

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of November 3, 2016: "It's your responsibility to drive social change"

Millions of years ago—183 million, to be exact—tiny grains of sand covered much of what we know today as Utah. The sand accumulated in dunes up to 2,500 feet thick. In our travels my cousin and I repeatedly came across petrified sand dunes. Astoundingly, some of these dunes eventually cemented into the stone we know today as Navaho sandstone, which ranges in color from orange to creamy white. At Zion National Park, the Navaho Sandstone formation shows vertically, as 2,000-foot high walls.

The Navaho Sandstone formation is the predominant rock in Zion. Additionally, this sandstone covers a huge landmass, extending from central Wyoming to southwestern California, some 150,000 square miles.

Naturally I acquainted cousin Edith with the latest book by an adored author and activist, Terry Tempest Williams, who is known as "TTW" or "Willet" to aficionados. In "The Hour of Land" TTW interweaves family history with the history of our national parks. The book is never anything less than delightful. TTW cares deeply for the outdoors and for the humans who enjoy it.

Unlike TTW, some members of her clan have remained Mormon, which has caused clashes and rifts. Still, they hike together on trails familiar since childhood, like the hikes in the Tetons she recounts in the book.

TTW and hubby Brooke reside in Moose, Wyoming. Significantly, she also sits on the board of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, a seat she shared "with Wallace Stegner :for more than a decade." Working alongside the Grand Canyon Trust and the Nature Conservancy, not only does the group seek to preserve the geologic grandeur of Utah's—actually, of all of the Colorado Plateau, it also furthers the aims of Native Americans. TTW feels strongly that it is the role and the responsibility of the individual to drive social change, including "to change the institutional and social status quo at the root of the climate crisis."

TTW describes Utah's Canyonlands as broken country, "twisted, turned, cracked, baked, uplifted, warped, compressed, cut, collapsed, fallen." When she contemplates its fragility as "the most beautiful place on Earth" she remembers that it is also "the most vulnerable."

In Utah, tar-sands mining has begun dangerously close to the edge of Canyonlands—and it's not the only park that's in trouble. TTW cites a report by the Center for American Progress that 42 national parks are threatened by oil and gas development, with twelve of them sorely afflicted already, among them Arches, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks.

Someplace else I read that nearly 90 percent of the public lands mined for coal in Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota have been left with permanent devastation.

We must put to rest the mistaken notion that “what is good for the oil business is good for the country,” writes TTW. “In the interior West, we know this is a lie. Just look at Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah and see how they have been laid to waste,” she writes to Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. The land-grab is a consequence of failed BLM policies, TTW asserts, where “deferred” leases keep appearing on quarterly sales for decades. The fight over Utah’s wild lands will continue, she says, and god on to speak of rural Gillette, Wyoming, where “A knock on your ranch-house door may be followed by the news that, while you own the surface rights to your land, the federal government has the mineral rights, and it just sold them . . . within days, a road is cut, drilling begins, and the wellheads, compressor stations, and processing plants are constructed, regardless of your . . . well-being.”

Exploiting our red deserts—Wyoming’s or Utah’s—is “not a boon for business but a bankruptcy of the imagination,” TTW contends. What is being sold is “the soul of a nation, one parcel at a time,” climate change e damned.

My cousin shakes her head when I show her the passage in which TTW cites a 2009 piece of Utah legislature. “House Joint Resolution 12” declares climate change “a trick,” urging the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to halt its carbon-dioxide reduction policies. The resolution was sponsored by a dairy farmer who fears that federal climate policies may lead to a “cow tax” on “belches and other gases.”

My cousin asks how any American can believe climate change isn’t happening when the country just suffered outside floods in Louisiana. Many European countries, Germany foremost among them, try hard to reduce climate-change and its impacts.

“Still, Wyoming’s making progress, isn’t it?” she says. “Ten years ago, those weren’t here.” She points to the wind turbines that sprang up since her last visit.

“We could have a lot more of them,” I tell her. “Wyoming’s politicians have decided the state owns the wind, so let’s tax the bejesus out of our wind farms. It’s one step forward, two back.”

“Maybe you should live in Germany again,” Edith ventures.

I tell her I’ll think about it.