

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column  
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My August has been highlighted by travel. In the first part of the month I drove to Iowa to pick up my son from his summer at college; as I write I'm in the middle of a vacation to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. Today, I'd like to share a couple of thoughts inspired by these trips.

I relieved the drudgery of my drive to Iowa by listening to a book entitled *1491*, a fascinating survey of life in the Americas before Columbus arrived. As the evidence makes clear, during pre-Columbian times, the Americas were much more heavily populated and, in many ways, more sophisticated than Europe. The evidence also makes clear that one reason such civilizations could exist was that native peoples extensively used and altered the land. As a result, it is very hard to identify a truly unspoiled or “natural” landscape, much less environment.

This focus on altered landscapes re-emerged in Israel. Here, archeological evidence dates human habitation back 5000 years. During that time, a combination of forces including war, changing technology, climate change, and religion have resulted in wildly different uses of the same parcels of land. As with the Americas, here in the Middle East, it is essentially impossible to identify any substantial parcel of land that, at some point during the last five millennia, hasn't been altered by human use.

Equally clear is that no “original” ecosystem is intact. In particular, since its founding, the state of Israel has made a concerted attempt to re-establish wild populations of every terrestrial and aquatic animal species mentioned in the Bible. While they have succeeded in re-introducing many of those species, they now more-or-less concede they will never be able to re-establish them all. More interesting still is that the archaeological evidence makes it clear that, by the time of the Bible, humans had clearly altered the landscape, flora, and fauna from those found in earlier millennia.

On a contemporary note, among the factors altering the Israeli landscape today is rapid population growth and its consequences for housing, food, transportation, water, politics, and a host of other factors. Perhaps most fascinating, though, is the amount of high-end housing being constructed, especially as second homes or other types of non-primary residences. Jerusalem is an especially hot market for such housing.

Why mention this? Because it's my belief that one consequence of the world becoming increasingly inter-connected will be to reverse a fundamental principle of economic development, namely that people move to places where jobs are located. Going forward, I believe the opposite will become increasingly true: jobs will emerge where people choose to live. As a result, in the future, the truly successful communities will be those which invest not in attracting businesses, but in making themselves the nicest possible place to be.

As with many lessons in life, what drove this realization home to me was a combination of point and counterpoint. The primary purpose for my Middle East trip is to help a graduate school housemate celebrate his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and at the event I got into a discussion with a classmate who lives in Indiana. During our conversation, she suggested that her state and many of its cities were so anxious to attract jobs that they offer subsidies to seemingly any business, even if the underlying economics don't make sense. When that happens, too often the business fails or departs, leaving the state or city that much more anxious to attract the next deal. Net result? A cycle of addiction to subsidies.

Such efforts are understandable, and often-times admirable. However, they also have a whiff of desperation, of trying to go back to a time which has long-since passed, using tools which are equally

dated. This is human nature, of course, relying on what worked in the past to face the future. However, a problem arises when the future is a different beast than the past, and that's the reality we face today. Changes in technology, transportation, and a host of other factors are combining to sever the umbilical cord linking where one works and where one lives. As that happens, rather than moving to a place for a job, people are becoming increasingly able to take their job to a place. That, in a nutshell, is the economic development model of the future, but one few places recognize, much less embrace.

It's the model driving changes in the Tetons, though. For the last decade or two, without doing anything except keeping our extraordinary environment extraordinary, we've managed to create an economy so vibrant that we can't even house all our workers. The same is true for other "nice" places to live, not just in the northern Rockies or even America, but around the world. As a result, we in Jackson Hole find ourselves not just at the forefront of a trend, but serving as a model for the future of successful economies.

Two final thoughts. First, what both *1491* and my Middle East trip have driven home to me is just how unusual the greater Yellowstone region is. To an extent perhaps unequaled in the world's temperate zones, our environment and landscape are little changed from what they were thousands of years ago. As a result, if there is anything close to a truly "natural" landscape and environment in this world, it is ours.

This leads into the second point. Because our future economic health is so closely tied to our quality of life, we find ourselves in a good news/bad news situation. The bad news is that, as a species, we humans have proven ourselves eminently capable of screwing up nice places to live. In a more benign sense, we humans also have a 5000 year track record of markedly altering environments.

As a result, it seems likely that, in the future, we in the Tetons region will, at a minimum, significantly alter our landscape and environment; in the worst case, we'll also take a series of small steps that, combined, will end up significantly harming our quality of life.

However, the good news is that much of that future is directly under our control. In particular, we have the chance to sustain something that, in the context of the world, is truly remarkable. The better we understand and recognize this, the better our chances of making decisions history will judge favorably.