

# 18. Qualities of a Sustainable West

- A West that knows its history, and is thereby immunized against the lack of foresight that can fool people into believing that a boom will be permanent
- A West that takes advantage of the opportunities presented by a boom, to make the long-term investments that would soften the severity of a future bust
- A West with a well-installed “nostalgia blocker” that would permit clear-eyed appraisals of the stability and vulnerability of extractive industries and tourist enterprises
- A West that finds more carefully planned means of effective growth-control than a bust
- A West that takes a hard look at its future, boom or bust, to assess the sustainability of water systems in a major drought, the support for community in a bust, and the healthy ecosystems necessary for future continued growth
- A West that pays attention to the social impacts of both boom and bust, and through fieldwork and research, sets up programs and facilities that mitigate the community discord that arises equally with rapidly expanding populations, and rapidly deflating populations
- A West that acts on the wisdom of foresighted boom-time investments in infrastructure

Even when economic recoveries occur promptly, workshop participants felt strongly that booms should not be occasions to put the busts out of mind and memory. In good times, governments (federal, state, local, tribal) should anticipate downturns, and make intelligent moves to build and maintain infrastructure when tax revenues are more abundant. During booms, Westerners should fight their susceptibility to amnesia about previous busts and to the denial of future ones. Remembering the boom/bust context is of particular importance in environmental decision making, where efforts to think in longer units of time can be derailed by sudden economic swings. Both boom and bust offer their own separate perils for intelligent planning for natural resource use and land development.

In boom times, prosperity can inspire a “devil may care”/“tomorrow will take care of itself” frame of mind. And yet, in bust times, a sense of scarcity of public and private money, as well as a keen desire for economic recovery, can produce a similar climate of resistance to initiatives on behalf of environmental protection. We would urge Western citizens to be wary of both forms of justification. When told that either hard times or good times require a release from constraint on development, public audiences might well respond that the goal of sustainability in natural resource use transcends temporary conditions of boom and bust. While the familiar phrase “making hay while the sun shines” has evolved into an invitation to short-term merriment and hilarity, it is actually an invitation to think ahead and take advantage of the opportunities to prepare for a time of future need. Just as making hay while the sun shines is much preferred to making hay while the stars shine or the rain falls, economic booms provide an important opportunity to support intelligent environmental policies and the building of community resources in times of general well-being.

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