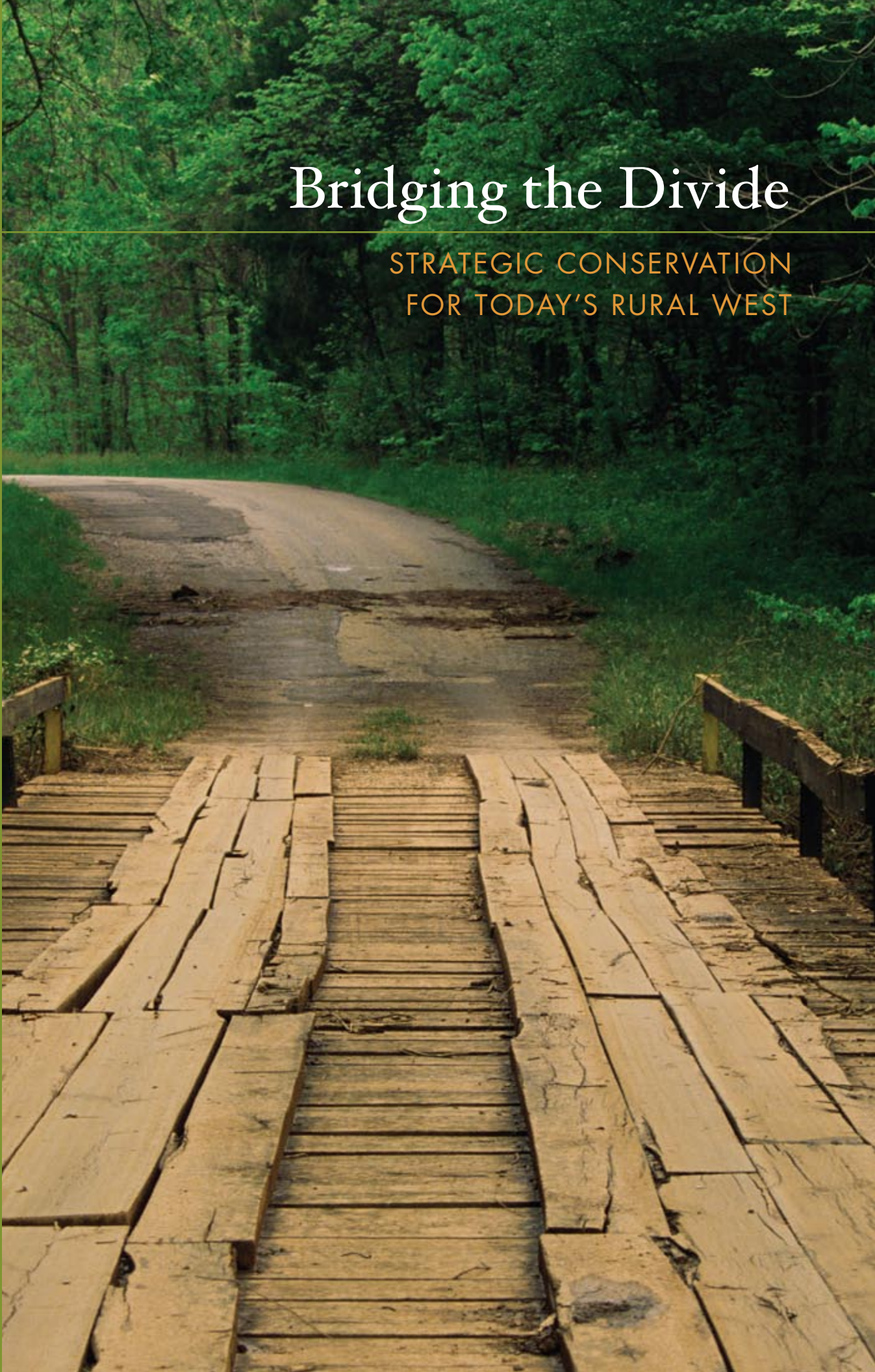


Bridging the Divide

STRATEGIC CONSERVATION
FOR TODAY'S RURAL WEST



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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Resource Media provides media strategy and services to non-profits, foundations and others who are working to protect communities and the environment. We work behind the scenes to foster effective collaboration, develop messages rooted in common public values and promote sound environmental policies and practices.

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Prologue



PROLOGUE

It was a summer day in 2003. Ken Siderius walked into the office and flopped into a chair.

“That,” he said, “was an old-fashioned ass-whipping.”

Siderius was an enormously popular teacher in a small but fast-growing community in northwestern Montana. His family had pioneered the valley a century before, and it broke his heart to watch sprawl destroy the farmland his community once cherished and pollute the water they had always used for fishing, swimming and irrigation.

Modestly enough, Siderius and the Flathead Land Trust had asked their local county commissioners to put a \$10 million conservation bond on the ballot to protect farmland and water. Conservationists had conducted a poll showing the bond was highly popular and commissioners indicated they would cooperate. First, they scheduled a public hearing.

Then came the ass-whipping. The local “wise-use” faction, already inflamed by decades of fighting over logging and endangered species, took aim at the bond. They packed the room. “This is nothing but welfare for environmentalists,” one charged.

The commission caved, voting unanimously to kill the bond.

But Siderius and the local conservation community did not cry in their beer for long. They organized. They built relationships, steeped themselves in local politics, defused their opposition, raised money and built power. Five years later, they tried again.

In 2008, local conservationists teamed with a broad spectrum of businesspeople, sportsmen, concerned parents and farmers. With a chorus of voices, they all but demanded the commissioners put the bond on the ballot. The same voices from five years ago howled in protest, but their chants were outnumbered. This time, the commission unanimously endorsed conservation. The bond initiative went on the ballot.

What had changed over those five years? Not the opinion or the political makeup of the people of Flathead County. Polls showed that conserving land and water had always been locally popular. What had changed was the way conservationists did their business. It took hard work over many years, but they had learned to be more strategic.

Outside the commissioners’ office after the favorable vote, initiative supporters shook hands. Siderius smiled broadly. Election Day was only months away. “Okay,” he said. “Now the work begins....”



Part I: Introduction

INTRODUCTION

The rural American West is a paradoxical place for the American environmental community—at once the site of our greatest victories and our most heartbreaking frustrations. Ironically, communities within a short drive of some of America’s most spectacular conservation triumphs—Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Yosemite—are some of the most difficult political geographies for environmentalists to work in today.

Conservation is a bedrock value in many parts of the West. Yet, advocates too often find themselves working against the current of local communities. Worse, conservationists are often labeled “outsiders” or “special interest groups” out of touch with local sensibilities. As a result, enormous conservation potential goes unrealized.

The imperative to capture the West’s exceptional conservation potential grows every day. As Ray Rasker of Headwaters Economics puts it: “What we have in the American West is truly unique on a global scale. We have a modern, industrial economy that rivals that of Western Europe, immediately adjacent to vast expanses of open land, healthy ecosystems and true wildness. You just don’t see that combination anywhere else in the world. That is our competitive edge in the global economy and it is what draws people who want to live and invest here.”

Cast against a backdrop of rapidly changing demographics, economics and politics across the rural American West, one thing remains clear: conservationists will realize the West’s conservation potential only with a keen understanding of the people who live here and an effective

strategy for mobilizing them. To get there, conservationists must have a clear-eyed view of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Westerners treasure open land, clean air and water, friendly communities and local wildlife. These features are

In the American West, “we have a modern industrial economy immediately adjacent to vast expanses of true wildness.”

– Ray Rasker, Headwaters Economics



exactly what conservationists work to protect. Yet, too often—and despite their best intentions—conservationists impede their own progress because of how they are perceived and how they present their issues.

It's time to turn that around. Conservation is on the cusp of a new era. That era could be filled with exciting new victories, or familiar old frustrations. The difference depends largely on what we, as conservationists, say and do.

In the following pages, Resource Media provides a roadmap for how conservationists can translate frustrated efforts into fruitful strategies that help rural communities and safeguard diverse Western landscapes. The lessons here are derived from our years of fieldwork throughout the rural West coupled with extensive interviews with leading public opinion researchers, elected officials and conservation leaders. They bear out the great opportunities to be found at the intersection of smart communications strategy and thoughtful organizing.

We have distilled that learning into seven principles for strategic conservation: be pragmatic; listen first; build local alliances; speak “local”; raise authentic voices; apply appropriate technology and tactics; and see the big picture.

Over the years, Resource Media has seen these strategies work. We have seen conservationists who used these strategies win—and win big—in challenging, even hostile, local communities and rural places.

To be certain, strategic conservation is easier said than done. Execution requires hard work, creativity and dedication. Changing habits and behavior is one of our greatest challenges, no matter who we are. But the rewards are real.

Strategic Conservation: The Seven Principles

- **Be Pragmatic**
- **Listen First**
- **Build Local Alliances**
- **Speak “Local”**
- **Raise Authentic Voices**
- **Apply Appropriate Technology and Tactics**
- **See the Big Picture**



Part II: The West: Center Stage of American Conservation

American conservation may have been born around Walden Pond, but many landmark battles and victories rolled out in the West.

America created the world's first national park—Yellowstone—in the West in 1872, followed by 240 million acres of Western national forests, parks and wildlife refuges by 1904.¹ Peregrine falcons, elk, mountain lions and bison were once transcontinental species, but were saved from extinction in the West.

The West continues to be center stage for conservation. The first Earth Day was announced in Seattle. America's first bottle bill and landmark land use laws came from Oregon. California's building efficiency codes, pollution prevention standards and ocean protections set the pace for the nation.

Issues such as water allocation, public lands and energy policy, endangered species recovery, and growth and development dominate Western public life as in few other regions. Every year, conservationists invest tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars and uncounted hours to protect land, water, air and wildlife in the rural West.

Economist Larry Swanson of the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West said in the past, people came to the West following jobs in the fields, mines and the mills. In today's footloose economy, Swanson said, jobs follow the people and the people move to find the highest quality of life, most often in a beautiful, clean, natural setting.

In the West, the environment matters.

MAP OF YELLOWSTONE





II.1 FINDING THE RURAL AMERICAN WEST

What do we mean by the rural West? Using Census Bureau regional classifications, we focus on Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, Washington and California.

These 11 states are geographically and culturally diverse. Yet one overarching fact is that Western states hold the vast majority of America's public land—on average, Western states are 47 percent federal land. California and Idaho are 50 percent federal land. On the low end, Montana and Washington have about 30 percent federal land, and on the high end Nevada is 85 percent federal land. By comparison, other states (except Alaska) average about 3 percent federal land.²

In today's footloose economy, jobs follow the people and the people move to find the highest quality of life, most often in a beautiful, clean, natural setting.

— Larry Swanson

O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West

Perhaps because of this public estate, and perhaps because life in the West is more closely tied to the land, the West is also home to long-term disputes over land, water, air and wildlife. Consider, for example, the clashes over water allocation in the Southwest; nuclear waste storage in the Great Basin; timber and salmon in the Pacific Northwest; energy extraction in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana; and air pollution, water allocation and farm runoff in California.

Rural areas, according to the Census Bureau definition, have fewer than 500 people per square mile. That statistic tells only part of the picture. A rural Western community

may be a college town with high-tech business zones, an oil-strip boomtown, a Hutterite colony, an Indian reservation, a ski-and-golf resort, or a farm town where the tallest buildings are grain elevators. Rural Western communities may be a commute away from Phoenix or Salt Lake City and are wired to Los Angeles, Seattle and beyond.

Amid these complexities and paradoxes, the people of the rural West have influence far beyond their numbers and far beyond the region.

II.2 WHY THE RURAL WEST MATTERS

For those of us dedicated to protecting land, air, water, wildlife and the rural ways of life cherished by Westerners, the American West is where the action is. These are some reasons why:

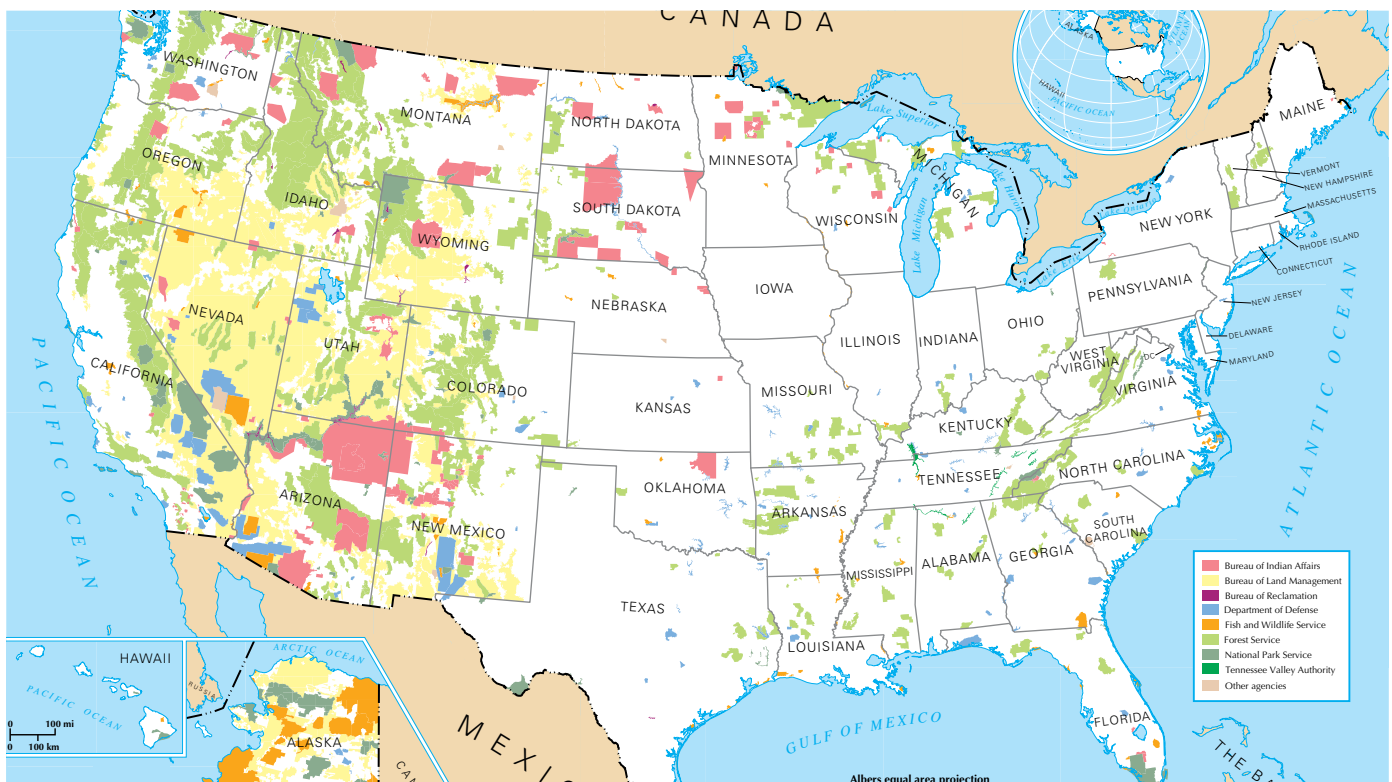
- **High ecologic value.** Outside Alaska, the interior West was the last region of the United States to be settled and developed. While by no means uniformly pristine, the American West remains relatively intact ecologically. Large swaths of public land and large expanses of private range and timberlands are the best hope for saving and restoring rare wildlife, especially in the emerging era of global warming. Although certainly dammed and diverted, Western rivers flow more freely and the air and water are often cleaner than in more industrialized portions of America. In much of the West, arid climates and rugged topography have prevented the wholesale conversion to agriculture that prevails in the Midwest and Great Plains.
- **Disproportionate political influence.** For several reasons, the environmental policies of the United States are disproportionately influenced by politics of the 11 Western states. By giving each state two votes in the U.S. Senate, the Constitution equalizes states of large and small populations. As a result, Wyoming,



with 1/80 the population of New York, has equal power to the Empire State in the Senate. Key Western lawmakers are powerful gatekeepers on natural resources and energy issues. In recent decades, the majority of the Secretaries of the Interior have come from the West, including people like Stewart Udall, Cecil Andrus, James Watt, Bruce Babbitt and Gail Norton. Lawmakers from Western states make up roughly half of the House Committee on Natural Resources and Senate Natural Resource and Energy Committee, wielding influence far beyond their proportion of the national population.

- **Shifting political opportunity.** The West is in political flux. Although still largely conservative, the Rockies should no longer be seen as a conservative stronghold.³ According to demographer Bill Frey, only four Western states are solidly “red”—Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and Montana, and only California is solidly “blue.” The rest—Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico—are “purple.” Even red states, such as Montana, have recently elected Democrats with green inclinations, such as Gov. Brian Schweitzer and Sen. Jon Tester. Old guard blue-state conservatives who made careers baiting environmentalists, such as Sens. Larry

FEDERAL LANDS AND INDIAN RESERVATIONS



Source: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey



Craig, R-Idaho, and Conrad Burns, R-Mont., are out of office. Conversely, coloring California blue glosses over its vast rural and conservative inland that has produced anti-environmental lawmakers such as former Congressman Richard Pombo.

The West is important for conservation not just regionally, but nationally. Complicating matters, the demographics of the West change every day.

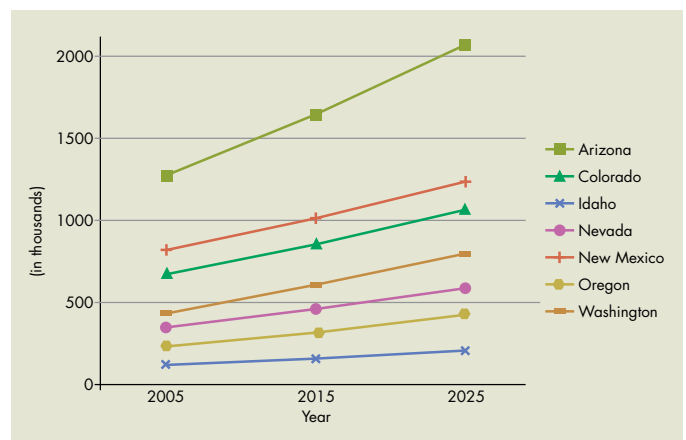
II.3 THE WEST OF TOMORROW

Because the West is a living place, it is a changing place. Demographers document several trends key to understanding the region's future.

- **The West is graying.** Baby boomers are aging nationwide, but that trend is pronounced in the rural West as retirees flock in and young people emigrate.⁴ Retirees are significant portions of newcomers not just in the “sun belt,” but also in rural and affordable places such as Idaho’s Panhandle, Washington’s Olympic Peninsula and communities on the Western Slope of Colorado. All Western states except California have seen the population of 55 to 65 year olds grow by more than 60 percent since 2000, far more than the rest of the country. The percentage of people over 65 will more than double in all of the Western states in the next 25 years.⁵
- **The West is growing more ethnically and culturally diverse.** Some pockets of the West such as northern Idaho and western Montana remain some of the most ethnically homogeneous areas of the United

States.⁶ However, that is increasingly the exception. Nationwide since 2000, the population of whites has grown 2 percent, the number of Hispanics has grown 32 percent and the number of Asians has grown 30 percent. Much of that change is playing out in the West.⁷ Five of 10 states with the greatest number of Hispanics are in the West, particularly California, Arizona and New Mexico. Twenty percent of people in Colorado and Arizona are Hispanic and 44 percent of New Mexico residents are Hispanic.⁸ The Pacific Coast states of Washington, Oregon and California (along with Hawaii) have the highest percentage of Asian-American voters.⁹ American Indian populations have grown by 18 percent in the last decade, with most living in the West, particularly New Mexico, Arizona, California and Washington.¹⁰

PROJECTED HISPANIC POPULATION IN WESTERN STATES



Source: U.S. Census, *Projected State Populations, by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995–2025*



- **The West is torn between demographic extremes.** While some communities of the West boom, others wither. The five fastest growing states from 1990 to 2000 were all in the West. Nevada topped them all with 66 percent growth that decade, but Idaho, Utah, Colorado and Arizona all grew by 30 to 40 percent.¹¹ But that growth is spread very unevenly. Fast-growing communities tend to be those in attractive natural settings, served by airports and telecommunications.¹² Other counties, sometimes just a few miles away, are seeing harder times. In Idaho, for example, Kootenai County grew by 55 percent over the 1990s, while immediately adjacent Shoshone County lost population in the same period. In Montana, Ravalli County boomed by 44 percent in the 1990s, while Garfield County lost 20 percent of its people.¹³
- **The economics of the rural West are changing—perhaps faster than perceptions.** Historically, the economic engine of the rural West was resource extraction—logging, ranching, farming, energy and mining. For decades now, those powerhouses have become relatively less important, accounting for less than 10 percent of personal income in the rural West.¹⁴ Meanwhile, professional, technology, light industry and service sectors have increasingly dominated. But there are important caveats. The current high prices for minerals, energy and food have given traditional extraction sectors renewed vitality in some places. The energy boom is sweeping over much of Wyoming, particularly places like Sublette and Campbell counties.¹⁵ Overall, energy, mining and agriculture are a relatively small piece of the pie, but in some places may be all the pie there is. At the same time, cowboys, loggers and miners continue to be enduring Western archetypes.

- **The West is urbanizing.** Like the rest of the world, Westerners are trading open spaces for urbanization. Western cities like Boise, Las Vegas and Phoenix are among the fastest growing cities in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, four of the five fastest growing U.S. cities between 2000 and 2006 were in the West. Of the 50 fastest growing U.S. cities of that period, 23 were in the West. Beyond the growth of the metro-West, the line that formerly separated urban and rural life is blurring. Many farm families (where they still exist) have at least one member of the household who commutes to work. Places like Meridian, Idaho, went from a sleepy farm town of 9,600 in 1990 to a Boise suburb of 60,000 by 2006. Places like Flathead and Ravalli counties in Montana have populations that would categorize them as nearly metropolitan (40,000 to 100,000 people) but with 65 to 80 percent of the population living outside any city limits. The very definition of what is “country” and what is “city” is blurred as exurban growth takes over forests and fields, but often without the accompanying urban infrastructure.

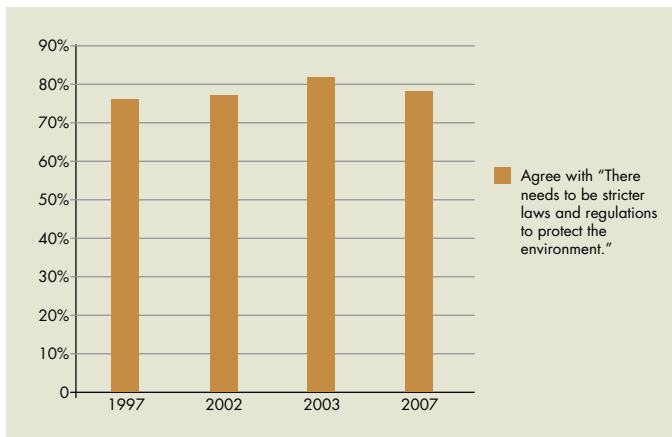
With all that’s changing in the rural West and all that’s at stake, conservationists need to understand the complexities of the communities they work in—and the views and concerns of the people who live there.

Part III: The Case for Strategic Conservation



Polls confirm that conservation—the sustainable stewardship of land, air, water and wildlife—is a mainstream American ethic. A 2007 survey from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 83 percent of Americans supported stricter rules protecting the environment. That is similar to a 2005 Pew poll where 77 percent agreed that “America should do whatever it takes to protect the environment,” with 66 percent agreeing strongly with that statement. Fewer than a quarter of voters agreed with the alternative, “America has gone too far protecting the environment.”

AMERICANS SUPPORTING PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT



The poll asked adults nationwide, “Please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it or completely disagree with it... There needs to be stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment.” Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

Unfortunately, out West it often proves difficult to translate that support into real change. Understanding change—and people’s reaction to it—is key to advancing conservation. Understanding the core beliefs and values that are the foundation of opinion is likewise critical.

The strongest, most durable conservation comes not only from legal edicts, but also from the hearts and minds of the people who will be affected by those edicts every day. Decisions that impact land, air and water are felt deep and wide in the lives of rural Westerners. Conservationists don’t succeed in the West or in Congress without a thorough understanding of the people who live here and the changes unfolding around them. That means knowing your neighbors—not just their demographic makeup, but their experiences, values and concerns.

“Social movements rise or fall on how well they reflect the public’s values and appetite for change.”

—John Russonello
Beldon, Russonello and Stewart



To succeed, today’s conservationists need to take a clear-eyed look at both their strengths and weaknesses. Our strength is that we share with rural Westerners a passion for clean water, clean air, healthy ecosystems and wildlife. Our weakness is that the decades of bitter fighting in the West has left environmentalism with damaged credibility and relevance, leaving it poorly positioned to tap into local support. However, by nurturing relationships, understanding local values, articulating threats and presenting solutions, conservationists can overcome those challenges. The result can be not just short-term victories, but durable conservation solutions for decades to come.

III.1 INTO THE DIVIDE— LOVING THE ENVIRONMENT, LEERY OF ENVIRONMENTALISTS

Simply put, environmentalists have an image problem.

“Voters have a preconceived notion of an ‘environmentalist’ as a grungy radical college kid who knocks on the door with a petition at dinnertime,” said Lori Weigel of Public Opinion Strategies.

Rick Johnson, director of the Idaho Conservation League, said his staff and volunteers feel that resentment against environmentalists in rural communities as they address a host of conservation issues, from stopping pollution to protecting national forests.

“How can I walk into the Idaho Legislature and have a coherent conversation about anything when I am hated? You don’t get anything done.”

Despite Americans’ support of environmental protection, polls suggest people nationwide are increasingly skeptical of “environmentalists.” In 1991, Gallup asked Americans if they consider themselves an environmentalist. That year, 80 percent of Americans self-identified as environmentalists. By 2007, fewer than half did.

David Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates pointed out that Americans are skeptical, even cynical, about all kinds of institutions—from business to government to environmental groups.

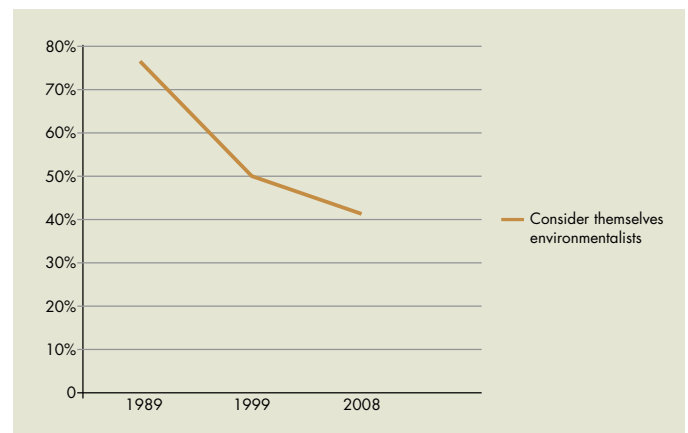
“Speaking broadly, I think it stems from a kind of feeling of helplessness on many fronts that pervades how people view the world right now,” Metz said.

John Russonello of Beldon, Russonello and Stewart said that skepticism is reinforced in the West by a history dating back to homestead swindles and pillaging mining companies.

“Outside groups are not generally welcomed in the West,” Russonello said. “There is skepticism of any outside group, large or small. The history of the West is a history of being shafted by outside institutions.”

Kevin Kirchner of MacWilliams, Kirchner, Sanders and Partners said stories about environmentalists’ confrontational tactics reinforce the radical reputation.

AMERICANS DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM ENVIRONMENTALISTS



The poll asked adults nationwide, “Do you consider yourself an environmentalist or not?” Source: Gallup Poll, 1989 and 1999; ABC News Poll, 2008.



“The stories of tree spiking, lawsuits and people perched in redwoods, get portrayed in the press and they stick in people’s minds,” he said.

Russonello agreed environmentalists make plump targets, but can overcome native skepticism.

“Environmentalism is no longer a movement, as it was in the 1970s,” Russonello said. “It’s about practical, everyday decisions that lead to a healthier, safer, cleaner and more beautiful existence. Once, environmentalism was new and struggling to be accepted. Now, everyone accepts it. It has lost its meaning because everyone believes it.”

“We are in a new era,” he said.

III.2 CREDIBILITY AND RELEVANCE

Pollsters have repeatedly found that calling oneself a “conservationist” instead of “environmentalist” earns a 10 to 15 percent bump in the polls. Indeed, many environmental groups now shy away from the term “environmentalism” and instead embrace “conservation.”

Yet that short-term solution misses the root of the problem.

Whether you call yourself a conservationist or an environmentalist, you will likely fail to meet your goals if you ignore two fundamental questions:

Who says?

So what?

Without credibility, the best, most finely tuned message is useless. If seen as irrelevant, our issues are quickly crowded out by more pressing matters.

“The challenge in conservation is always making our issues relevant to people,” said Weigel. “People think, ‘How does this issue affect me?’ That is what people ask first. That is the lens through which they see *everything*.”

“The message cannot be conservation for conservation’s sake or you are just talking to your base,” she said. “Messages

VALUES

The key that opens hearts and minds

Primary values

- Family/personal security
- Personal responsibility
- Personal liberty
- Honesty/integrity
- Fairness/equality

Secondary values

- Care for others
- Stewardship
- Personal fulfillment
- Respect for authority
- Love of country or culture

that relate to people are the ones that come out on top, again and again.”

Weigel noted the public grew more supportive of stopping global warming when environmentalists shifted the topic to droughts, violent storms and forest fires near their homes, rather than melting ice caps and polar bears at the ends of the Earth.

Decades of social science research tell us that voters vote in ways that reflect their core values, such as prosperity, family, freedom, community, patriotism and spirituality. Love of nature and responsibility to be good stewards enter that mix of values, but generally on a lower tier. Researchers also tell us voters are weary of ideological squabbles and hungry for solutions.

“People think environmentalists do good work, they are just impractical,” said Russonello. “Environmentalists are seen as people who look at an issue from an ideological perspective. Whereas voters may think, ‘What is good for our community? In this particular instance, what makes the most sense?’ People are skeptical of ideology.”

Protecting a wetland for abstractions such as preserving an “ecosystem,” or promoting “biodiversity” is perceived as ideological; protecting the same wetland to filter clean



water or provide waterfowl for hunting is considered practical. That is the essence of the perception of “environmentalism” as opposed to the perception of “conservation.”

“The brand ‘conservation’ has not been tarnished so much,” said Kirchner. “But if all we do is just switch labels, without changing strategies and rhetoric, we will end up in exactly the same place in three to four years or so. The label matters, but it’s not just the label that matters.”

“Messages that relate to people are the ones that come out on top, again and again.”

– Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies

Several years of polling and field experience across the West indicate over and over again that “environmentalists” enjoy only low-to-medium credibility with voters. Without credible spokespeople, the most finely tuned message is useless. While polls vary, Resource Media has reviewed a number of polls from the West that show repeatedly that voters are generally more likely to trust local park rangers, scientists, hunters and anglers, farmers and ranchers, and health care professionals. The irony is many of these trusted people are, at heart, environmentalists. It’s our job to give them a voice.

III.3 DAVID OR GOLIATH?

Conservationists understandably view themselves as underdogs—as Davids bravely standing up to political and corporate Goliaths. Indeed, when comparing the budgets of some neighborhood conservation groups to the record profits of, say, ExxonMobil, the David and Goliath metaphor seems apt. But from the perspective of rural Westerners,

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WORK TODAY

From 1999 to 2007, Tracy Stone-Manning served as director of the Clark Fork Coalition, a group that had secured \$120 million in federal money to clean up the country’s largest Superfund site, in Montana’s Clark Fork Drainage. She noted that to succeed, she, as well as Coalition members and funders, had to shelve their long-held distrust of the beef industry. Some environmentalists remain deeply lodged in a battle mentality, entrenched against a well-defined enemy.

“It’s heady and intoxicating, but it’s a hangover of the past,” she said. “I can think of very rare cases where that is effective. It’s a different kind of work now.”

“Our issues are not only environmental issues, they are community issues. And when the community owns it, you win it,” she said.



environmentalists can seem like ill-tempered giants in their own right.

In fact, environmentalists are powerful and rural Westerners know it. After all, they watched as environmentalists helped bring about the return of the wolf in the northern Rockies and the fall of logging programs across national forests—defeating traditionally powerful ranching and timber industries. News coverage about conservation deals involving hundreds of millions of dollars is not unheard of.

When rural California Congressman Richard Pombo lost reelection in 2006, he played David, blaming the loss on the environmental political action committees that targeted him with negative ads. “They dumped a million dollars on my head,” he told one reporter. “What could I do?”

The trouble with having power is that it’s easy to come across as a bully or worse. It is up to those of us within the environmental community to make sure we are seen not as a power-hungry giant but as an effective champion of the public interest.

III.4 WHY LOCAL?

Environmental groups that engage locally in dedicated, thoughtful ways have achieved great advances—advances that build political capital instead of burn it.

“It’s a big ideological shift for the environmental community,” said Chris Wood, chief operating officer of Trout Unlimited. “We should not keep looking for top down political solutions. The more answers we can offer that come away from San Francisco or Washington, D.C., the better, more durable the protection will be over the long haul.”

Environmentalists have the training and time to think abstractly about the land, water and wildlife—to seek out the big picture, said Russonello. Trouble is, he said, most folks do not relate to the natural world that way.

“It’s difficult to nationalize environmental issues because people relate to them in a local way,” he said. “The environment is never a big issue in presidential races not because people don’t care about it, but because people don’t relate to it in a national way. To them, it’s very local.”

People see the environment as the water they drink, the air they breathe and the places they enjoy on weekends. Likewise, people tend to side with people they know, like and trust.

“If you ask people who they trust, it very often boils down to things that are very local. This is perhaps even more pronounced in small communities,” said Metz. “These folks like having scenery and clean water, too. They know that if we are not careful, we can screw things up.”

There are also practical, mechanical reasons that make organizing at the local level potentially effective:

- **Local decision-makers wield real power.** While still often very challenging, it’s far simpler to win over two or three county commissioners to make a local law than win over 218 Congressmen, 51 Senators and the President to create a federal one. Other local governing bodies hold significant power as well; soil conservation districts, for example, have broad authority to take steps to prevent soil erosion and protect waterways. Wildlife and fisheries management are directed by fish and wildlife commissions, appointed by governors and most responsive to in-state wildlife interests. As species move off the federal endangered species list, conservationists’ relationships with state wildlife agencies grow more important. Wood noted that important decisions in agencies like the Forest Service are often in the hands of local district rangers.



- **While still hotly charged and hard fought, local politics are often less partisan than national and state politics.** Some local elected officials, such as city council members, do not run under any partisan label. Partisanship can be a major obstacle to building alliances. Even where local races are partisan, voters who are staunchly Republican in national races may elect Democrats to represent them in local seats, and vice versa. For example, Lincoln County, deep in Montana’s timber country, voted for Bush three to one in 2004, yet filled two of the three county commission seats with Democrats.
- **Local strength can be the foundation for state and federal strength.** Russonello pointed out that the Christian Right rose to influence in the 1980s to 2000 not by stepping into the White House and U.S. Supreme Court directly, but by cashing in on long-term investments at the grassroots. They ran people for local school boards and city councils, grooming future political leaders and building a political infrastructure that paid off decades later with power far beyond their numbers. When global warming activists faced brick walls in Washington, D.C. during the Bush Administration, they switched focus to state and local governments and made progress until they could capture the attention of Congress.

People generally have higher regard for local government agents and agencies than the federal government and are also much more likely to interact with local government than distant federal entities, say researchers like Weigel. Likewise, she says, rural voters often feel doubly alienated, from the distant federal government and from the dominant urban culture that seems not to understand their culture and concerns.

Furthermore, people tend to relate to the land, water, wildlife and air from a localized perspective. When trying to engage conservation at the national level, these are all liabilities. But when engaging conservation locally, they become strengths.

When put all together—finding shared values, building credibility and working locally—the opportunities clearly outweigh the challenges. These are the building blocks of strategic conservation at work.

“The more answers we can offer that come away from San Francisco or Washington, D.C., the better, more durable the protection will be over the long haul.”

– Chris Wood, Trout Unlimited

Part IV: The Seven Principles of Strategic Conservation



WHAT IS STRATEGIC CONSERVATION?

Strategic conservation isn't simply a blueprint for conducting a conservation campaign. Instead, it's a mindset that shapes all elements of conservation work. It emerges from a conservation culture with vision, savvy, an understanding of how politics works, humility and the dedication to succeed.

Strategic conservation organizations see themselves as part of a larger community and understand their success depends on public support. They have the perspective to understand that winning a courtroom victory or publishing a devastating op-ed is only a temporary triumph if it erodes popular support for the larger goal.

Strategic conservationists understand it is good strategy—not a cop-out—to listen to critics and to find common ground. It is a sign of strategic thinking—not political cowardice—to focus discussions where values overlap, rather than focus on ideological divides.

Resource Media distilled the following seven principles of strategic conservation from our years of fieldwork throughout the rural West, coupled with extensive interviews with leading public opinion researchers, elected officials and conservation leaders.

These principles are built on a foundation of local values, alliances and voices. This can open doors to opportunity that might otherwise be locked.

For each principle, we've included a case study of one of our conservation partners that illustrates the principle in action.

Strategic Conservation: The Seven Principles

- **Be Pragmatic**
- **Listen First**
- **Build Local Alliances**
- **Speak “Local”**
- **Raise Authentic Voices**
- **Apply Appropriate Technology and Tactics**
- **See the Big Picture**



CORE VALUES—BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMMUNICATION

Core values are the bedrock of opinion and should be the foundation of every conservation campaign's message.

For Americans, primary core values include security, prosperity, responsibility, freedom, integrity and fairness.

Secondary core values include caring for others, stewardship, personal fulfillment, respect for authority and love of country or culture. People are often willing to endure great sacrifice, even risking their own lives, to protect their core values.

Conservation campaigns that win in the court of law may lose in the court of public opinion if they fail to connect to core values.

Consider the common frame of jobs versus the environment. That frame stacks environmental concerns against the security of families, the prosperity of communities and the freedom of

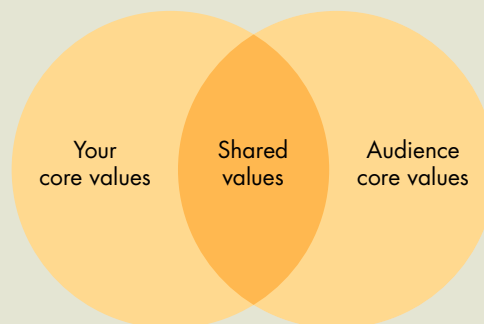
people to live their own lives. People will side with those core values every time. When environmentalists convincingly frame their story as a benefit to security, prosperity and freedom, momentum shifts to their side.

In strategic communications, you speak to the heart first, the head second. Speaking to core values helps unlock people's hearts so they will be receptive to the facts you present.

An effective message starts with shared core values. It presents a credible threat to those values and shows the way to a commonsense solution to that threat.

The key to success is to understand your audience and speak to their core values. Find the places where environmental efforts complement core values. Focus the discussion there and make incremental steps forward.

VALUES-BASED MESSAGING





PRINCIPLE 1. BE PRAGMATIC

Success requires seeing a campaign through to its conclusion. There is no substitute for hard work and tenacity. Idealistic goals are fine, but political pragmatism leads to real success.

Strategic conservationists have an ideology, but understand most people are not ideological. They know that real progress often comes in small increments that move you toward your goal without compromising values or your ability to advance further later on.

The Wild Sky Wilderness case study below demonstrates this principle, as well as the importance of understanding the reality of decision-making within the democratic process.



Case Study: Washington's Wild Sky Wilderness

The northern Cascade Range of Washington State is cloaked in protected wilderness areas, but much of this already-protected wilderness is near or above the rugged tree line.

In 2008, the million-acre complex of wilderness areas centered on Glacier Peak got a bold new addition: the 106,000-acre Wild Sky Wilderness focused not on alpine terrain, but on the lush forests near the river bottoms. The decade-long campaign to protect the Wild Sky illustrates the power of a campaign that has an idealistic, science-based vision, coupled with a pragmatic path to success.

"From the beginning, the theme of the Wild Sky was the need to fully protect low elevation land," said Doug Scott of the Seattle-based Campaign for America's Wilderness.

The vast Cascades wilderness complex supports a variety of wildlife species, but the low elevations are particularly productive and relatively intact lowland forests are quite rare.

Scott, who has been involved in wilderness protection since the 1960s, said Washington State groups such as the Washington Wilderness Coalition, the Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society, along with Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Rick Larsen, showed their political smarts when advocating for the Wild Sky.

Even before the bill was introduced, conservationists and congressional staffers listened to and addressed the concerns of the local public and the Forest Service. Conservationists gave up some areas popular with snowmobile riders, as well as some land where the agency had concerns over road easements, mountaintop radio transmitters and lookout towers. Wilderness advocates also stretched to address concerns of boy scouts, mountain bikers, horseback riders and floatplane pilots.

That pragmatism earned the support of 100 businesses and 70 local elected leaders in rural parts of the Cascades, and in small towns like Index and Monroe. As a result, there was no way remaining opponents could characterize the bill as the work of "outside" Seattle interests.

"The proof of the pudding was in the initial Senate hearing," Scott recalled. "It was a love-fest. Even conservative senators were stepping all over themselves to say, 'this is the right way to prepare a wilderness proposal.'"

This carefully built foundation supported the legislation for six raucous years in Congress. Powerful anti-wilderness crusaders in the House of Representatives targeted the bill, holding up action for six years, but failing to do damage to the proposal itself. Through those disputes, wilderness advocates rejected proposals to weaken protections for or remove ecologically important lands. They were willing to make small compromises early on, but not gut the bill or weaken the Wilderness Act.



“There were seasoned wilderness veterans behind this bill,” Scott said. “They knew the country like the back of their hand. They were not about to be buffaloed.”

Scott noted that some wilderness advocates envision sweeping, multi-state wilderness proposals that are politically dead on arrival in Congress. In-state support from the congressional delegation is key to any successful wilderness bill, he said.

“You cannot roll over members of Congress and their home states. There is simply nothing in this history that comes close to justifying that idea,” he said. Furthermore, top-down wilderness breeds bottomless resentment, whereas grassroots support is enduring and priceless.

“It is not in our interest to have wilderness systems made up of areas that have been forced upon unwilling local communities,” Scott said. “That’s a recipe for endless hostilities. We want local support for these areas, not resentment. We’re building for the future here.”

What went right?

Wilderness advocates had a scientifically driven goal, and a pragmatic path to get there. They addressed legitimate community concerns, while sticking to their ideals and larger goals. The local community could relate to the scale of the area they wanted to conserve and the reasons for protecting it. Conservationists built a broad coalition of rural support, rather than attempting to rally urban clout to “roll the locals.”

PRINCIPLE 2. LISTEN FIRST

Good conservation policy is guided by sound science. However, implementing policy in modern democracies is not solely a matter of presenting data and facts according to objective logic. In politics, you must speak to the heart first, the head second. And before you speak, you need to listen.

Polling and focus groups are powerful modern listening tools, but being a good objective listener is also an everyday practice. Listening means letting go of assumptions so you can better understand the community you work in, who they trust, what they care about and what messages and facts move them.

Effective conservationists know how to listen. They not only value and understand modern tools of public opinion research; they also empathize with their neighbors, local businesspeople, property owners and other community members, even when they disagree on certain issues. They want to understand what people value and find areas of common agreement. They listen with and speak to the heart.



Case Study: Protecting Rosebud County, Montana

Poor, conservative and remote, Rosebud County, Mont., seems an unlikely place for an environmental landslide. Yet that’s what happened here in 2004.

Fewer than 10,000 people live in this arid, 5,000-square-mile county in southeastern Montana. The place is most noted for a battle in the Plains Indian Wars in 1876. Like



most of eastern Montana, Rosebud County leans Republican, is heavily dependent on agriculture and is economically distressed. The county's population is about two-thirds white and one-third American Indian; most of the Indians live on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The average per capita income is \$15,000 and one in five children lives below the poverty line.

In 2004, the American West was in the midst of an energy boom and conservationists worried about what it meant for land, wildlife and water. One thing was clear: economic and political pressure was mounting to extract energy as quickly and cheaply as possible, pushing costs like water pollution onto local communities. So local conservationists, led by farmers and ranchers affiliated with the Northern Plains Resource Council, took local action.

Rosebud County was in line for exploitation by energy companies seeking coal bed methane. Drilling to the south in Wyoming had shown how tapping these gas reserves produced a byproduct of salty water spilling to the surface, polluting streams and fragile soils.

Conservationists sought to tap the authority of the local Conservation District to stand up to the energy companies. In theory, the district had the authority to restrict energy development. But there was a caveat: such authority had to be approved in a public vote.

Supporters made the simple case that clean water was fundamental to the prosperity of farms, towns and families. Rather than oppose the energy developers altogether, supporters of the measure instead insisted that energy development occur on local terms.

The campaign focused on core values, the bedrock of local sensibilities: family, community and local determination. Conservationists wove those values into everything from outreach materials to the wording on the ballot.

Northern Plains Resource Council also worked hard to get out the vote on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, where general election voting is often low.

That Election Day in Rosebud County, President Bush defeated John Kerry 55 to 45 percent. But those same voters passed the new regulations protecting water and soil 80 to 20 percent.

What went right?

Conservationists left ideology and complexities behind. They framed the story simply around community values of self-determination, prosperity and clean water—values that resonated with the local community. They communicated those values and messages consistently in all of their outreach materials. They pursued reasonable controls, seeking a balance and not a ban. They were perceived as reasonable problem-solvers who understood the needs of the community, not as outsiders with an “unreasonable” plan.



PRINCIPLE 3. BUILD LOCAL ALLIANCES

In conservative rural communities, alliances are critical to both short-term and long-term results. In the short term, they are the only way to show broad-based public support that moves decision-makers. In the long term, alliances are key to building the credibility that environmentalists too often lack. Fact is, we are often judged by the company we keep.

Building alliances takes time and comes only from listening and finding common areas of interest. There is no shortcut or substitute for strong alliances.



Case Study: Fighting Idaho's Proposition 2

Idaho, perhaps the most crimson of the red states, is fertile ground for property rights, rugged individualism, and skepticism of government.

So how did conservationists pull off one of the biggest political surprises of 2006, demolishing a libertarian ballot measure that earlier boasted more than 60 percent support?

In 2006, Proposition 2 appeared on the ballot, a copycat initiative similar to an anti-planning, anti-government measure that had swept across Oregon. In short, Prop 2 required taxpayers to pay property owners the “lost value” of land affected by government regulation.

The language was sinister in its simplicity. It sounded like simple fairness, but the end result would be to render all efforts to guide new growth and development meaning-

less. Indeed, early polls showed that Idaho voters supported the measure by more than 60 percent. Some observers figured Idaho was a lost cause.

But public opinion research revealed Prop 2's weak spot: Idahoans were leery of giving up local community control, especially when they learned the proposition was funded by a New York real estate developer named Howie Rich.

Conservationists knew that the state's small conservation community couldn't go it alone. Brick-by-brick, conservationists started the hard work of building a coalition of Idahoans who would reject Prop 2 as too extreme. Leaders from the Idaho Conservation League created a political spin-off, Neighbors Protecting Idaho. The list of allies grew: Idaho Chamber of Commerce, Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, Idaho Association of Cities and Towns, Idaho Association of Realtors, Idaho Forest Owners Association, along with fellow conservation groups including Idaho Smart Growth Coalition, Greater Yellowstone Coalition and the Nature Conservancy. Local mayors, county commissioners and the governor joined the chorus.

“I've seen strong coalitions put together before, but I've never seen one, I think, quite as diverse as this group,” said then-Gov. Jim Risch to the Idaho Statesman. “They have all come together to say that this is a bad idea for Idaho.”

Final results eclipsed even the most optimistic poll results. Prop 2 went down 76 to 24 percent.



What went right?

Conservationists used public opinion research to understand local voters' concerns and perceptions. They built a broad coalition. They did not seek individual credit for the work but put the campaign first. They told an effective story, centered on "black hat" outsider, New York developer, Howie Rich. Instead of discussing the mechanics of planning, they focused on the negative impact of Prop 2, which would muzzle local voices and handcuff communities large and small.

PRINCIPLE 4. SPEAK "LOCAL"

Good communications means using everyday language, short sentences and vivid nouns and verbs. Get rid of acronyms and jargon.

Over the years, David Metz has developed a list of environmentalists' jargon that leaves people baffled or annoyed, along with words that hit home. Instead of "the environment," talk about local lakes and rivers. Instead of "biodiversity" or "ecosystems," talk about favorite local areas and cherished local wildlife.

"Strategic communications requires taking complicated, nuanced issues and simplifying them—presenting them honestly, but in black-and-white," Metz noted. "A lot of progressives find that distasteful, as if it's cheating. But the fact is, in today's world we have a 10-second window to get people's attention and engage. It's that or be ignored."

Good messaging requires ruthless editing. Always ask: Is there a simpler way to say this? Can we replace every long word with a shorter one? Remember Tom Paine, the pamphleteer of the American Revolution. He wrote *Common Sense* with the goal of being so clear "even those who can barely read will understand."

Simplifying your language respects the fact that your busy audience is barraged by thousands of messages every day. And simple statements are naturally more compelling. Love songs aren't complicated—they're simple and direct. Complexity may tickle our intellect, but simplicity speaks to the heart *and* to the head.

Using simple language, strategic conservationists tell compelling stories with clear victims, heroes and villains. They edit ruthlessly and are dedicated to 100 percent accuracy. They are fluent in environmental jargon, but can also speak in everyday terms without condescending.



Case Study: Milltown Dam Removal

In the spring of 2008, a trout outfitted with a tiny tracking device did what no fish had done in a century. It swam from Montana's lower Clark Fork River to the Big Blackfoot, a river made famous by the film, *A River Runs Through It*.

That fish was able to do so because conservationists had advocated successfully for removal of a 100-year-old barrier, the Milltown Dam. When a local letter-to-the-editor in the late 1980s first proposed taking down the obsolete dam, the idea was dismissed as radical. Now, after 25 years of hard work, the dam was history.

"It was the kind of problem that could only be solved if everyone was on board," said Missoula conservationist Bruce Farling, who penned that letter. "The people led and the politicians followed."

In the 1980s, the Clark Fork Coalition started pondering the idea of tearing down the Milltown Dam and hauling away tons of mining waste that had settled in the reservoir. They wanted a plan through Superfund to have the Atlantic Richfield Company, which was responsible for the waste, pay for cleanup. The idea took root with decision-making agencies when in 1996 river ice threatened to crush the dam and send catastrophic amounts of pollution into the river. The Coalition's base liked the idea of removal because it would protect local drinking water, lead to a healthier river and improve trout fishing.

Certainly, environmentally concerned individuals and fishermen constitute a solid base of support in an outdoorsy college town like Missoula. But conservationists knew they would need broader support to win statewide.

Potential supporters included residents of the riverside town of Bonner, where mine waste tainted wells. Since the tons of arsenic- and metals-laced waste lodged behind the dam posed a very real risk if a flood caused a dam breach, downstream community leaders were important potential allies. Enlisting a key Republican county commissioner led to the support of the Republican governor and senator.

What's more, tearing down the dam and cleaning up the sediment translated to blue-collar jobs and associated spending. Business leaders such as Missoula industrialist Dennis Washington saw the appeal.

Step by step, the Clark Fork Coalition used simple language to broaden its appeal to undecided observers—with the core message that removing the Milltown Dam would make drinking water safe, safeguard downstream communities and create good-paying jobs. Benefits to fishing and river ecology were a plus. This message expanded the environmental base to include supporters on both sides of the political aisle.

This tide could not be resisted. In 2008, the dam was breached and the fabled waters of the Big Blackfoot once again run free.

What went right?

Conservationists had a bold vision that translated to a clear goal. They framed it in terms the local community found compelling: protect water quality, safeguard downstream communities and create jobs. They worked hard for years, systematically building support from across the local and statewide political spectrums.



PRINCIPLE 5. RAISE AUTHENTIC VOICES

To succeed, conservationists must be known, trusted and liked. Campaigns succeed when they have a “face” that’s familiar or that folks can instantly relate to. Generally, that boils down to someone local, who clearly has the community’s best interest at heart. Smart strategists don’t care about taking credit or getting quoted in the paper—they put that task in the hands of whomever is most effective.

To maximize credibility, the spokesperson must complement the message and audience. When addressing business owners, have a business owner speak. When addressing anglers, have an angler speak.

But spokespeople do not come from thin air. They come from relationships. Developing those relationships takes time and dedication to a community. There are no shortcuts and no substitutes.

Successful conservation organizations share the microphone and are content working in the background. The ancient Chinese leader Lao Tzu said, “A leader is great when he gets the people to do great things and in the end, they say, ‘we have done it for ourselves.’”



Case Study: Sportsmen and Ranchers Take on Bush Energy Policies

In 2002, the Bush Administration was giving the energy industry the keys to the kingdom—opening up public land in the American West for oil and gas development. Oil and gas drillers swept across remote, sparsely populated portions of states like Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah. Energy

prices were climbing and the Bush Administration cloaked drilling in the patriotic bunting of “energy independence.” Watchdog groups struggled, looking for ways to make the issue relevant.

Part of the answer came from giving voice to local spokespeople.

Trout Unlimited worked with Resource Media to recruit a panel of unlikely critics of President Bush’s energy policies: Western Republicans from the very regions seeing the most development. Specifically, they were hunters and anglers, gun-rights advocates wearing blue jeans with hip pockets worn by tobacco-can rings. They spoke to a packed house at the National Press Club. Reporters called the group the Magnificent Seven after the heroes of Western films, and the “gun rack pack.”

This was the opening salvo in a broad campaign to engage sportsmen as leading spokespeople to counter Bush energy policies on public lands in places like Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming. In Wyoming, for example, sportsmen spear-headed efforts to set the Wyoming Range off-limits to drilling, calling themselves “Mother Nature’s Bodyguards.” Sportsmen made effective spokespeople both in local coffee shops and the national Capitol.

The tactics spread to other groups and campaigns and the drumbeat of hunters upset over energy development took on a life of its own. The “gun rack pack” forced the Bush Administration into its first tactical retreat on the issue, building the storyline that President Bush was out of touch and going too far.

By 2006, hunters and anglers were flexing their muscle and showing results on the ground.

Hunters and anglers upset over the prospect of destroying elk habitat in New Mexico’s Valle Vidal secured a bill setting the 102,000 acres off-limits to drilling. Sportsmen’s pressure was key to moving Republican Sen. Pete Domenici to a pro-conservation position.



Meanwhile, hunters joined with ranchers to protect Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. Also in 2006, Sen. Conrad Burns, a Republican, sponsored legislation retiring energy leases on this prime wildlife habitat, an area Burns earlier supported developing. In both states, the New Mexico and Montana Wildlife Federations, made up primarily of hunters and anglers, played key roles.

It's worth noting that Democratic governors who have recently won in formerly "red" states have done so in part by promoting their love of hunting and fishing. In Colorado, Gov. Ritter never passes up an opportunity to talk about his love of fishing. In Montana, Gov. Schweitzer carries a spent rifle cartridge in his pocket, and has shown off new guns while meeting with local newspaper editorial boards.

What went right?

Conservationists gave voice to a group of people who had been ignored—hunters and anglers. These people happened to be important constituents of the Bush Administration. Conservationists worked with hunters, ranchers and anglers to put a human face on the damage being done to public land by the administration's energy policy.

PRINCIPLE 6. APPLY APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY AND TACTICS

In some rural communities, the bulletin board at the local mercantile may be the best-read mass media. A slick full-page advertisement in the local newspaper may catch eyes, but may not seem grassroots unless carefully crafted. Online tools and email networks may be great for reaching the base of supporters, but may be less apt for reaching undecided and swing voters. In small communities, never underestimate the power of word-of-mouth communications.



Case Study: Oregon's BLM Logging Plan

The timber towns of the Oregon Cascades—places like Roseburg and Albany—are tough turf for environmentalists talking about curbing logging. For decades, the towns have been steeped in controversy about spotted owls.

Yet the Bush Administration took aim at logging even more ancient forests, rolling back protections on 2.5 million acres of Bureau of Land Management forests. Trout Unlimited and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers sought out a new angle.

In particular, scientists indicated that the Bush plan was not only bad for threatened owls, it would destroy habitat for "freezer species" like elk and steelhead. The conservationists had a fresh angle, and sought tactics to make the most of it.

BHA and Trout Unlimited self-published a report outlining the impacts the Bush plan would have on Oregon hunting and fishing traditions. The report was stocked



with photos and quotes from dyed-in-the-wool Oregon outdoors people. They didn't focus on stopping logging, but rather on *maintaining* current habitat protections. Several other Oregon hunting and fishing groups also signed onto the report.

Not content with simply approaching the city paper in Portland, conservationist Mike Beagle pitched the report to rural papers in the heart of timber country—including Roseburg and Albany. And instead of simply pitching it as “hard news,” he also framed it as an outdoor page story.

Beagle's tactics fused a compelling message with credible messengers, allowing a conservation message to resonate in media markets that were previously closed or even hostile. News coverage critical of logging in these markets is particularly potent because it is unexpected.

Different communities have different media infrastructures. Many areas in the rural West, particularly Indian Reservations, are in “media holes” where they get very little attention from traditional news outlets. Today's trends of consolidated media ownership and reduced newsroom staff compound this.

Finding the right media for a given campaign, including news alternatives such as local blogs, bulletin boards or feature pages, is key to reaching rural audiences.

What went right?

By stepping out of the standard news frame and using local voices, conservationists were able to tap into markets that might otherwise be hostile. Small local markets and specialty markets can be far more valuable for a campaign than a banner headline in the *New York Times*.

PRINCIPLE 7. SEE THE BIG PICTURE

If you just want to win a lawsuit, hire a good lawyer. Winning hearts and minds requires a larger vision.

When making tactical decisions, study the payoffs. Remember that victories as well as losses carry costs. Will fighting for a small victory today put you in a better, or worse, position to win a larger victory tomorrow? How will your tactical decisions impact your allies working on conservation from another angle, or allies you may need for different campaigns?



Case Study: Protecting the Sierra

With his grey beard and intense demeanor, Craig Thomas is a veteran of the Timber Wars. He knows the biology of the spotted owl. He was hanged in effigy in timber towns of California's Sierra Nevada.

Thomas still stands up for endangered species. Yet he also spends part of his time figuring out ways to get logs to sawmills, and help businesses profit from wood products cut from national forests. The director of the Sierra Forest Legacy in Sacramento, Thomas says his view of the world has remained steady, as his tactics have shifted.

“My intensity hasn't lessened, but it has broadened,” said Thomas. “I am very interested in exploring what ‘yes’ means, while reserving the right to say ‘no.’ We environmentalists know how to say ‘no’ better than anyone on Earth. We don't have a lot of experience in how to say ‘yes.’”

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Forest Service was bent on clearcut logging. Over time, environmentalists fought the



agency both in court and in Congress. Logging levels dropped dramatically. As mills closed, tempers in small timber towns grew hot.

In the midst of the conservation victories, Thomas noticed something: Sometimes his critics made a good point.

For example, one of Thomas's goals is to protect habitat for an endangered forest weasel called the fisher. One of the problems facing fishers is too much logging. But another is that unnaturally crowded forests fuel unnaturally large forest fires.

"We do not want the fisher to get logged to death, but we don't want it to burn up, either." Thomas saw a need to cut small, flammable trees, just as he sees the need to leave larger, more fire-resistant trees standing.

"We felt we had to break the gridlock from our end," he said. "There was work that needed to be done."

While sticking to his guns of protecting habitat, Thomas's group now invests in time in the field, working on forest thinning plans that provide wood fiber, but leave the forest intact, or even healthier than before.

In doing so, Sierra Forest Legacy has worked with businesses such as a greenhouse that grows organic tomatoes and is heated with renewable wood chips instead of propane. It has worked to find economic ways to get small logs to mills that need them. It has helped plan forest-thinning projects that protect rural communities from fire.

Thomas's willingness to sit down with industry and agency folks has drawn some criticism from the political left. In some ways, he said, such criticism was more difficult to take than being vilified during the Timber Wars. He still sees himself as something of a radical.

"Radical isn't seeing how many projects we can stop. Radical is finding solutions that do not violate our principles. Do we play fair? Do we look for solutions? That's radical."

"It's scary every step of the way," Thomas said. "The pragmatic path involves taking some big risks. I prefer small, measured risks. But we make huge errors when we just hide out in the bunker."

What went right?

Sierra Forest Legacy learned and adapted as times changed, listening to critics, responding to the needs of local communities and promoting solutions in its messages. It elected to keep a low profile on polarizing issues, where possible, and addressed legitimate concerns of rural communities. It kept an open mind, acknowledging and adapting when critics made valid points.

Part V: Conclusion



CONCLUSION

The rural American West faces unprecedented environmental and social change. Population growth, demand for natural resources and global warming provide those of us working on conservation in the West with more challenges and opportunities than we can imagine. Squandering our time and resources on ineffective strategies or tired old tactics results in very real losses, with permanent consequences.

In Resource Media's work with a variety of conservation partners, we have found substantial areas of overlap between rural Western values and environmentalist values. We find these shared values even in places recently torn by highly contentious, deeply felt issues.

Until recently, Western environmental activists have spent too much time focusing on what divides us from rural Westerners. It's time to shift our focus to our shared values, time to leave past battles behind and build bridges to the future.

These bridges need to be two-way, based in trust and respect, with ideas flowing in both directions. Gaining

credibility and relevance is done campaign by campaign, through long, deliberate effort. That effort requires taking many small, pragmatic steps to reach the larger goals. It requires listening to the community, picking local issues and allies judiciously, giving voice to authentic spokespeople, using tactics and technologies that make sense locally, and always keeping an eye on the big picture. Credibility is difficult to gain, but very easy to lose.

All of this takes hard work. But when the work builds bridges that span ideological, political and social divides, the results will last far into the future.



Part VI: Endnotes

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