

Beauty and Plunder in Wyoming

By Christopher D. Cook

Each night, during four viciously cold, wind-throttled months in Cheyenne, Wyoming, this past winter, I gazed out my window at a hideous beauty: a hissing tongue of oil fire erupting from a refinery, flaring like a devil's flame, licking eastern Wyoming's towering high plains sky. Above the gaseous bursts, the night subsumed everything beneath it with an all-consuming hugeness, pockmarked by cold-shined moon and stars.



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Days on the high plains, when not blotted out by whirling thrusts of snow, are owned by a piercing blue sky that shatters horizons. The land below undulates in rolls and folds, intestine-like gyrations punctuated by craggy-peaked mountains to the west, wind farms, and oil pumps that dip their beaks deep into the Earth with unvanquished thirst.

While running a political campaign out of Cheyenne—the state’s capitol and largest city, with 60,000 people—I became intimately acquainted with the nation’s least populated, most energy-rich, and Republican-dominated state.

Wyoming represents a poignant expression of the worldwide conflict between environmental exploitation and preservation.

The state’s two chief economic engines, mineral extraction and tourism, rely on diametrically opposite relationships to the state’s abundant yet imperiled natural world.

With its strange brew of soul-gripping beauty and prolific resource plunder, Wyoming serves as a potent reminder of America’s disconnect from the consequences of our economy and politics. In Wyoming and across the United States and the globe, the engines of ecological destruction fuel (and finance) a politics that further imperils our future.

A Culture of Eco-Denial

Wyoming is a cauldron of contradictions: of ecological beauty and destruction, of barren sparseness and erupting mineral riches, of strident self-sufficiency amid significant economic dependence on exports and federal aid. This stew is fired by a tantalizing mythology of unending plenty that is profoundly American. The notion of limitless disposable landscapes, of Earth as playground and production site, and a world where we can plunder endlessly without consequences—these are foundational American fantasies embedded in our culture and politics.

In Wyoming—where the GOP has a grip on two-thirds of registered voters, all the state’s representatives in

Washington (the state hasn’t sent a Democrat to D.C. since 1978), and more than two-thirds of the state legislature—a politics of ecological denial prevails. According to *WyoFile*, a prominent online state newspaper, Republican Governor Matt Mead has repeatedly questioned humans’ role in climate change. Last May he told a conference of energy experts: “When it comes to the current debate of this issue on air quality—on climate change, global warming—whatever people prefer, I remain skeptical that global warming is caused by human activity.”

Promoting expanded coal production, raising the speed limit to eighty miles per hour, fending off EPA enforcement actions, keeping the state minimum wage and taxes as low as possible, and opposing federal curriculum science standards that mention climate change as fact rather than theory—these are part of a dominant political culture that enables maximum energy extraction and, thus, further environmental degradation.

Wyoming writer Samuel Western, an author and longtime journalist for *The Economist*, says the energy extraction sectors are kingmakers due to their outsized role in the state’s economic survival during a long history of poverty and barren treasuries. At one point in 1968, Wyoming had a total of eighty dollars in its state coffers, Western recounts.

“For seventy-five years, the state existed on a shoestring budget,” he says. “Wyoming doesn’t want to return to those days, and knows that the only show in town, revenue-wise, is energy.” Wyoming’s energy sectors became especially dominant during the OPEC oil embargo in 1973, says Western, when they emerged as a central component in the state’s fiscal survival.

Wyoming’s deep-rooted hunting and fishing culture (not without its own ecological impacts) provides some counterbalance to this industrial primacy. “When it comes to environmental degradation in Wyoming, wildlife is the canary in the coal mine,” says Western. “As an industry, if you screw with Wyoming’s big game population and hunting opportunities, you’re in trouble, jobs be damned. Healthy animal populations require habitat, and habitat means going easy on the land and the water. That’s the fundamental tension.”

Yet that tension isn’t inspiring much change, Western says. “I don’t see a collective angst in Wyoming

over environmental degradation,” he notes. “There’s a fealty or loyalty to jobs first, environment second, though people do care about the environment and the outdoors. . . . There hasn’t been a statewide discussion about the future of Wyoming coal given that coal is a major contributor to climate change.”

Bounty’s Bane

Wyoming is fossil fuel central, a veritable furnace churning out more than 40 percent of America’s coal and one-tenth of the nation’s natural gas. It’s also home to a quarter of global shale oil reserves, and one-fourth of the world’s trona, a sodium bicarbonate mineral used to manufacture numerous synthetic products. More than 100 coal trains “enter Wyoming empty and leave loaded and bound for all points daily,” according to the Bureau of Land Management.

On top of this, a “black gold rush” of coal-bed methane since the early 1990s has generated not only power but Earth-scarring pollution and epic guzzling of water. Wyoming is the third driest state in the country, with a statewide average of just thirteen inches of rainfall annually.

Despite its image of wide-open unspoiled spaces, the “Cowboy State” also leads America in carbon emissions per capita. In the winter of 2010, soaring ozone pollution caused the state to issue ten warnings for residents to remain indoors. That same winter, in Sublette County’s Upper Green River Basin (in western Wyoming), ozone pollution surpassed levels in any American city, according to the EPA.

Wyoming’s majestic beauty—its towering, jagged-toothed Tetons, its Bighorn Mountains sweeping in rocky green undulations, its geysers and bison of Yellowstone—helps to obscure the energy industry’s devouring of the rest of the state’s natural offerings.

Away from the postcard views, Wyoming’s landscape is under siege.

Powder River Plunder

The Powder River Basin, a 24,000-square-mile swath of coal-laden land stretching across southeastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming, is the epicen-

ter of a ferocious shredding and scouring of earth. In this coal and methane-harvesting inferno, thirteen of America’s largest coal mines churn out almost half of the nation’s coal supply—375 million short tons of coal in 2012.

Coal rail lines “scar landscapes and create coal dust pollution along the tracks. Sometimes coal that blows off of the rail cars combusts and starts local range fires,” reports the Powder River Basin Resource Council, which monitors industry and works with area ranchers and farmers to fight for ecological and economic balance. “Coal haul trucks are surrounded in a cloud of air pollution that is carried by the wind to neighboring lands.”

People living near the basin’s extensive oil and gas facilities “sometimes report that they get headaches and nose bleeds, and find it harder to breathe, especially when they are close to wells or when there are industrial accidents,” says the Council’s Shannon Anderson. Both coal and oil and gas development create industrial-scale truck traffic, which blows up dust on county roads and public lands. Particulate matter roiled up from the trucks “pierces your lungs,” and ranchers report pregnancy and lung complications among their livestock, Anderson says.

Beyond the scarring and charring of the land, the basin’s mining operations produce massive emissions with regional and global consequences. “During blasting operations, coal mines emit significant amounts of toxic air pollution, contributing to regional haze and higher ozone levels,” the Council says. Basin mines are “the root cause of approximately 13 percent of the carbon dioxide pollution in the U.S.”—making this one region of Wyoming the nation’s “largest single contributing factor towards climate change.”

Throughout the basin, coal mining has “caused complete dewatering of aquifers formerly used for drinking water and livestock watering,” the Council reports. Since the early 1990s, coal-bed methane—which involves drilling wells and blasting water into coal seams to extract methane gas—has depleted the region’s water supply, and left behind 1,200 “orphaned” wells that require capping and cleanup, some of it at public expense.

According to the council, one methane well guzzles 17,280 gallons of water in a day—that’s 6.3 million gallons in a year. For one well. Each well requires up

to two years of constant water drilling to reach the targeted coal seam, pumping up to 100 gallons of water into the ground per minute.

Now multiply that by the roughly 25,000 wells drilled to facilitate Wyoming's coal-bed methane boom. We're talking about 157 billion gallons of water devoted to this one extraction industry. "Discharge of this water is causing extensive erosion and cases of irreversible soil damage from high salt and sodium in the discharge water," the council says.

Equally scary is the political culture upholding this monumental spoiling of the land. The energy sector's dominance is deeply embedded in Wyoming's economy and politics: two-thirds of the state budget comes from the fossil fuel industries. Governor Mead has put up mighty resistance to EPA efforts to rein in coal plant emissions, according to *WyoFile*. In 2012, the Petroleum Association of Wyoming paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a day in overtime wages to federal regulators to expedite permitting of new fracking wells, the *Casper Star-Tribune* reported.

Back in the Powder River Basin, health concerns stemming from mining operations go unexamined. "We don't have a public health school," says Anderson. "All we have is an energy resources school, and their job is to promote industry." That industry "has tremendous political influence—it's two-thirds of our budget, and money is power."

That money and power have a quieting effect on Wyoming politics, says Robin Van Ausdall, executive director of the Wyoming Democratic Party. "Even vocal supporters of environmental sustainability who have been critical of the extraction industries do a total 180 when they run for office," she says. "If the extraction industry is against a candidate, they don't win. We're outnumbered significantly."

My four months living and working in Wyoming winter and politics, both well heated by coal and oil, offered a close-up window into a frightful scale of ecological upheaval. It was also an instructive reminder of how deeply the industrial growth agenda insinuates itself into our politics and culture.

In the campaign I was running, Charlie Hardy, an insurgent, under funded Democrat running for the U.S. Senate, was marginalized from the get-go by this politics and the big money behind it. We were running uphill against incumbent Mike Enzi, who has amassed

millions of dollars in his war chest (much from the energy and pharmaceutical industries), and the Senate's second-most conservative voting record. Even in this long-shot bid, criticizing the fossil fuel industries was seen as treacherous. In especially rightwing corners of the state, Charlie encountered voters who whispered their party affiliation and feared their car would be vandalized if it featured a Democrat bumpersticker. Despite the chronic money shortages, Charlie, to his credit, is running all the way to the finish line this November.

Wyoming's Republican-dominated politics require a staunch allegiance to (or silence about) Big Coal, a disdain for the EPA, and the outright denial or at least the obfuscation of climate change. This political culture, in Wyoming and beyond, in turn nourishes our destruction of the planet.

Perhaps the best hope for Wyoming's ecological future resides in the state's biggest fear: the demise of Big Coal. As Van Ausdall puts it, "Two thirds of the coal in Wyoming needs to stay in the ground, and all the carbon-based fuels need to stay in the ground. Wyoming needs a new plan. When it's not profitable to take the coal out, it will stay in the ground, and coal will lose its grip over Congress."

As Samuel Western cogently explains, Wyoming's boom-bust reliance on energy plunder has made it "America's monolith of demographic, educational, political, and economic monoculture."

Wyoming's extreme version of dependence on the energy sector serves also as a metaphor for our larger monocultural path as a species: Around the world, we are turning bounty and biodiversity into ecological and economic monoculture. Our worldwide ecological plunder is eradicating species, water supplies, arable land and soil, breathable air, ozone, entire ecosystems, and the very future of the planet. What is striking is the depth and scale of exploitation, all to sustain an economic model that cannot possibly survive. ♦



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