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Cultural Objections to the New West Economy

The rapid growth of jobs and population during the 1990s in the Mountain West, including Western Montana, would appear to put to rest the fear that the relative decline in our natural resource sectors was going to force us to choose between fleeing the region for sustenance or remaining here in a ghetto of unemployment and poverty, the proverbial new Appalachia. To be sure, incomes here are low, but no lower than in similar small cities and rural areas. So if we want a small city or rural lifestyle, we cannot do any better by moving on. Maybe that is why our population has grown, not declined.

But a focus on such economic facts seems to miss a quite different and still powerful cultural and environmental attack on the "New West" economy. That critique runs something like this: "Work, place and identity need to be fused if we are to have integral people, communities, and environments. For work is the primary way that we make a home in the world. The natural resource industries upon which we historically depended allowed us to make that home here based on our intimate knowledge of the landscapes we sought to inhabit and work as we built our livelihoods on those landscapes. The problem we now face is that links between landscape, work, identity, and community have been broken by the economic changes that have swept the region. Without those natural resource industries, we no longer need to know the natural world well enough to be able to extract a living from it. Our relationship with that natural world is now that of the distant observer contemplating scenic beauty or that of the grow-up child playing carelessly at our favorite recreational activity. Both of these seem trivial compared to the life-long and life-dependent engagement of nature by of the farmer, rancher, logger, or miner. We no longer have that deep commitment to place or knowledge of place. We have not made a home in the natural landscapes we inhabit. We are rootless and homeless. And that represents a tragic cultural loss and a dangerous environmental threat." Or so this line of argument goes.

As powerful and compelling as is this critique of the economic transition we are going through, it is based on a distorting nostalgia. It basically asserts that the only way that we can come to know a natural landscape is through commercial exploitation of it. It claims that a vision guided by what is commercially valuable and cost-effective is an integral and complete vision of nature. It baldly asserts that the only reliable commitment that one can make to a place is one based on profit. The crude, revisionist character of these claims is breathtaking. These are not

cultural arguments but the opposite; they deny the rich cultural character of our existence.

There is nothing trivial about connections to the natural world that are based on beauty, awe, or religious impulse. There is nothing superficial about a relationship to the natural world based on scientific understanding and an insatiable, but respectful, curiosity. To be "at play in the fields of the Lord" is not to be sneered at nor is our thirst for adventure and physical accomplishment. The point is that we, as human beings, have the capacity to make meaningful connections with the natural world in many different ways and in many different dimensions. To insist that only the commercial connection is reliable and meaningful is to trivialize us individually and collectively.

It is not only by working for someone else, mediated by a labor market, that we make a home in the world. Our home is also built around our families and communities and the values we share with them. We do not all have to be engaged in underground mining or farming or some other shared common occupation to be good neighbors or good citizens. It is not only by wrestling with the physical world using our muscle and sweat by which we discover truths about ourselves and our fellows. Deploying our minds and our hearts to render useful, even critical, assistance to our family, friends, and strangers also brings us wisdom, humility, and satisfaction.

Finally, even though our puritan background constantly urges us to doubt it, we should not be putting down play. It is an essential, human, and unburdening activity that helps keep us truly alive to the world and the people around us. "Recreation," after all, is re-creation. It gives us new life, keeps us alive. Those who doubt this are hopelessly Ebenezer Scrooges and deserve their misery.

The claim that without the natural resource industries that were important to our past, we cannot live decently in the present is outrageously wrong. It is nostalgia gone beserk, desperately claiming that any break with the past leads to economic, moral, and cultural corruption and collapse. Humanity's resilience over millennia of economic and cultural change emphatically rejects that peculiar rear-view mirror-ism! Such a sanitized romantic attachment to our recent past is not the basis upon which we can continue to develop a productive and respectful home in the spectacular natural world we call Montana.