The Break of Day

$7 Gas and the New West

by Courtney White

"We are not walking a prepared path." – Wendell Berry at The Quivira Coalition's 6th Annual Conference, in response to a question about the difficulties that lie ahead.

During the spike in gasoline prices in the summer of 2006, our Congressional Representative, Tom Udall, warned a newspaper reporter that one day we would be "wistful about $3-a-gallon-gas."

Filling up my gas tank the other day in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and paying $3.49 a gallon for the privilege, I thought "Hey, I'm *already* wistful about $3 gas!" I just didn't think I would be so wistful *so fast*.

I had better get used to the feeling. All indicators suggest that gas prices are heading in only one direction – up. Perhaps *way up*. The reason is simple to explain, but hard to digest: the global supply of oil cannot keep pace with demand. Worse, supply may "peak" soon (if it hasn't already) and thus begin an inexorable decline.

Lonely Nevada highway. (photo by C. White)

And with no "Plan B" in sight, this decline in oil production has serious implications for all of us.

What, for example, might $7 gas mean for the American West, where I live, with its dependence on tourism, its embrace of urban and exurban sprawl, its extraordinary bounty of natural resources, its aridity, and its long distances? The answer, I suspect, is this: we're going to be wistful about more than just $3 gas.

Our nostalgia will include the current version of the so-called 'New West,' whose many luxuries and benefits are dependent on cheap fossil fuel. I say "so-called" because there have been many "new" Wests over the past two hundred years, each as fresh and fleeting as the previous one. This shouldn't be news – history moves in periods, ages, eras, and epochs, one giving way to the next, sometimes quickly. Few understand this better than westerners, who have learned the hard way that change is inevitable – as are the inevitable laments.

In his memoir, *A Walk Toward Oregon*, noted historian Alvin Josephy, Jr. quotes the famous western artist Frederic Remington in 1902 mourning the passing of the 'Old West' and the arrival of something new: "I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever," said Remington. "I saw the living, breathing end of three American centuries of smoke and dust and sweat, and now I see quite another thing where it all took place, but does not appeal to me."

Josephy is sympathetic – but only up to a point. "As a historian of the American West, I also knew that, before and after Remington, each generation in the West had lamented in its own way the passing of its Old West."

The original Old West of the Native Americans was replaced by a New West of missionaries and mountain men. That West was replaced by the brave new frontier of miners and soldiers; which gave way to homesteaders, farmers, ranchers, capitalists, doctors, city folk and so on. The next New West included artists, movie stars, dudes, automobiles, picnickers, oil men, and land speculators. Next up were bureaucrats,

environmentalists, backpackers, migrant workers, Land Rovers, latte and, well, more land speculators (I'm filling in for Josephy here).

His point is this: every New West eventually becomes an Old West which is replaced in turn by something new, whether we like it or not.

It happened to Josephy as well. "The Old West that I had experienced was now gone too," he wrote, "changed by industrial and military centers, interstate highways, recreation developments, trophy ranches and urban sprawl, conformity, high-tech pop culture, television, and economically stressed cattle and lumber operations struggling to survive against global competitors."

"Components," he concludes, "that will become someone else's Old West."

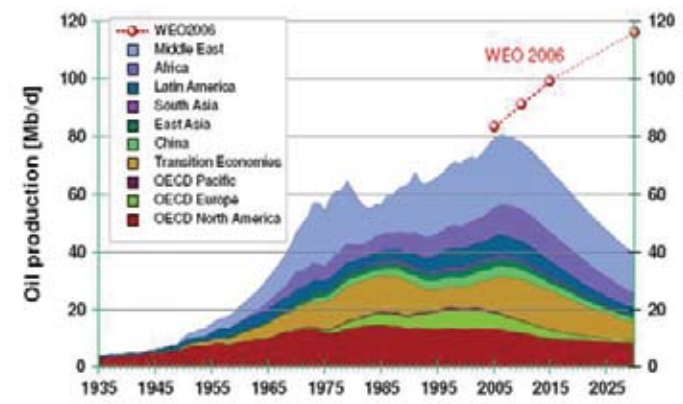

Chart of projected global oil production. The ascending line (in red) represents projected oil demand. From a lecture by oil industry expert Matt Simmons (see www. www.simmonsco-intl.com)

This historical page-turning is upon us, I believe, and it has big implications for conservation. Think of where the movement was a century ago – think of John Muir and his fights for national park protection and his struggles against dams and other destructive examples of a rapidly urbanizing nation. Think of Teddy Roosevelt burning the midnight oil with Gifford Pinchot, the head of the newly minted U.S. Forest Service, to create fresh forest reserves against the wishes of loggers, ranchers, and miners.

Fast-forward to where conservation is today and how much it has changed to meet evolving times. Now contemplate about where it might go in a 21st century that is shaping up to be quite different than the 20th.

A place to start is the effect $7 gas will have on the American West. This includes:

A Decline in Recreation-based Economic Activity. One of the early casualties of rising gas prices will be long-distance tourism – currently a mainstay of many economies. It's not just driving, higher airplane fares are inevitable as well. In fact, it's a safe bet to say that any tourist activity involving fossil fuel will become more costly, probably *much more* costly. Rural communities may stagger under the blow. This will have a big impact on conservation as well, which firmly hitched its wagon to recreation decades ago

The Juggernaut of Urban & Exurban Development Will Falter. Cheap gas begat our love affair with the automobile which begat suburban and exurban (ranchette) development which begat an intense period of economic prosperity all across the West. But what will $7 gas beget? Serious economic trouble in suburbia, I suspect. For conservation this will be a mixed blessing: a reduction in the rate of land fragmentation could be a relief, but economic turmoil could dry up dollars (and members) for conservation efforts.

Water Will Become More Expensive: In the arid West, water is our life source. In fact, much of western history revolves around water, especially the availability of cheap (i.e. subsidized) water for expanded agriculture, new homes, new cities, and endless growth. But much of this water is dependent on fossil fuels for its pumping and delivery. Rising energy costs mean higher water costs, which, combined with water's increasing scarcity, raises the likelihood of additional economic and ecological turmoil ahead.

Economic Hardship Will Spread Upward: As the basic necessities of life – food, energy, and water – become more expensive, the economic pain will be felt among the poor and disadvantaged first and hardest. Consequences could range from increased crime and social unrest to questions about how to keep farmers and ranchers in business producing local food when diesel prices shoot through the roof. Against this backdrop of rising economic hardship, current conservation priorities will have to be redefined.

There's more. Rising energy prices are just one consequence of a century of frenzied industrial

economic activity. There are others, as daily news reports remind us. Soon, all of these rising concerns will merge into a general sustainability crisis, I believe, requiring a new response from the conservation movement altogether.

Age of Consequences

Although no one knows what the decades ahead will bring precisely, there are enough indicators available to say with confidence that the 21st century will look a lot different than the 20th. Whether the concern is climate change, peak oil, overpopulation, species extinction, food and water shortages, or something else, the challenges ahead are daunting and varied.

These are all elements of what I call the *Age of Consequences* – the era in which we, and subsequent generations, are required to grapple with the cumulative effects of two hundred years of full-throttle industrialism. It's not just about damaging industrial products, such as greenhouse gases or toxic wastes, but damaging decisions also. Action has consequences, of course, but so does *inaction*, which largely describes our collective response so far. We can see trouble brewing – but we hesitate to react with corresponding urgency.

Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2005. (hoto from http://www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/lookingatearth/h2005_katrina.html)

Metaphorically, I think of the Age of Consequences as a hurricane that has been building slowly over open water for some time but is now approaching shore. We can already feel its winds. We don't know precisely where the bulk of the hurricane will make landfall or how strong its winds will be ultimately, but we do know that it *will* strike and that its destructive power will be awesome.

A strenuous effort must be made to lower the wind speed of this hurricane as much as possible – such as reducing the amount of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere or preserving biologically rich natural areas from industrial development. This is an appropriate and important job for the current iteration of conservation movement. However, since the hurricane is destined to make landfall no matter what we do, it also means new work for conservationists – the next turning of the page for the movement.

Specifically, I believe there are three areas that are paramount:

1) Reversing Ecosystem Service Decline. In 2005, the United Nations published its *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, a global evaluation of the ecosystem services on which human well-being vitally depends. These services include food, fresh water, wood, fiber, fuel, and biodiversity; climate, flood, pest and disease regulation; nutrient cycling, soil stability, biotic integrity, watershed function, and photosynthesis; and spiritual, educational, recreational, and aesthetic experiences.

The ultimate conclusion of the Assessment is this: globally, ecosystem services are in decline – in some places rapidly – and as they decline so will human well-being.

This means traditional conservation concerns, such as wilderness protection, parks, and recreational experiences, will fall in priority. That's because as human well-being degrades, conservation strategies that don't actively aim at reversing ecosystem service decline will become less and less important as basic human needs, such as meeting food and energy requirements, rise in importance.

The Assessment's authors encourage active adaptive management of natural resources, including restoration, monitoring and experimentation with new management methods – all with the goal, in their words, of maintaining ecological "diversity, functional groups, and trophic levels while mitigating chronic stress [in order to] increase the supply and resilience of ecosystem services and decrease the risk of large losses of ecosystem services."

In other words, to improve human well-being, we must roll up our sleeves and get busy with the big job of *managing* the planet according to ecological limitations.

2) Creating Sustainable Prosperity. The conservation movement has been slow to recognize that environmental problems are at heart economic problems. Ecosystem services, for instance, are declining largely because their conservation value is not seen to be in the economic self-interest of important portions of society (abetted by cheap fossil fuel). As a result, conservation became primarily a subsidized activity, accomplishing its goals principally by (1) direct or indirect governmental funding; (2) as a byproduct of commercial agricultural activity; or (3) by philanthropy; or some combination of each.

Conservation remains subsidized to this day for a variety of reasons, including its high cost. Another reason is a well-founded concern about the role uninhibited market forces play in the overexploitation of natural resources – a role that has contributed widely to ecosystem service decline around the planet.

Stream restoration specialist Bill Zeedyk describing how a post vane protects an eroding bank. Comanche Creek, Valle Vidal, NM. July 2007.

But can conservation pay for itself ultimately? If it can not, at least at some significant level, then the objective of reversing the decline of the ecosystem services on which human well-being depends might be impossible. *That's because more than a century of conservation work has demonstrated the limitations of subsidized incentives (case in point: the current condition of the planet)*. Additionally, the scale of the conservation job continues to grow, especially as ecosystems decline, which means the cost of restoration will grow as well.

More to the point, even if conservation can be profitable, can it be sustainable – in other words, can it be *prosperous over time?* There are no easy answers to these questions, though for inspiration we can look to the growing number of family-scale, progressive and indigenous ranchers and farmers around the world who have succeeded, to one degree or another, by working on the original solar power – photosynthesis. Many have been profitable and sustainable simultaneously, and often for the same reason, thus prospering in multiple ways, and not just economically. We could learn a great deal from their examples.

3) Relocalization. This word will likely dominate the upcoming decades. The inevitability of rising energy costs means more and more of our daily lives, from food production to where we work and play, will be lived closer to home at local and regional scales. This won't be by choice, as it is currently, but by necessity.

The key is to look at relocalization as an opportunity, not just a challenge. It can be a form of rediscovery – learning about our roots, about community, neighbors, gardens, and doing with less in general. One could even look at relocalization entrepreneurially – those individuals and organizations that get into the game early, by providing re-localized goods and services, will stand a very good chance at a profitable living as the transition begins to unfold.

Relocalization includes:

The Development of Local Food and Energy Sources: Working landscapes will become critical again. So will the innovations currently taking place at the nexus of agriculture and ecology – a nexus that requires working lands. This is not to dismiss wilderness or the needs of wildlife, but it does mean concentrating our efforts on answering an important question: could New Mexico feed itself? Could Montana? Or France? And if not, why not, and what can we do to stimulate local food and energy production?

Farm and Ranch Land Will Become Important Again – So Will Farmers and Ranchers. Local food and energy, as well as recreational opportunities, require local land that is available for these uses. We'll need local people to do this work too, as well as their local knowledge. This means figuring out how – now – to keep the current generation of farmers and ranchers on the land, as well as encourage the next generation to stay, come back, or give agriculture a try.

Restoration Will Become An Important Business. Producing local food and energy from working land-

scapes, especially in quantity, will require healthy land as well as best management practices that work 'within nature's model.' However, while the 'toolbox' of progressive stewardship is now well developed, a great deal of our land is in poor condition, for a variety of reasons, requiring restoration and remediation. The good news is that this work could afford local communities a bounty of jobs at good wages.

All of this work involves creating a "new path" – to paraphrase Wendell Berry – much of it agrarian in nature. Participation in its construction will require a new type of conservation effort, and probably a new type of conservation organization. While older 'models' of conservation are needed for the important job of slowing the Age of Consequences 'hurricane' down as much as possible, the work on the 'shore' requires a new model, one that has a different goal than conservation has aimed at in the past.

As a conservationist, as well as member of the human community, I'm no more a fan of change than anyone else. But the next time I fill up my truck at the gas station, I'll be reminded of how fleeting my 'New West' turned out to be. I'm not sure what will be coming next precisely, no one does. It's just coming, that's all. Maybe it'll be better – I guess it depends on your expectations. As for me, I'll climb back in my truck and keep working toward a more resilient future for as long as I can. It's the least I can do for my children.

The storm moving toward shore took a long time to develop – and it'll take an even longer time to dissipate. Our primary duty, therefore, is to be patient, to work dutifully and thoughtfully. Building resilience will take time. It will also require skill, collaboration, and respect. To build a new path, we'll have to work together, and we'll have to do things differently. Fortunately, we have a great deal of raw material, some of it quite ancient, from around the planet from which to start.

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Courtney White with daughter Olivia at The Quivira Coalition's 2008 Annual Conference. (photo by Gene Peach)