

Old West vs. New West

A collision of concrete beliefs has petrified the debate and the debaters. Life was much simpler when I viewed the battle to "save" the West through a black-and-white lens.

As a young environmentalist, it was easier to condemn my adversaries' beliefs without scrutinizing my own. And it was easier to attack my adversaries when I didn't know them. I have agonized over this for years now.

At the heart of this land war - and that's what we should call it - is a conflict of cultures. On one side stand the "New Westerners," mostly urbanites who consider themselves environmentalists, but whose connection to the land comes through recreation.

On the other side are the "Old Westerners," most of whom live and work in small rural communities and make their living from the land.

In the past three decades, each side of the conflict has so caricatured their opponents that they have, in the process, turned themselves into cartoon characters as well.

Here are some generalizations:

- Most New Westerners long for the simple life in a small town, but they hold Old Westerners in low esteem and abhor their politics. And when they move to a small town, they build an oversize home, complain about the lack of amenities and try to change everything.
- Most Old Westerners live the simple lifestyle that New Westerners claim to admire. Their homes are smaller and their cars are older, and they lack a lot of the luxuries without which a New Westerner could never endure. But if they had more money they would probably match the new extravagance.
- Old Westerners like cows. Millions of cattle still graze on public lands, and some ranchers who hold federal grazing allotments are terrible stewards of that land. They allow overgrazing, destroy rare streamside habitat and turn public lands into wastelands.
- New Westerners hate cows. They think most ranchers are bad stewards. They want to eliminate public-lands grazing. But when they buy a condo in a

New West town, they love the view of cows on the alfalfa field from their picture window and complain bitterly when yet another development wipes out the pastoral scene.

- **Old Westerners like their jeeps and their off-road vehicles, and a minority of thoughtless idiots cause a disproportionate share of the resource damage. Many of their peers know this and don't like it, but say nothing because the one thing they'd rather not do is be seen agreeing with the environmentalists.**
- **New Westerners drive hundreds or thousands of miles in gas-guzzling vehicles so they can pedal their bicycles 40 miles and say they're non-motorized recreationists. Bicyclists gather for rallies and races just like their motorized cousins and cause extraordinary damage when the numbers are high enough.**
- **Some Old Westerners like to hunt, mostly deer and elk. Each year a few thousand hunters get a permit to kill a cougar. They chase the big cat with their dogs, run it up a tree and shoot it.**
- **Most New Westerners don't hunt and would never kill a cougar. But when thousands of cougar-loving recreationists invade once empty public lands, it is a hunt of sorts already - a hunt to eliminate the habitat that reclusive animals like cougars need.**
- **Most Old Westerners oppose wilderness, since they believe it will limit their access. On the other hand, Old Westerners understand one key component of wilderness far better than their adversaries. They understand solitude. They like the emptiness.**
- **New Westerners are terrified of solitude. Leave most of them alone in Utah's canyons without a cellphone and a group of companions, and they'd be lost. As a result, the search-and-rescue budgets of many rural Western communities have increased astronomically in recent years. Most members of search-and-rescue teams are Old Westerners.**
- **Old Westerners agree with the Bush administration that increased production of oil and gas on public lands is necessary to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Many of those same people mock efforts to reduce**

U.S. dependence through conservation efforts - which is really stupid.

- **New Westerners oppose increased oil and gas exploration and advocate conservation. Yet most of them are bigger consumers of natural resources than the people who defend drilling on the public domain.**
- **Most Old Westerners hate the writer Ed Abbey, who once said, "If America could be, once again, a nation of self-reliant farmers, craftsmen, hunters, ranchers and artists, then the rich would have little power to dominate others."**
- **Most New Westerners love Ed Abbey, even though they despise half the people Ed honored in the preceding quote. They may have read all his books, but they understand far less than they realize.**

As long as Westerners, new and old, refuse to acknowledge the fruitlessness of their inflexible positions, the West will suffer for our stubbornness. This is not about compromise; it's about dialogue and discussion. An honest discussion.

Jim Stiles is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). He publishes the Canyon Country Zephyr in Moab, Utah. April 2005