest of us. We all use technology, cell phones, iPods, and everything else, to make our lives easier and more pleasurable. Since Gore-Tex, recreationalists have done the same thing. The capability of technology has grown immensely, effectively allowing the 47-year-old me to do things now that I could not do on my own in my 20s.

So now, the shift begins. As all forms of technology allow people deeper and deeper into the backcountry and as wilderness advocacy goes by the wayside in a postindustrial society, recreationalists will have to police themselves. Instead of trying to push the frontiers of what they can do and how they can do it, in their own self-interest, they will have to find ways to put boundaries around the resources they treasure, so those resources will be preserved for their future use.

It is a paradoxical situation: the outsiders have become kings and queens of the castle. It is a whole lot easier to sit outside the tent and throw firecrackers inside; it is much, much harder to sit inside the tent and govern not only your enemies, but your close friends as well.

No longer do recreationalists grapple with opponents about which lands they can use. The entire recreational community must now develop an ethic of sustainability that will assure that the sports recreationalists choose continue for generations. Leadership that provides stewardship of the resources it uses and consumes and develops a political position that wisely manages power from the inside rather than sits outside carping is essential. Recreation now faces an internal struggle among its many constituencies to define its values, the do's and don'ts of a new land ethic.

It is a sea change in the American West, a reorganization of how we as a culture have approached the outdoors for the better part of four decades. It requires that those of us who love the American West find new ways to communicate with one another to preserve as much of it as we can, for use as well as for its own sake.

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