

Collaborative Conservation: Peace or Pacification?

*The View from Los Ojos**

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“Sin Tierra No Hay Justicia: Sin Justicia No Hay Paz” “ Without land there is no justice: without justice there is no peace” graces a banner hung on the marbled walls of the New Mexico State Capitol Rotunda during the 1996 legislative session. In front of the banner, weavers arrange multicolored piles of wool, a spinning wheel and loom. There is a table of wild-crafted herbs, a corner where a drum maker works and a display of micacious clay pottery. A woodcarver, oblivious to the throngs of politicians, lobbyists, and others attendant to the political process, remains absorbed in bringing a face out of gnarly wood. The materials used by these artisans originated in the national forests of northern New Mexico. *Poquiteros* (small-scale sheep and cattle growers), weavers, woodworkers, potters, and *curanderas* (healers) came together to make a gentle but powerful statement against environmental organizations seeking to close public lands to grazing and timber harvesting as well as to capture ancestral village and tribal waters for in stream flow.

The weavers, reluctant warriors in this latest struggle by villagers to retain centuries-old pastoral cultures, would prefer to be back in their workshop in the northern New Mexico village of Los Ojos, educating visitors through displays of beautifully woven rugs and tapestries. There, it is more comfortable to talk about how their enterprise, Tierra Wools, and its parent organization Ganados del Valle, (a nonprofit with the mission of creating sustainable economies from cultural, agricultural, and natural resources) rescued the rare Churro sheep breed from near extinction and revitalized the centuries’ old Rio Grande weaving tradition. But the weavers recognized that in this continual struggle, artistic expression alone will not safeguard ancestral land and water rights.

Several hours south of Los Ojos, from pricey refurbished adobe and Victorian offices in Santa Fe, New Mexican environmentalists have fired off a nearly decade-long barrage of lawsuits, seeking domain over grazing and timber resources on public lands under the Endangered Species Act. To many northern New Mexicans of color, these barrages are the latest in a conquest that began in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and has not stopped since. The battlefield in this latest incarnation of conquest is in the courts and streets. In the fall of 1995 environmentalists shut down the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests to all timber harvesting (including fuel wood which villagers depended on for cooking and heating) because of the presence of spotted owl habitat. (The U.S. Forest Service spent almost 2 million during the early 1990’s attempting and failing to find the owls in either national forest.) Unable to afford legal council to respond to the injunction, villagers launched protests. Environmentalists were hung in effigy in October. Two months later, a candlelight prayer vigil was organized in Santa Fe, bringing out more than 400 people from northern and southern New Mexico. Unwittingly, the environmentalists lawsuits had done what had never before had been achieved in New Mexico’s history: a collaboration between Anglo ranchers and loggers from the south with the traditional Hispano *Poquiteros* and fuel wood harvesters from the north.

There is a long history, which led up to the candlelight procession on that snowy December night. It began in the late 1890s, when U.S. and European resource barons clear-cut the bountiful forests that stretched almost uninterrupted from Santa Fe County north through Colorado, damaging the snow holding capacity of upstream timber stands, leaving downstream agricultural villages to struggle with silt laden irrigation ditches and low or no water during dry years. Then in 1905, Theodore Roosevelt, ironically a hero of the conservation movement, commandeered the common lands of villages and pueblos (supposedly guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) into the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests. After that, livestock barons purchased grazing allotments on the forests and sent truckloads of cattle from Texas, Oklahoma, and eastern Colorado, seeking the plentiful grasses that once sustained village and pueblo flocks and herds. Local families, still on a mixed barter and cash subsistence economy, found it difficult to compete with the grazing barons for these grazing allotments.

As bottomland villages were severed from upland grazing ranges, valley floor pastures became degraded and lost their capacity to sustain local communities. Before conquest, *Poquiteros* moved livestock from lowland to upland ranges and back again. As a result of this intensive but well-timed grazing system (with origins on the Iberian Peninsula), forage maintained its vigor and grew so high that elders recount how “we’d have to be up on horseback in order to find the lambs or calves.” Losing uplands grazing meant reducing herds and flocks to sizes that were not economically feasible. But because livestock were handed down from generation to generation, buffering families from hunger as well as symbolizing connections to ancestors (livestock were often used as dowry or gifts), many villagers clung tenaciously to their pastoral culture, which once fed family, village and region while renewing the environment.

Those common lands not commandeered into the National Forest system were either seized for back taxes, stolen by Santa Fe-based land speculators or sold by village opportunists without consent from the rest of the residents. All of these acts broke the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which promised that “property of every kind, now belonging to Mexicans...shall be inviolably respected...and all Mexicans shall enjoy ...guarantees equally ample as if the same belonged to citizens of the United States.” As land eroded out of village and pueblo control, generations of knowledge about how to live on and with that land began to unravel. Although rarely recognized as such, this knowledge is primary environmental science. How to steward the grasses, the waters, the forests, and the soil in distinct ecosystems is a science steadily built over time through the process of trial and error. When the environmental science earned by these trials was trampled by outside forces and in some cases, inside *opportunistas*, environmental degradation, poverty and its bitter social fruits followed.

Counties north of Santa Fe, in both New Mexico and Colorado, are designated by the US Department of Agriculture as “Persistent Low Income Counties.” This means that since the census started tracking income levels (1939), these counties have remained in the bottom quintile of all U.S. nonmetro counties. Broken treaties and the industrialization of livestock production and timber harvesting over the last 150 years left villagers to eke out sustenance from several sources: sales of livestock, fuel wood, hay, flagstone, vigas, pinon nuts, and traditional arts and crafts. In the past, these revenues were supplemented by the most able-bodied in the family moving into the migrant farm worker stream, leaving the ‘ranch’ to the elderly or to women with small children.

Today, local villagers still take seasonal jobs or commute to urban centers, working low-paying, full-time jobs while maintaining ‘the ranch’ back home. The goal is

to insure a continuation of *la herencia*, or the handing down of family lands to the next generation, as well as to protect oneself from the deep poverty often experienced by those elders who have lost their land.

Conquest Reconstructed

Environmentalists, many of them new transplants to New Mexico, look at the ravages left by the industrialization of public lands and, perhaps to their credit, have decided to fix it. But it is unfathomable why environmentalists would not look to the people who have lived for hundreds of years in agro-pastoral communities, which buffer public lands, as the first to be consulted and as peers in this effort. After all, Hispano villagers and Native Americans have life-long knowledge of these lands and have fought extractive industries and the U.S. Forest Service long before the modern environmental movement. By rendering people of color invisible, or vilifying them as “violent” or “tools of livestock and lumber transnational corporations,” many environmentalists have, in their historical and cultural illiteracy, assumed the cloak of conqueror.

Unexamined by environmentalists is the violence of poverty. Persistent poverty and economic dependency has resulted from a century and a half process where national and international capital forces sought to gain wealth and “make more productive” the seemingly ‘idle’ or underutilized natural resources, land and labor of western communities of color. As industrialists had their way with these resources, poverty and environmental degradation became a structural part of much of the rural West. It is not possible to repair the environment without repairing the inequities produced by this violent history.

The single biggest threat to a sustainable environment are the so-called “New West economic growth strategies,” rampant throughout the region. This latest colonizing wave comes on skis, golf carts, river rafts and jeeps. Many environmentalists view recreation and tourism as ‘walking more gently on the land,’ a therapeutic antidote to mining, logging and grazing. Yet the growing tourism and recreation economy in the West has resulted in increased air and water pollution, degradation of scenic resources and loss of agricultural lands (and therefore wildlife habitat) to subdivisions and resorts. Proponents of a more environmentally beneficial economy generally dismiss grazing as economically unimportant to the West while ironically the demand for naturally grown meats and other natural agricultural products continues to increase annually. Others claim that tourism/recreational service jobs pay better, require more skills and higher educational levels and have more potential for advancement. Unexamined is who benefits from the higher paying jobs and who gets the menial jobs. Virtually no published environmentalist has examined the impact of racism and economic inequity in a heavily tourist/recreational economy.

A case in point is the growth of the tourism/recreational economy in Taos County New Mexico. In the 1950’s, local people were told that expanding tourism would create jobs and improve incomes. Since the 1960’s, gross revenues in Taos County have risen commensurably with the expansion of recreation and attendant retailing, restaurant and service businesses. But even when economic activity doubles, as it did between 1980 and 1990, poverty statistics remain virtually unchanged. In 1980, the official poverty rate for Taos County was 25.7 percent. In 1990, it was 25.4 percent.

Clearly, the increased flow of revenues through the tourism/recreational economy of Taos had little effect on material poverty and has actually exacerbated ancillary

poverty, including loss of ancestral lands and water, loss of resilience in family income-generating activities, increased taxes, and the erosion of community cohesion produced by growing racism and economic inequality. In the fall of 1999, a recent transplant to Taos published a feature article in the *Sunday New York Times* where she recounted incidents of perceived hostility towards her by young Hispano males which resulted in her decision to purchase a handgun for protection. She wistfully recounted her reasons for coming to this breathtakingly beautiful mountain valley from her previous urban residence and expressed anger at Taos' "dirty little secret" of hostile and violent locals.

Reconnecting Culture, Economics and the Environment

In contrast to the neocolonialist economies and increasing social stratification in the "New West" are the efforts of those indigenous to the region who seek to build sustainable economies by reconnecting the best traditional cultural practices with modern production and marketing strategies. These groups focus on adding value to cultural, natural and agricultural resources. Educational and cultural tourism are part of these economic development strategies...because of the twin opportunities to educate mainstream America and create niche markets. These strategies strive to benefit those with limited economic status and educational levels and whose gender, race and ethnicity have left them economically marginal. Such strategies require long-term, patient investment to underwrite human capacity building and meet the research and development needs of innovative, local enterprises.

Ganados del Valle, for example, spent 7 years (1984-1991) supporting the technical assistance and training needs of Tierra Wools' weavers, (operational costs were covered by sales). In 1992, Tierra Wools annual sales reached nearly \$350,000 and in 1996 the business was spun off to its weaver-owners. Ganados went on to create 4 more enterprises from 1990 to 1996, which marketed naturally grown, local meat and produce, regional arts, crafts, and home decor items. Over 150 artisans and agriculturists in the region were assisted to bring products to market; and 50 new jobs, many in management, were created locally. A work-based academic program was designed to professionalize the primarily women-staffed organization, most with a high school education. A small loan fund helped artisans and growers to be more productive, and a scholarship fund supports those wanting to complete their college degrees.

From Conflict to Collaboration, and Back Again

Despite these accomplishments, the efforts of Ganados were constantly laced with conflict over use of resources. Whether protesting the transfer of agricultural water rights to a proposed ski resort, supporting local land owners in a title dispute with real estate developers, or supporting forest-dependent communities in a lawsuit against the Forest Service for discrimination in the allocation of timber and fuel wood sales, Ganados quickly discovered that one of the major barriers to a sustainable economy was control of natural resources.

The most difficult struggle for Ganados was over access to summer grazing for members' flocks. Because the organization returned to the tradition of cooperative grazing (where flocks are pooled and flock owners share the costs of the shepherd), small-scale growers were able to bring their flock numbers up to an economically viable

level. This put more pressure on Ganados to locate summer pastures for the growing flock which was needed to supply the annually increasing demand of the weavers for high quality wool, especially from *Churro* stock.

In the mid 1980's, Ganados began discussions with New Mexico Game and Fish about the possibility of grazing one of the two state wildlife areas in the valley. Traditionally, these areas had been grazed by Anglo cattle growers. Ganados, in consultation with the local office of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (SCS), offered the flock as an intensive grazing management tool to improve the quality and quantity of forage on the refuge, while eradicating what SCS identified as invasive shrubs and weeds, with little or no value for wildlife. After nearly two years of discussion, New Mexico Fish and Game settled the matter by convening a task force. Its first order of business was to put an indefinite moratorium on all grazing in wildlife areas.

In the summer of 1989, after a fruitless search for grazing lands for the cooperative flock, the Jicarilla Apache nation agreed to let the sheep graze on its lands. However, several weeks into the summer, the tribe's attorney notified Ganados that the lease was suspended because of pending litigation with Game and Fish, which owned the wildlife area bordering the Apache's land. Bringing the flocks back to home pastures in July, before winter feed crops were fully grown and harvestable, would have forced growers to sell their flocks, including the *Churro* because they could not afford to buy winter feed. By this time, some growers were in their fourth year of a seven-year breed-back cycle required to return the *Churro* to its original characteristics. After a failed appeal to the Game and Fish for emergency grazing, Ganados growers, in an act of civil disobedience, moved their flocks in the night under a full moon to the adjacent wildlife area.

As soon as news of the "sheep in" hit the media, major New Mexico environmental and hunting organizations were quick to condemn (The wildlife areas are used primarily by Game and Fish as premium hunting areas for trophy elk). The shrillness of these attacks took Ganados by surprise as the organization had pursued environmental goals since inception: guard dogs, not poison were used for predator control, sustainable agricultural practices were encouraged with marketing incentives and inappropriate subdivisions were fought. Ganados leaders, as practicing environmentalists, assumed that card-carrying environmentalists valued these efforts to protect land, water, wildlife, and local cultures.

Realizing that the strong coalition between hunters and environmentalists would be difficult to defuse, Ganados went to U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman, considered the state's environmental legislator, to request assistance in convening a professionally mediated retreat. Twenty environmental leaders were invited to the table. Five agreed to come. Ganados found resources to house the group for three days and retain the mediators. Initially, these meetings seemed to defuse mutual hostilities. Ganados leaders learned to respect the dedication of the environmentalists. Environmentalists appeared genuinely moved when, after a lunch prepared by the weavers, the women made presentations on how important Tierra Wools and the members' flocks were to their lives. One weaver said sweetly and candidly "and if we had to put the sheep on the wildlife area again and go to jail, we would do it. It means that much to our families and our community."

Toward the end of the retreat, after sorting through commonalities and differences, the group resolved to go beyond "just talking." Action around a mutually agreed-upon project would create genuine collaboration that could create lasting alliances. A land

purchasing project in the Chama Valley was conceived, which would meet the environmentalists' desire to buffer development in prime agricultural areas while meeting Ganados' need for grazing to continue its sustainable development strategy.

But instead of creating lasting alliances, this joint project eventually failed, revealing some core problems with collaborative approaches. Ganados learned that the environmentalists themselves are not united. Their different membership bases and corporate cultures often result in different approaches to environmental problems. Those who came to the table felt they had little influence over those who did not. Those who did not come to the table felt that they didn't need to. They could achieve their environmental goals through the courts and legislatures. Those who came to the table were unwilling to stand up to other environmentalists to ask them to reconsider their tactics. Their continued collaboration with Ganados opened them up to criticism from the non-participating groups. When those who worked for national organizations found themselves growing closer to Ganados' point of view, they often ended up at odds with their superiors and membership. One member of the group dropped out because his board would no longer underwrite his working on the joint land purchase project.

In the end, it was Ganados who really needed the joint land project in order to continue its sustainable development strategies. Those environmentalists who participated wanted to demonstrate that they and their organizations were not insensitive to the economic and cultural needs of New Mexico's communities of color. But this was a moral gesture, not a need. When parties in collaboration are not there because of equal needs, the effort depends on the 'charity' of those wanting to make a moral gesture. Charity does not result in justice nor does it reverse the ravages of racism. Without economic justice and authentic cross-cultural learning, collaboration is an exercise in the pacification of rural populations.

Until environmentalists come to need the contributions and continued existence of agricultural cultures to stay on the land supported by profitable and sustainable production and marketing strategies, their participation in the collaborative process is more of a moral stakeholder without actual investment. At the same time, agricultural cultures in order to stay on the land must move beyond colonial economies and create new economic opportunities by adding maximum value to sustainably grown and harvested resources. In this process, they will need the environmental community to advocate for more environmentally and economically beneficial policies for rural America.

Collaboration can provide the opportunity for the kind of cross-cultural communication that is necessary to address social, economic and environmental problems in the West. But unless the issues of race, class and culture are faced head on, there is a real question whether collaboration can make a dent in deeply held ethnocentrism rooted in still deeper historical legacies. Breakthroughs are possible, but only if we can gather the courage to risk stepping outside our colonized worldviews.

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