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## Hope and Gloom Out West

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The American West, Wallace Stegner once wrote in one of the region's most quoted aphorisms, is "the native home of hope."

Having put this very cheerful sentiment on public record, Mr. Stegner soon began to wonder what on earth had possessed him.

With its extraordinary landscapes, wide horizons and great natural resources, the West might qualify as hope's native home. But the West is also -- in large part because of these very assets -- the second home of tension, conflict, regret, dismay, gloom and bitterness.

Yet for all these miseries, the West has become the return address for my own sense of hope. I have the good luck to be employed as a kind of shuttle diplomat, carrying messages and attempting negotiations among various contending parties in the West today. That work has given me a deep -- if perhaps naive and lamblike -- faith that these are great times for bridge building, alliance making and solution finding.

True, we live in an era in which we are told daily, if not hourly, about the intense and draining polarization of our political world, and the West has its own well-developed version. Environmental conflicts -- energy production and consumption, water allocation, wildfire management, land-use planning, growth control -- provide fine battlegrounds for the display of the rattier aspects of human nature.

But our conflicts present one great advantage: neither major political party offers much in the way of solutions. Consult the platform and mainstream positions of either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party and, on the issues that matter most to the West, you will find yourself contemplating the yawning interior of Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

This vacancy presents a fine opportunity to notice the mounting irrelevance of partisan squabbling. When it comes to the all-important

environmental issues, most Westerners are actually political hybrids, mixtures and muddles no matter what their party registration. They want to be supplied with the necessary natural resources to support their current level of comfort and convenience, yet they want the production sites of those natural resources to be out of sight and out of mind. They want water coming out of the faucet without disruption of the river system; they want to build Western-style log houses without disturbing a single tree within their viewshed.

And it's no wonder the muddled outnumber the clearheaded, and the ambivalent inherit or at least manage the earth. In the last part of the 20th century, the West became the fastest growing region in the nation, and in that same era, Congress wrote a whole new draft of the assumptions and processes that govern public-lands management, environmental decision making and natural resource development. We feel awash in people, legislation and confusion. Pollsters would be advised to add a question to their protocol: "Are you one of those rare individuals whose principles and convictions actually match up to and shape your conduct as a voter and as a consumer? Or are you as muddled, ambivalent and inconsistent as the rest of us?"

The environmental laws -- the Wilderness Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act -- were national in scope. But they carried particular consequence for the West, given the huge percentage of its lands still under federal management, and the importance of natural resources and natural beauty to local economies.

So a flood of new residents has been colliding and jockeying for position with old-timers and each other. At the very time they were most needed, the ground rules for all this colliding and jockeying were up in the air as the environmental laws were being carried out, applied, interpreted, condemned, defended and second-guessed.

Could anyone have created better conditions for the production and proliferation of conflict, tension, bitterness, litigation and reciprocal demonization?

But now, as many of the various contenders look back at years of energy-draining contention, many of them yearn for a better code of conduct among opponents, a more productive manner of dealing with conflict and a more effective way to distinguish substance from noise in these under-refereed debates.

And with that yearning, hope returns home.