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Beauty and the Beast—or How the Economy/Environment Debate Is Killing the Colorado Plateau

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Abstract

The Colorado Plateau, an area covering roughly 130,000 square miles in southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, northwestern New Mexico, and northeastern Arizona, is under siege by changing economic, social, and environmental factors. These changes have divided institutions and communities in a battle over economic development and environmental protection. The resulting loss of trust has too often led to gridlock and stagnation. Community-based decision-making is needed to guide the region toward an ecologically and environmentally sustainable future. This process requires increased cooperation among communities, land management agencies, and the region's land-grant universities.

INTRODUCTION

Sam Taylor, the gruff old editor of the Moab *Times Independent* and long-time Utah highway commissioner, loves to tell the story of the Civilian Conservation Corps crew that was building the first real road up the narrow hogback in Garfield County between Escalante and Boulder. It was midday and they were shoveling and leaning, shoveling and leaning when an old cowboy came riding up out of a draw. He sat there on his horse just watching and waiting until the sergeant in charge of the crew couldn't stand it any longer and walked over to see what he wanted. "Nothin'," says the cowboy. "Just wondered what you fellows was doin'."

"We're building a road to Boulder," says the sergeant proudly. After the cowboy just sits there and watches and doesn't say anything for a while, he adds, "You got a problem with that?"

"Well," says the cowboy thoughtfully, taking off his hat and scratching his head, "I think you fellows got it wrong. What we need is a road *from* Boulder."

This story is told for a couple of reasons. First, it illustrates the contrary nature of folks on the Colorado Plateau, whether people have been there for five

generations or just arrived last week. You don't find many people there who don't have an opinion and, as they say nowadays, an attitude. There may be a spell that the Colorado Plateau casts on people. It claims them in a special way, and in turn they claim it as their own and want to guard it for their own purposes. That may seem an odd attitude to have about a place so huge—130,000 square miles—so rugged, so remote, and so sparsely populated—fewer than a million and a half permanent residents. But this kind of land takes a lot of space to make a living and a lot of room to satisfy the need for the personal refreshment we call recreation (Figure 1). We have developed neither the social skills nor the land ethic necessary to share this land in peace.

The second reason the story is told is that we are still, today, arguing about roads on the Colorado Plateau—and about tortoises and wilderness and water and cows and mountain bikes and almost any other natural resource issue you can think of. These issues have not been settled—not yet.

The arguments are costing us, and the Colorado Plateau, dearly. The arguments appear to rise from a polarization of thinking that we frequently describe as the economy-versus-environment debate. That debate is particularly intense in the West and on

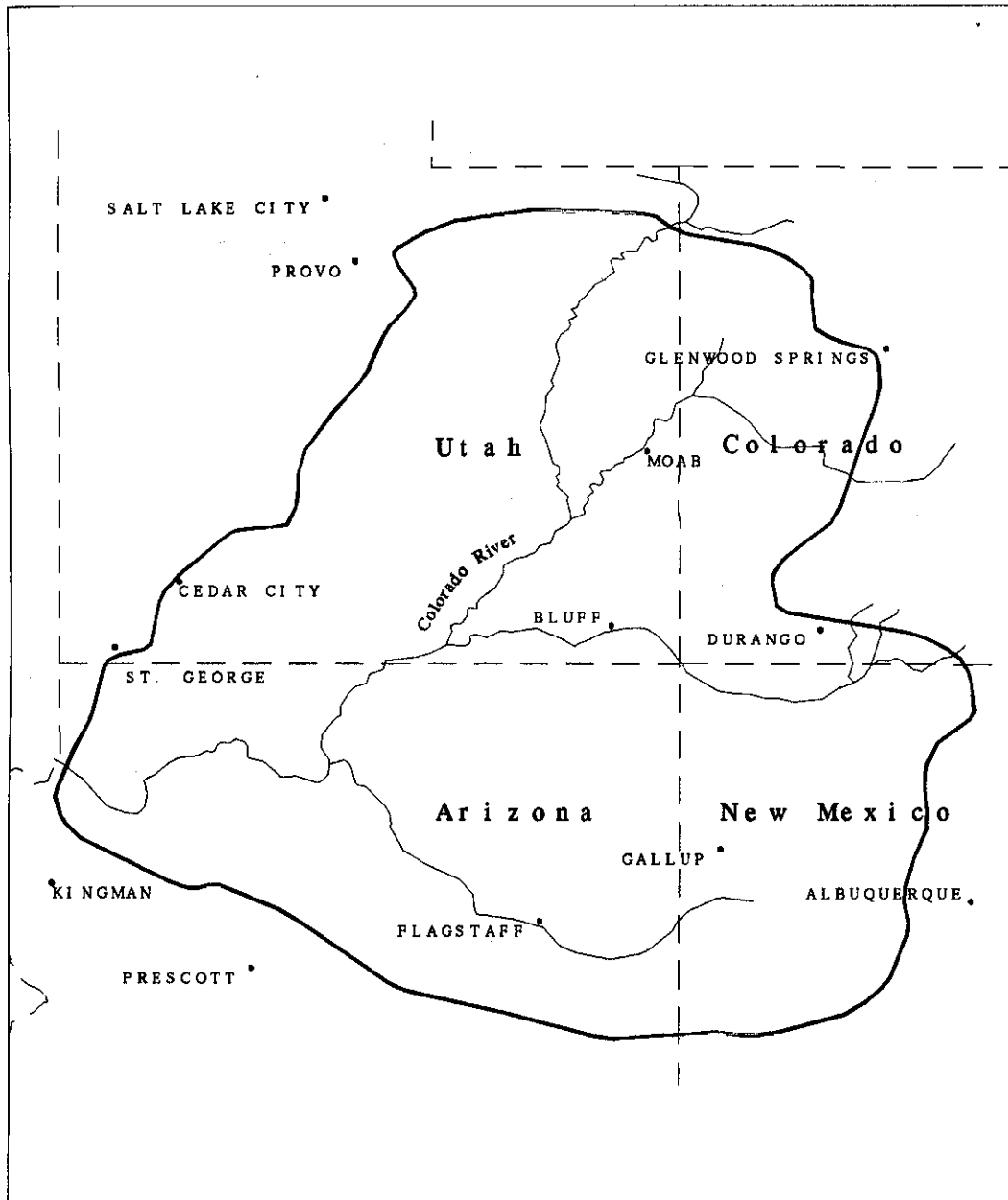


Figure 1. The Colorado Plateau.

the Colorado Plateau because more than half the land—in many counties over 80 percent—is publicly owned. There the benefits that may accrue to each of us, whether they are jobs, dollars, personal pleasures, or spiritual uplift, come from places that are *ours* but that we perceive as *mine*.

This matter of perception makes the debate very frustrating. Agreement must start with understanding. If I perceive *beauty* to be untrammelled landscape and the *beast* to be a developer driving a D9 Caterpillar, I will not be well understood by someone who believes beauty to be a regular paycheck, a comfortable home in the town in which he grew up, and nice neighbors. That person also believes the

beast to be an ugly and apparently useless animal whose protectors have caused him to lose his job.

Agreement also requires a sense of equity in the debate. When we feel powerless, we tend to be defensive. Someone may ask the lion to lie down with the lamb. It may even happen, but the lamb doesn't usually get much sleep.

When arguments and perspectives are out of balance, it is always much easier to wreck the train than it is to get the railroads to run on time. Today on the Colorado Plateau, we are quite talented at creating train wrecks. This tendency comes from the pace of change and from the inadequacy of our institutions to adapt to that change.

CONFLICTS ON THE PLATEAU

There are fundamental changes occurring on the plateau. There is an economic change. The marketplace has been affected by resource depletion, technological advancement, global competition, the uncertainty of both capital and publicly funded support, and a shift in the number and kinds of jobs. There is an environmental change. We have moved from a position of little concern to one in which draconian legislation and complex rules are contributing to gridlock as much as they are to problem solving. There is also social change. As political power and priorities are shifting, we are discovering that command-and-control approaches only replace patronage, exclusion, and exploitation with run-amok bureaucracy.

We are faced with developing and adapting to different resource economics that blend market motivations and public responsibility. We are faced with the need to reshape our institutions to integrate new concepts, such as ecosystem management, with economic uses of both commodity and amenity resources; and we are faced with an urgent need to develop more effective, cooperative decision processes.

I am greatly influenced in my opinion of what is needed by some thoughtful Westerners such as Daniel Kemmis, Frank Gregg, Ed Marston, and Charles Wilkinson.¹ All of them have stressed the relationship between people and the places they live and the role of communities in decisions. This kind of thinking led to the development of the Grand Canyon Trust's Community Initiatives Program for the Colorado Plateau. As we address the changes that are taking place, as we plan for the future of the public lands that dominate the plateau, as we consider the fate and the uses of the natural resources of this area, I believe we are more likely to find success through a process of collaborative community-based decision-making motivated by responsible citizenship and stewardship than we are by escalating the "War on the West."

Following are some examples of the costs of our behavior over the last couple of decades. There are few people on the Colorado Plateau who have not heard of, or who do not have an opinion about, the Burr Trail—a road *from* Boulder, Utah. How many years have we been fighting over whether the Burr Trail should be a maintained gravel road or a two-lane, rural paved road? How much money has been spent? How many lawyers' children have been put through college? How much bitterness has been engendered? I don't know, and I don't want to think about researching it. I'd be afraid of the answer.

I saw an interesting figure one day while I was working with a cooperative local planning project in

Garfield County, Utah. In 1990 the total revenue stream for the county—sales taxes, property taxes, road-maintenance funds, fees, all receipts—totaled just under \$5 million. The largest single piece of that—37 percent of the total, almost \$2 million—was the Burr Trail Grant from the Utah Community Impact Board. Is the road paved today? Partly. Is it passable? Sort of. Will the fight, and the lawyers' fees, go on? Undoubtedly. Is this what we want for a jobs program? I don't think so. Could that money have been better spent, and the money and time of the opponents better invested, in urgent community or park management or other local needs on the Colorado Plateau?

A larger road controversy looms as well—in this case, a road from Mexico to Canada. With major amounts of federal spending at stake, the state of Arizona was quick, but not alone, in claiming its right to a North American Free Trade Route. In his State of the State report on January 11, 1993, Governor Symington announced support for a route that followed I-17 north to Flagstaff and then extended it, vaguely, north from there. North from there is the Colorado Plateau and all of the promoters and all of the opponents who will, with blood in their eyes, go to war over if, where, and when such a freeway will be built. With an East/West history of mistakes, ranging over a century from railroads to interstates, you would think we might have learned something about the price of not working these things together ahead of time. It will be interesting to see whether an inclusive regional planning process will happen this time.

Further, what about the most controversial transportation planning decision of all, i.e., the decision not to have any road, or mechanical transport, on a piece of public land—the designation of wilderness? What is the adamant antagonism over Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness designation in Utah costing us, and what will it cost before it is over?

The Coalition for Utah's Future Project 2000 "Honest Broker" effort is working to bring together the full array of interests in the state to see if agreement can be reached on a BLM wilderness proposal. The process is very slow, and the future of this effort is in doubt. The reason is simple. Folks don't trust one another a whole lot. Just think of what that failed trust has cost.

When trust fails, lawyers thrive. I suppose a wonderful goal for the Colorado Plateau would be to put all natural resource lawyers out of business—water lawyers, environmental lawyers, mining lawyers, real-estate lawyers—but that would be unfair to lawyers. They are a symptom, not the disease. When you start resorting to lawyers to solve problems, funny things happen.

Here is another road issue. In Utah, counties are

threatening legal action to prove the existence of RS2477 roads, i.e., roads to and through federal land that once appeared in the county records and that, they insist, have at some time been maintained. Why? So that the presence of a road might preclude the designation of wilderness. At once ironic and frustrating, in the neighboring state of Colorado counties, pushed by landowners who want to prohibit public access to public lands across old abandoned roads, have gone to court to deny the existence of RS2477 roads by claiming that the county never really maintained them. Lawyers are indispensable for this sort of thing.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

This lack of trust, this fear of one another's motives, underlies much of the economy/environment debate on the plateau today. It seems to be an unbridgeable gulf at the federal, and often at the state, level. Even in our communities, the parties tend to line up on opposite sides of meeting rooms and yell at one another. The odd thing about it is that this conflict doesn't very often exist at the personal level. Inevitably, a person taking the economic side in the debate will claim with some fervor, "Look, I'm an environmentalist. I care about this land. I have all my life."

Equally true, the folks taking the other side have to have jobs, buy groceries, earn a living, save for retirement, and otherwise be engaged in economic activities. In fact, each of us combines economic and environmental considerations in the decisions we make in our daily lives. Some of these are generated by the world around us, some come from within, but they are not either/or decisions. We all must work, feed our families, and buy school clothes for the kids, but we must do that in concert with caring about the quality of our lives and the places we live. Why do we have so much trouble combining these things in our community decisions?

The problem lies in a couple of areas. One is that our social skills and institutions have not kept pace with the technical capability to affect our landscape. Pressure for economic change far exceeds our general capability to adapt to the change. The motivation for change—usually economic—is individually driven, intense, impatient, and fast. The nature of the change affects the quality of life and the environment of entire communities, but the ability to manage the change and adapt to it requires time and patience for communication and understanding. We seem to fall a little short in these areas.

The second part of the problem is the way we

describe the debate to ourselves, dividing the world into two opposing camps. In its most extreme version, this view supposes that there are irreconcilable ideological differences in the way people look at the role of human beings. One is the homocentric ideology based upon a belief that the role of man is to dominate and enjoy the fruits of the earth, that the function of nature is to serve man. The other is the biocentric ideology based upon a belief that man is responsible to nature, that his role is to serve as a steward of the earth. If such beliefs are held as a matter of faith, independently of logical argument, there is no good starting point to resolve differences about things like protecting endangered species. However, my conversations with people on the Colorado Plateau lead me to believe that this ideological impasse is a simplistic intellectual construct and does not reflect the thinking of most people.

Nonetheless, the way that we approach resource debates, nationally or locally, does not lend itself to finding commonality of interest. Traditional public participation, such as public hearings, typically results in much shouting and not much hearing. Communities divide into two camps, and boosterism wars with protectionism. Unfortunately, controversies expressed in inaccurate metaphor are the stuff of modern media. When extremism is not only newsworthy but dominates the news to the extent that special-interest strategists vie for the most confrontational sound bite, the lunatic fringe becomes wrapped in a mantle of normality. We are all aware of People for the West and Earth First! and are sadly ignorant of the Escalante Action Team or the Farmington River Reach Foundation or hundreds of other groups calmly working to bring a quality environment to their communities in concert with sustainable economic prosperity. The cameras focus on the unwashed spiking old-growth trees and on the unshaven spiking spotted owls.

Stewart Udall and W. Kent Olson, in a *Los Angeles Times* column (1992), labeled the so-called "wise use movement" the "MeFirst!ers," which is a fair assessment of the homocentric extreme; but you have only to read Rod Nash's *The Rights of Nature* (1989) to understand how far the "tree firsters" have gone in the direction of biocentrism.

We need to understand this prime-time simplification for what it is—the edge effect of our fear, unease, and mistrust of one another. In reality what we find in places like the Colorado Plateau is a wide range of rural communities where most of the citizens are interested in both their own well-being and in the well-being of the place where they live. They think the me-firsters are greedy and the tree-firsters are mad; and they wish that their politicians, business leaders, public-agency managers, and communities could find ways to solve these problems equitably

rather than exacerbating them.

COMMUNITY-BASED DECISION-MAKING

How do we get out of the bind we are in? How do we deal with the kind of gridlock that is wasting so much time, money, and effort that could be used in productive endeavor? How do we find ways through the mistrust that overwhelms good intentions in public decision-making? I am convinced that in rural areas like the Colorado Plateau the change must come at the community level—in the decisions made by towns, counties, and Indian tribes—and in the places where we work and live. If not there, where will we implement that change? If we want conservation and a fundamental land ethic to guide public-land decisions, doesn't that have to happen in place—in the place? I see no bright future in trying to impose such principles from afar.

To focus at this level is not to ignore the rest of the world—far from it. Look at the nature of the issues that are overwhelming these communities. The issues go far beyond roads and wilderness. We have water issues—from the Animas-La Plata project in Colorado to the allocation and storage of water in the Virgin River. We have endangered-species controversies—from goshawks and spotted owls to desert tortoises. We have waste-management issues, clean-water issues, air-quality issues. We have issues about the impacts of traditional uses like grazing, mining, and logging. We have issues about the impact of new uses like recreation and tourism.

If community-based decision-making is going to play a key role in addressing the interrelated environmental and economic issues that are confounding public land and resource management today, it will take a positive, proactive effort by many of our institutions, not just communities. This effort is beginning to be made. In the last five years, there has been pressure building to make these changes, pressure that is now being released. In the area of public-lands and natural resource management, there has been a repressive lid over innovation and change for the last decade. That lid is now being lifted—and not a moment too soon.

From an economic standpoint, traditional resource commodity production enterprises must adjust to survive. The abundant resources and public-support systems that were the underpinning of much of that economy are gone or going. The number of jobs that will be supported will be a fraction of those supported in the past, and the issue is "where will the capital come from and where will it go?" At the same time, rapid growth in amenity resource-based enterprises

poses significant problems ranging from speculative real-estate values to second-class jobs to getting and keeping capital on the plateau.

Simultaneously, a shift is taking place in the way we look at and understand environmental values. Site- and species-specific protectionism is giving way to biological diversity and ecological sustainability approaches. Integrating these ways of looking at the long-term protection and production of natural resources requires much more of a holistic approach by our institutions than they have had in the past. It also requires more involvement with a broader constituency than in the past. The Bureau of Land Management needs to be much better at routinely working with backpacking college law professors who are concerned about cows, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needs to be much better at working with real-estate developers who are concerned about tortoises.

Will we, in fact, encourage our institutions to demonstrate the kind of innovation and creative response to change that will enable a community-based decision process to work? What about the role of the public-land managing agencies—BLM, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service—in this context of community-based decision-making? There are places on the plateau where these agencies and their employees are viewed as aloof from their adjacent communities and as wielders of arbitrary power that must either be co-opted or politically outmaneuvered. As long as Smokey Bear is looked at the same way that Lithuanians looked at KGB officers, it would appear that development of community-based decision-making processes may be a little tough. When these agencies are also viewed with antagonism by both environmental and economic interests outside the community, things appear even bleaker. How did this happen to our public agencies?

Originally these agencies operated under two guidelines: (1) a legislative mandate, which was the guidance from the people, and (2) professional judgment, which was exercised by responsible managers of the agency. In the last 30 years, this has changed. The legislative mandate is general and decisions must be considered through an unwieldy process of public participation to more precisely define the voice of the people. Because of the growing complexity of issues, decisions are based upon the work of specialized professionals, many of whom disagree with the direction of management.

The inevitable result of this process is gridlock, with the public-land manager as scapegoat. The gridlock results from this process: reason tells us that there will be different opinions about what agency decisions should be. Simplified, one interest wants decision A and an opposing interest wants decision Z. The public-land manager, not wanting to alienate

one group or the other and bound by law to be responsive to public participation, compromises with decision *M*. No one is pleased, and the decision triggers round after round of appeals, injunctions, and lawsuits that blame the agency for making the wrong decision, i.e., not the one that *A* wanted and not the one that *Z* wanted. The issue is then litigated on the basis of not having crossed all the *t*'s in a cumbersome, bureaucratic process. We then have the gall to complain about a bloated bureaucracy that spends most of its time in the office doing paperwork instead of being out in the field doing real work. How often we forget that in a democracy we get exactly the kind of government we deserve.

Community-based planning offers a way out of this bureaucratic dilemma. The field managers of public-land agencies must become an integral part of a continuing process of planning and adapting and foreseeing future needs within the communities that are intermingled with the public land they administer. This arrangement does not let the communities themselves off the hook. While communities cannot dictate what happens on surrounding federal lands, they can have an important influence on federal decisions—but only if they are prepared to undertake a serious, collaborative effort. The adage that there is no such thing as a free lunch prevails here. The means through which rural communities on the Colorado Plateau can play a greater role in determining the future of the public lands surrounding them is to get involved in the hard work of land-use planning, to develop as communities a vision for the future that they can use to manage the changes taking place within their own jurisdictions, and to accept their share of responsibility to care for all public values on public lands—even at the cost of short-term profits for individuals within the community.

The good news is that these changes are happening. We are seeing them in northern Arizona's Coconino County, where Tusayan, Flagstaff, and other local communities are taking a lead role in working with Grand Canyon National Park in the development of a general-management plan that doesn't believe the world stops at the park boundary. We are seeing it in Montezuma County, Colorado, where the county is taking the lead in working with state and federal agencies to develop a system that will let any one of them have access to the land and to the resource-information bases of all of the agencies so that common and complete data can be used in public decision-making. We may see it in Garfield County, Utah, where three local planning efforts—a county-wide pilot general-management plan, an economic-diversification plan, and a local action team-planning effort for Escalante—may dovetail effectively with the development of BLM's Kanab-

Escalante Area Resource Management Plan.

There are many other efforts under way around the plateau and on other public lands in the West. It is hard to pick up an issue of *High Country News* without reading about these endeavors.

Another dimension of the benign neutrality role that has painted the public-land agencies into a bureaucratic corner has been its depressing effect on creativity and responsiveness. There are signs that that may be changing. Great innovation is needed for these agencies to assure that management achieves the long-term maintenance and protection of the basic productivity of the lands they administer. Fortunately, across the West today we are seeing a growing commitment to ecosystem management by these agencies. This approach seems so simple in construct, but it represents a significant change from the past. It is based upon the idea of sustained yield at its best—the long-term capacity of land and water resources determines the limits of use. Use allocations and levels are products of that determination, not a precedent condition. Practical approaches to managing things like biodiversity are being applied through collaborative, local planning efforts with the joint support of state and federal natural resource agencies in California. Public and private interests are working together in collaborative watershed planning and management projects in Colorado and Montana.

Such approaches are not without their economic impacts, and here again creativity and a willingness to be involved are the necessary components of a successful community-based approach. The crude tools of the past—subsidy and economic protectionism—will no longer serve. Considering the fundamental economic changes taking place in the rural, public-land West, the investment to date by the public-land agencies in research and support for adaptive change has been woefully small. That too is changing, although perhaps not fast enough. The Forest Service is making a substantial commitment through the rural community-development program. Communities like Kremmling, Colorado, are demonstrating that this kind of commitment makes a difference; but much more needs to be done.

A collaborative support effort is vital where management changes are needed because resource-value loss is not acceptable, especially where those changes have economic consequences. A potential example may be a situation in which BLM is requiring grazing-management limits and practices that simply aren't economically possible for a group of small permittees. Here, if BLM takes the lead with community support in working with the permittees to combine their operations into a single more efficient one, the management requirements become practical reality. Change is happening.

There are many institutional changes that would facilitate this idea of community-based decision-making, including a full range of state, local, and regional governmental changes. The most disappointing institutions have been the state universities and land grant colleges in the West. Created with public resources, they were intended to provide the research, the science, the wisdom, and the education that would guide the region as it grew, developed, and changed. They were designed to be leaders in solving the natural resource problems of the day. Not so says Ed Marston in a scathing editorial in *High Country News* on March 8, 1993: "Most of the West's universities and land grants are so cowed, or so trained, that they are nearly useless when it comes to helping solve today's natural resource questions."

There are, of course, individual researchers and professors who are brilliant exceptions; but the fact that they are often castigated by deans, presidents, and state legislatures serves to demonstrate the general rule. The most serious concern, from my standpoint, is the narrow focus of most study and research. Designed to serve a traditional clientele, its goal is to solve yesterday's small problems tomorrow rather than to encourage interdisciplinary study to solve tomorrow's big problems today.

A serious difficulty facing local leaders who are pushing for community-based planning is the lack of readily accessible, objective data about natural resources and resource processes, i.e., solid information on cause and effect relationships, both in terms of resource impacts and economic consequences. There are bits and pieces of help available, usually specialized, and very little of it is designed to realistically facilitate the local management of change much less to resolve the friction between economic and environmental concerns where communities and public lands interact.

The answer may lie with the state and federal natural resource agencies, particularly the federal land management agencies. The availability and direction of contract funding from these agencies will do much to encourage the Western schools to play a part in the changes now under way. The federal agencies must look to communities as partners in the process of change if we are to make progress on breaking this very expensive gridlock. For the com-

munities to be effective in that partnership, they need quality information and support. Who better to develop and provide that information than the Western universities, not as narrow technicians who resist change but as full-service, multidisciplinary, objective analysts and support-team members?

CONCLUSIONS

A new road is being taken. It will be a key part of a new collaborative spirit that surely will benefit our public lands and resources and our small communities on the Colorado Plateau. In a sentiment that Sam Taylor would probably echo, we need a way both to and from Boulder.

We would do well to consider still another perspective about beauty and the beast. In the Navajo tradition, beauty is harmony—harmony with the world, with the land, and with one another. Perhaps the beast is in us, in our failure to strive for that harmony.

The economy and the environment are neither beauty nor beast, and we must stop treating them as though they are. They are simply descriptions of the whole reality that we live with, in, and by. To treat them as polar opposites engages us in fruitless debate in which we waste the energies that could be better put to use as we strive as individuals and as communities to achieve harmony.

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