

The Age of Consequences

A Chronicle of Concern and Hope

Courtney White

Introduction by Wendell Berry

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INTRODUCTION

by Wendell Berry

IN 1997, WHEN Courtney White and his allies started the Quivira Coalition, conservation in the United States, and most conspicuously in the west, was in serious failure. Wilderness conservation was more or less all right, and the conservation organizations would dependably rise up and shout in emergencies such as oil spills, but the landscapes of farming, ranching, and commercial forestry were often seriously abused, as often they still are, without much notice by anybody. The official forces of forestry and agriculture promoted “best management practices” that were, and still are, “best” by standards unrevealed. These practices were, and are, mostly unquestioned by a public trained in submission to the opinions of experts.

The land uses that *had* caught the attention of the conservationists were mainly ranching and logging on the public lands of the west. In the grazing lands of the southwest, where Courtney lived and had worked for one of the established conservation organizations, the ranchers and conservationists were divided by a political and rhetorical hostility that both sides had worked diligently to perfect. The conservationists were assuming, to the extent almost of misanthropy, that there was a contradiction between any economic use of the land and the land’s natural character, a contradiction that was absolute and unamendable: just get the humans and their needs off the land; then the land will return to nature and be well. The ranchers, cherishing their belief in their independence, stood on their rights and wished to be rid of the conservationists, whom they saw as ignorant city people meddling in other people’s business.

Courtney had spent enough time on the conservationists' side of this division, and he had enough sense, to see that this feud was useless and wasteful. Nothing good was ever going to come out of it because nothing good was in it. The Quivira Coalition came from that realization. The Coalition placed itself in the middle between the two sides in order to provide a zone of peace or peace-making, in which the opponents could meet and talk, come to know one another, and eventually help one another.

That at least some people from each side did meet and talk, become acquainted, and begin to work together, in the hospitable space provided by the Coalition, proved soon enough that their old quarrel had been not only useless, but also silly, for in answering the question "What do you want?" the two sides found that they wanted mostly the same things: land and water conservation, unspoiled countryside, and biological diversity. They discovered further that in order to have these desirable things they needed each other's help.

The actual work of the Quivira Coalition was defined by another question: was there in fact an irresolvable contradiction between the land economy of the ranchers and the natural health of the land? Years of work and observation on the part of the Coalition, its members, and its consultants strongly suggested the opposite: that there is an indivisible correlation or mutuality between the economic health of the ranch and the ecological health of the lands and its waterways. This surprises nobody who has troubled to understand that the human economy as a whole depends entirely upon the wealth and health of the natural world. The ranch's human family and its land must thrive or fail together. The difference is made in the degree of harmony between the human economy and the nature of places. Cattle, for example, can be used invasively, so that they overgraze the

grass and trample too heavily the margins of the streams, or they can be managed considerately as components or members of the land's community of creatures.

And so Courtney White's experience with the Quivira Coalition has made him master of two indispensable truths: people of different and apparently opposing interests can work together in goodwill for their mutual good; and, granted their goodwill and good work, a similar reciprocity can be made, in use, between humans and their land.

In the present book, Courtney White, of the American southwest and the Quivira Coalition, recounts his travels, in which he found his work at home confirmed in other places. Not everything from anywhere can be transplanted to somewhere else. But I trust and hope that enough of Courtney's learning in far places will prove to be homework, and we will hear from him again. The Quivira Coalition has made an excellent start on work that is a long way from finished.
