

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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This column was written before I knew the outcomes of yesterday’s elections. Regardless of who won though, one thing is clear: in few races did candidates’ views on the environment matter; in at best a handful were they decisive.

In survey after survey, rarely does the environment rank as important; frequently it is not even mentioned. Interestingly, the situation is quite different in Teton County: Locally, 78 percent of respondents to surveys conducted by the Comp Plan consultants ranked sustaining Teton County’s environmental quality as their highest land-use priority.

In my last column, I wrote about my belief in pragmatism – if something doesn’t work, don’t do it (or at least acknowledge you’re doing it for reasons other than outcomes). I mention this because it seems to me that the environmental community needs to ask itself why they’re in the game – is it really about outcomes? If so, national polls suggest that the environmental movement needs to re-think how it goes about doing things.

How might they do things differently? This question has intrigued me for some time, and I’ll use my next two columns to offer some thoughts. Today I’ll explore the three roots of my thinking; in two weeks I’ll share some conclusions I’ve reached.

The first root took hold a few years ago during a conversation I had with some colleagues from the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative (NRCC), the local research non-profit. We asked ourselves a simple question: “How many conservation-related organizations are there in the greater Yellowstone region?” That question launched the Greater Yellowstone Conservation Organization Inventory (gycoi.org), which now lists over 225 self-identified conservation organizations operating in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

The second root was learning that, of the greater Yellowstone ecosystem’s 27 million acres, only about 10 percent are still “in play”; i.e. are private lands which have not yet been developed. That’s not much, especially given how fast the region has been growing the past 20-30 years. Combine those factors and it’s pretty clear that, within another few decades, the region’s final land use patterns will be locked into place. (As in so many other ways, Jackson Hole is a distilled version of this larger pattern: In the Jackson Hole valley, only a few large parcels of private land remain “in play.”)

The third root was realizing that, generally speaking, the concept of “environmentalism” is essentially synonymous with “conservation,” which in turn is essentially synonymous with “preserving things – land, waterways, species – in their natural (i.e. undeveloped) state.” Yellowstone provided the foundation of this conflation; in the words of the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916, the purpose of Yellowstone and other national parks is “... to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Over time, the idea of environmentalism=conservation=preservation has spread to other national parks, other public lands, and, through conservation easements, to privately held land as well – hence the concept of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Combine all these elements, and it raises an interesting question: Once the fate of the greater Yellowstone's final couple of million acres is determined, what will all those conservation groups do? Sure there will be plenty of threats to the environment; sure there will be the need for groups speaking and acting for lands and living things that have no voice. But if the essence of the conservation/environmental movement is locking up land, what will happen when all the land is either locked up or developed? This may seem like a silly question, but when Yellowstone was established in 1872, it must have seemed pretty silly to be locking up 2.2 million acres in the middle of nowhere. Yet because of that silliness, Yellowstone blazed the trail for how the nation and world now practice conservation. From that perspective, it is not much of a reach for those of us in the region to now be thinking about where conservation goes once land use has been determined.

That's the abstract and intellectual argument for re-thinking conservation as currently practiced. There's a more pragmatic reason too, namely the apparent lack of support for the environment. Does this mean that environmental quality is not important? No, no more than the need to think beyond locking up land means that conservation as currently practiced is unimportant. However, that the environment ranks so low in most peoples' minds – a reality made pretty stark by the decades-long decline in national park visitation – suggests that this “traditional approach” to environmentalism has run out of steam.

For lack of a better term, let's call this traditional approach to conservation/environmentalism “Conservation 1.0.” And let's also stipulate that Conservation 1.0 has accomplished great things in the past 136 years. However, when Yellowstone was founded, there were approximately 1 billion people in the world. Today, with over six billion putting far more than six times the pressure on the environment, it seems reasonable to ask whether the tools developed over the past century are adequate to address today's challenges. Judging by poll numbers, it's a not unreasonable question.

To begin the search for an answer, last May NRCC and the Charture Institute co-sponsored a conference entitled “Conservation 2.0 – Conservation in the Greater Yellowstone: Past, Present, and Future.” At its conclusion, one of the keynote speakers – Ed Russell, a former Jackson Hole resident and currently an environmental history professor at the University of Virginia – and I started brainstorming about what constituted Conservation 1.0, and how that differed from what Conservation 2.0 might look like. The result was a taxonomy built around two basic principles playing out over 16 applications (Table 1).

The first of our two basic principles was that, where Conservation 1.0 views the various components of conservation in isolation; Conservation 2.0 will view all aspects of conservation as connected with each other, whether physically, through systems, or temporally. Second, building on principle one, Conservation 1.0 focuses on parcels of land with fixed boundaries. By extension, Conservation 1.0 also views conservation as essentially fixing a landscape or species in time. In contrast, Conservation 2.0 will focus on how ecosystems change.

These principles have profound ramifications; I'll explore them in my next column.

Table 1
THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION
CONSERVATION 1.0 v. 2.0: A TAXONOMY
Schechter/Russell

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES	Conservation 1.0	Conservation 2.0
	Discrete Fixed	Connected Changing
APPLICATIONS		
NATURAL SCIENCE-RELATED		
1. Boundaries	Fixed	Permeable
2a. Science	Certainty	Probability
2b. Science	Ecology	Ecology + Evolution
3. View of Nature	Fixed	Changing
4. Ecosystem Connectors	Non-human	Human
5. Management Focus	Species	Systems (habitats)
SOCIAL SCIENCE-RELATED		
6. People and Nature	Separate (other)	Incorporated (us)
7. Honored Landscape Types	Minimally Settled	All
8. Epistemology	Leisure	Leisure + Livelihood
9. Decision-making	Hierarchical/elitist	Democratic w/in Shared Goals
10a. Conservation Advocates – Class	Middle- & Upper-class	All Economic Strata
10b. Conservation Advocates – Race	Caucasian	All Races/Ethnicities
10c. Conservation Advocates – Nationality	American	All
11. Temporal	In time	Through time
MANAGEMENT-RELATED		
12. Land Owners	Public	Public + Private
13. Organizations	Government	Govt. + NGOs + Business
14. Tools	Land Ownership	Behavior Change
15. Working Style	Solo	Collaboration
16. Efficacy Measure	Acreage	Native Species: Viability + Evolution