

RADICAL

CENTER

story by GORDON BUNKER

In the mid-1990s, Courtney White, a Sierra Club activist, had had his fill of what he calls the “conflict industry.” Grazing wars between ranchers and environmentalists netted little if any progress toward fixing the issues. More often they resulted in deadlock and opposing sides becoming further entrenched in what each believed was right. “I suspected that [we] had more in common than different,” says Courtney in his thoughtful, measured way. “So it was important to step away from this kind of conflict machine that was running full speed at the time, and try to find some peace.”

Together with fellow Sierra Club activists Barbara Johnson and Jim Winder, who by the way is a rancher, Courtney went on to co-found the Quivira Coalition in 1997. He had seen the word quivira on a Spanish Colonial map used to designate unexplored territory. “So we’re trying to find some common ground with ranchers,” he says. “It was like going into unexplored territory.” When the group started, “we got shot at from all sides. But what’s important here is we weren’t just singing Kumbaya. We were pushing a suite of practices, new things on the ground as something we can rally around. We were talking about progressive cattle management practices, we were talking about reversing environmental degradation, how to fix creeks, talking about local food, grass fed food, things that we could do that were in the interest of everyone.”

“One of our early principal goals,” says Courtney, “was to energize what was called the radical center.” The idea is brilliant and profoundly simple. “The center was where things happened, so that you had practical positive pragmatic things we can do together. It wasn’t left, it wasn’t right, it was practical centrism.” But why radical, I ask. “Because we have a culture that likes to fight,” replies Courtney. “Just likes to brawl with each other and it doesn’t like to find points of contact where we can work together. And so the radicalness here is not to be more extreme, but is exactly flipped, to be more cooperative, to be more working together to accomplish goals.” To date, Quivira’s achievements from collaborative effort include direct benefit to at least one million acres of rangeland, 30 linear miles of riparian drainages and 15,000 people.

The land management practices Quivira promotes are not based only on textbook science. They’ve been employed directly. “A ranch on Rowe Mesa was given to us by local conservationist Bill deBuys. “We managed

it for about four or five years as a cattle ranch. We became members of the New Mexico Cattle Growers’ Association, which was kind of a trip for former Sierra Club activists! It was good to make that journey, to understand all sides of these issues. We got very well educated in both the benefits and challenges of local grass-fed food production.” Unfortunately, the 2008 economic crash precipitated the coalition’s selling the ranch. Courtney continues, however, “I am very grateful for the opportunity to learn ranching from the inside.”

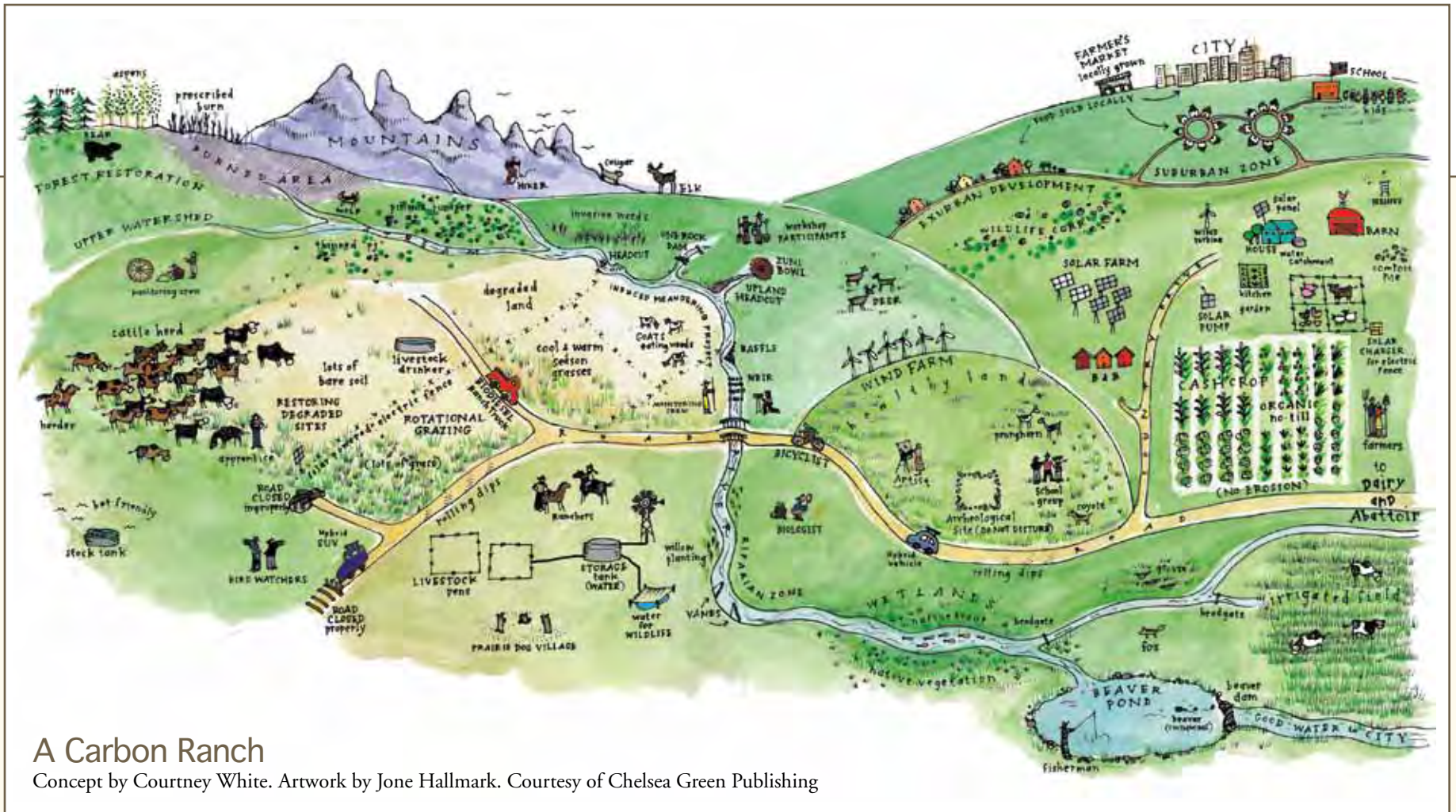
Building economic and ecological resilience is at the core of what Quivira does. “Thinking about the larger challenges,” says Courtney, such as climate change and providing for ever growing populations, there are “shocks to the system. They’re slower shocks but they’re still profound. How do you brace for changes? How can you build resilience

into these systems?” Courtney inquires. “Well, when you restore a degraded riparian area, it now has resilience for the next drought or the next flood. There are things you can do physically to these creek systems to restore them. We’ve done a lot of that work.” Literally. Quivira has a number of programs bringing people together to roll up their sleeves and have at it. Courtney says, “Many ranchers by their nature are resilient, they’ve stuck around through a lot of change over the last couple hundred years here. So droughts, all kinds of conflict including changes in land

management, fires—it’s resilience, hanging in there. But how to manage a drought for example ... the kind of cattle management we advocate is resilient to these kinds of shocks. The way the world is changing, particularly climate change, [ranchers] are trying to set themselves up for hotter, dryer times.”

The matter of being resilient applies not only to agribusiness. “I think there’s important lessons for those of us living in cities,” says Courtney. “How resilient are we? We pat ourselves on the back but let’s face it, we’re probably not as resilient as we think. This came home to me in 2006 when there was a tremendous snow storm that shut down Albuquerque, shut down both highways. A reporter wrote a story, how long would it take to empty the store shelves of food? It was six days. That’s not very resilient. So that shows you how you start thinking about these things.” For urban areas in the west, building resilience into water supplies, for example, is an issue. Courtney continues, “It seems there’s going to be less of it and we got a lot of straws in our water system. How do we figure this out without entering into conflict, particularly between urban and rural? California’s going through this, we need to watch California carefully. We need to be thinking about how to be resilient in all our lives.”

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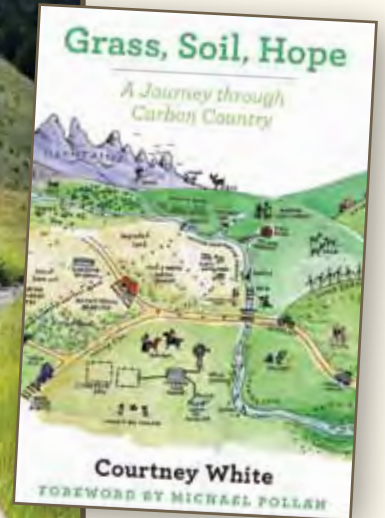
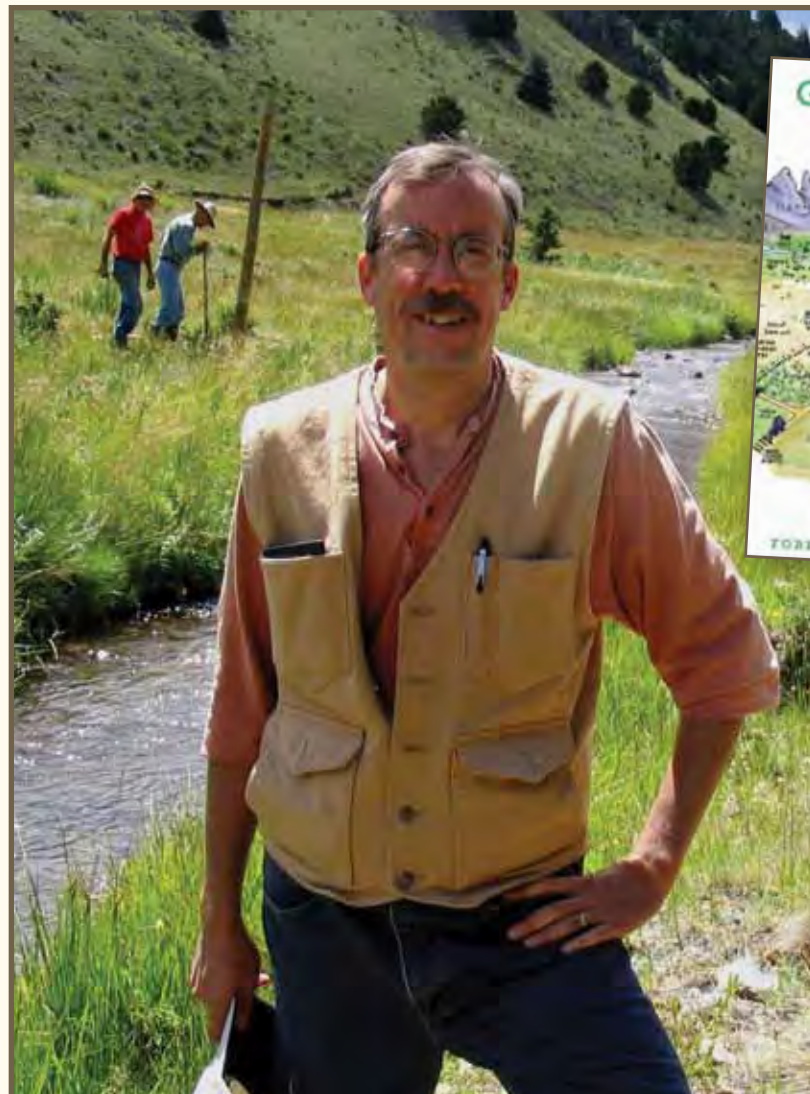
A Carbon Ranch

Concept by Courtney White. Artwork by Jone Hallmark. Courtesy of Chelsea Green Publishing

In the spring of 2010, Courtney found inspiration visiting the Nicasio Native Grass Ranch in Nicasio, California, where the idea—again brilliant in its simplicity—is to soak up greenhouse gasses in soil by promoting healthy plant life. Born from this experience is Quivira’s Carbon Ranch Project. “The potential to lock up CO₂ in rangeland soils is huge,” says Courtney. “There are a lot of rangelands, and a lot of them are degraded, frankly. If you can restore them, re-carbonize them, get green things to grow again, this is one of the silver linings about having these degraded landscapes across the west. It’s kind of like pouring water out of a glass. Now you have a glass that’s half full, it’s half full of carbon and the potential to refill that glass up to store a lot of carbon is pretty cool.” Courtney’s ability to see potential where I see hard used land is, in itself, inspiring. “Well managed ranches can sequester more greenhouse gasses than they produce,” he says, “so they can be net neutral or net positive. You can’t say that about a feedlot. There’s nothing soaking up CO₂ in a feedlot, it’s just all emissions.”

And this doesn’t simply mean a lot of extra work for ranchers. “Grass fed is a value added product,” says Courtney. At the end of the day, “it’s more money in their pockets. Many of these practices improve the productivity of the land. More cows on your land ... growing more grass the land becomes healthier and more productive, less prone to fire and drought. It can be win, win.” Courtney also points out La Montañita Co-op has been instrumental in providing a marketplace for locally raised grass fed beef.

He continues on climate change, “There’s no sense of crisis, therefore no one’s willing to pay to sequester carbon. It’s going to be growing on us rather quickly here, so the



Book Cover: Courtesy of Chelsea Green Publishing
Photo: Courtney White

| Courtney White at Carbon Ranch

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message I want to get across is we don't have to wait for some high technology to come down the road and save us. Low technology, which is grass and photosynthesis, creeks, water, mud, cows—we can do a lot with the technology we have. It's just a way of looking at the world differently." While Courtney considers himself a "professional daydreamer," I think visionary would be more accurate. "Everything's still the same, it's just suddenly you realize this landscape has got a different kind of potential."

He admits Quivira's efforts are relatively small scale. To tackle the larger problem, he says, "What's missing is how do we economize it, how do we make this work? I think it's [between] urban, where people who are worried about climate live, and rural, who can implement the work. It's bringing those two worlds together and kind of closing the circle here. That's where the radical center comes in. Urban and rural, which tend to be on different planets, hardly contact each other, they need to spend more time talking to each other through food, and I mean, the water that people drink in cities comes from rural landscapes, right? So how that landscape is being managed impacts directly the people in the cities. Having those two planets talk to each other, kind of visit each other is going to become increasingly important. Now, as the crisis comes down on us it becomes how do we connect the dots, that's the challenge we're facing."

"We live in an age of consequences. We've been partying hard for 60 years," says Courtney, "and the idea that we're not going to have a hangover, I don't know who told us that, but there's a hangover." Though ever the optimist, he concludes, "What's cool about today is we know all this stuff, good science. Microbiologists are my heroes. What they know about soils? Whoa! And we have all these practitioners, ranchers and farmers, they go out and do all this stuff, and they know what works. So with the science knowledge and practical knowledge, we have the tools, the toolbox is well filled up. Twenty years ago that toolbox was pretty empty. Now we just need to figure out how to grab those tools and get doing stuff."

Courtney White is the author of numerous books on environmental subjects. His latest, "The Age of Consequences: A Chronicle of Concern and Hope," published by Counterpoint, is available from local booksellers and you-know-where. Courtney's website is awestthatworks.com. For more information on the Quivira Coalition, go to quiviracoalition.org or call 505.820.2544.

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