

On Earth Day, remember  
JH's special place in world

By Todd Wilkinson

Earth Day 2009. Even mentioning the annual commemoration causes some people to scowl. If you are among them, it's more a statement about your attitude than the intent of those who founded the day 39 years ago to remember the importance of environmental protection.

Healthy landscapes are more resilient; they effect higher property values; attract more conscientious and innovative kinds of people who foster more diversified economies. And they are simply more inspiring, hopeful places to be.

I would suspect they also give rise to more kids wanting to return home after they've gone off to university and had a grand youthful adventure.

It always amazes me how "the rest" of Wyoming, which is to also say legislators and even the governor, often sit back and cast aspersions at Jackson Hole, claiming it to be a province of eco-extremists.

And yet, where do they like to vacation themselves? Where do they send visitors coming into the state looking for a memorable experience?

What's the place that continues to defy the desperate psyche that prevails elsewhere in the state where euphoric boom followed by bust, has been the norm?

This one.

How? Why? Because most people in Jackson Hole have set aside their antipathy toward the federal government and realized that the abundance of healthy public landscapes are the assets that will outlast the value of any oil, gas, or mineral play.

The good news is that Cody, Dubois, Sheridan and Lander are catching on. They realize that their close proximity to stewarded and safeguarded public lands will be the gift that keeps giving in the 21st century.

Something I'm often asked when I travel—and the subject of Jackson Hole is raised—is what KIND of people live here?

My reply, having called the valley home, is always the same: "Forwardthinking".

It doesn't matter whether an elected official is Democrat or Republican. Legislators from the Tetons get the big picture. Their peers downstate and in Washington, D.C. may attempt to disabuse them of their evolution in green thinking, but they know better.

I was ruminating the other day on a trip I took a couple of autumns ago with the Jackson Hole Center For Global Affairs to China. The delegation included outgoing Wyoming Senate President Grant Larson of Jackson, and local kid made good John Turner, the bald eagle biologist who went on to leadership posts in the state legislature before being picked to be national director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and then sidekick to Colin Powell when he served as George W. Bush's Secretary of State.

Anti-government libertarians religiously tell us that commerce free of regulation floats the boat for a more prosperous, healthier society. It is the argument they use to gut environmental protection laws and oversight. In the case of China, one can only cough in the face of that Adam Smith pipe dream.

What's the good of having more money in your pocket if you and your offspring are destined for shorter life spans? This is a question now before the Chinese.

Some of my Democrat friends may not want to hear this, but Larson and Turner, as the three of us breathed in some of the foulest, most toxically polluted air on Earth in Shanxi Province caused by coal-fired power plants, told the Chinese about the connections between environmental protection, thriving economies, and happy citizens.

That's why they, along with David Wendt and his wife, Liv—who oversee the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs and are devoted to promoting cleaner coal technology in the era of climate change—love to show this valley off to visiting Chinese leaders.

Jackson Hole is not only a counterpoint to China. It—and the thinking of its politicians, business people, and residents—stand in contrast to most of the rest of Wyoming, other struggling areas of the American West, and depressed corners of the U.S. now in the middle of busts from which they may never recover.

Being future-oriented instead of living ignorantly in the frontier past will, when this Great Recession ends, distinguish smart communities from the dumb ones.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay *Self-Reliance*: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Some day, the rest of Wyoming will awaken from its 19th century, single-minded delusion and have the courage to look upon Jackson Hole not as a categorical exception but a place where the Holy Grail has resided, all along.

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National journalist Todd Wilkinson writes his column for the *News & Guide* every week.