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A West that works

Leader of a lost tribe



Dan Dagget has become a professional provocateur over the years, challenging conventional approaches to protecting the environment.

Photo courtesy of Dan Dagget

Dagget's new book "Gardeners of Eden" urges humans abandon their hands-off preservation efforts and put Nature to work

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

When author Dan Dagget gave a talk recently at the annual Bioneers Conference, near San Francisco, he began by asking audience members if they had taken care of their environmental responsibilities that day. Had any of them gone hunting in a pack? Started a grass fire? Piled rocks in a gully? Chased any bison off a cliff?

In response, some people jumped to their feet and walked out of the auditorium.

This didn't surprise the former Earth First! activist. Dagget has been causing people discomfort ever since the early 1970s when he fought strip mines in his native southeastern Ohio. Over the years, he has become something of a professional provocateur, tilting at sacred windmills right and left.

His Pulitzer Prize-nominated book "Beyond the Rangeland Conflict" (1995), for example, challenged the long-standing idea that environmentalists and ranchers in the American West held incompatible goals, earning him a



Courtney White writes a monthly column for Headwaters News that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

Readers respond:

Alaska forest lands show need for human touch

Mr. Dagget has it right.

Sorry it is taking so long for the leaders of the pseudo-environment movement (those who say "leave it alone") to catch on that we humans are an integral part of the environment, and have the ability, if we will use it, to protect and improve land without abandoning it to the whims of nature.

great deal of teeth-gnashing from all sides of the grazing debate as a result.

The reaction to his latest book "The Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance To Nature" (2005) will likely be no different.

In it, Dagget argues that we have become aliens on our own planet. Once upon a time, he argues, humans enjoyed a mutualistic relationship with nature. In much the way that bees depend on flowers, beavers on creeks, and wolves on elk, ecosystems evolved in the presence of humans and began to depend on them, over time, to set fires, apply hunting pressure, and cultivate the soil. We were gardeners in Eden – natives living with, and using, nature symbiotically (despite the occasional mega fauna extinction).

No more.

Today, Dagget writes, we "get our food, fiber, and other products from nature via a system of extractive technologies more characteristic of aliens than of a mutually interdependent community of natives."

"The Leave-It-Alone assumption has brought us to the absurdity that the actual condition of a piece of land is irrelevant to determining if it is healthy or not."

**– Dan Dagget,
Author, "Gardeners of Eden"**

Our transformation into an alien species has had serious consequences: global warming, the endangering of plants and animals, the erosion of the connection between humans and nature, and increasing isolation as more and more of us live in cities, surrounded by what Dagget calls an "exploitosphere" where we extract everything from food to recreation.

One response to this transformation, more than a century ago, was the creation of a conservation movement, which aimed at correcting the exploitation of the natural world by shielding places we valued from the long arm of industry. The rise of environmentalism after World War II, with its emphasis on pollution and other toxic activities, also aimed at mitigating damage done by people.

Dagget thinks these movements have led us to a dead end.

"Ironically, those countermeasures have been, for the most part, just as alien as the situation they were created to correct," he writes. "We have created ever larger preserves and protected areas, and removed ourselves and our impacts from them. Acting as if we're trying to fool nature into thinking that we're not here, we have behaved as aliens would. We treat this land outside our exploitosphere as if it were a combination art exhibit, zoo, cathedral, and adventure park. There we limit ourselves to roles as sightseers, worshippers, caretakers, and joy riders."

Dagget believes that since humans were once an important part of the very ecosystems that we are now laboring to protect and restore, our efforts are doomed ultimately if we don't include the key piece of a very complex puzzle – us.

"If removing wolves or some other predator does harm to an ecosystem," he continues, "if causing a species such as the red-legged frog or the tiger salamander to become extinct threatens the security of all other species, as some of us claim, then it stands to reason that removing humans who have played a more widespread, more impactful role must cause even greater problems."

Just look at the condition of private forest lands (for the most part productive of flora and fauna) compared to much of the public land catastrophic fire prone, dearth of animals) over much of the west, and particularly in Alaska.

**Terry T. Brady,
Anchorage, Alaska**

Ecological efforts need to be flexible, adaptive

It sounds like a very timely book and the article describing it was top-notch providing a clear summary of its case. I will try to find and read it.

The balanced perspective is one I generally support.

"Leave it alone" isn't the right answer in some cases though it can still be in others. But "we can fix it" also requires caution.

The two approaches could meld into a "leave it alone when that works, or you don't know how to fix it, intervene as little as possible when you are pretty sure you know how to do it and watch to see if it works and stop if it doesn't or when you have achieved what is necessary" model.

Wherever possible, consensus from a range of experts and interested parties or at least an effort at consensus seeking is desirable. Some experimentation is also desirable.

Being honest about consequences good and bad under either model is essential.

Learning, adjusting, maximizing goal

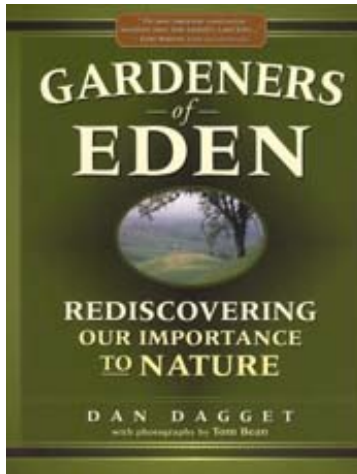
Talk about tilting at windmills – the answer, he says, is to become gardeners again, to recreate a more mutualistic relationship with nature through work.

"This book offers a way to become native once again," he writes, "to reassume some of the responsibilities we evolved to uphold, at least as much as possible in the context of a modern technological world."

Leave It Alone

"Gardeners of Eden" is the product of a long and winding road for the longtime activist. In 1992 he was selected by the Sierra Club as one of the nation's Top 100 activists for his leadership in a fight to stop a proposed uranium mine near the Grand Canyon. He also worked strenuously to create more wilderness areas near his new home in Flagstaff, Ariz. He believed in the mantra of the era, that human use was tantamount to abuse, including livestock grazing, which he assumed to be part of the "exploitosphere" as well.

To his surprise, however, he began to notice significant amounts of healthy land that were also being grazed by cattle under the care of environmentally concerned ranchers. While this challenged his environmental paradigm (it's hard to have your own windmills tilted at), what changed Dagget's mind for good was not just the ecological health he saw on well-managed ranches, but the dogmatism of the Leave-It-Alone philosophy of his fellow activists.



Dan Dagget's "Gardeners of Eden" has been called the most important conservation manifesto since Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic." University of Nevada Press, 2005.

His epiphany happened one day during a meeting of a group called '6-6' (six of us, six of them) near Tucson, Ariz., when a rancher said to the group "Tell me what you'd like this place to look like, and I'll make that my goal and work toward it and that way we can be allies instead of adversaries."

"There's only one thing you can do to make this place better," an environmental activist responded. "You can leave. Because if you stay, no matter what you do to the land, no matter how good you make it look, it will be unnatural and therefore bad. And if you leave, whatever happens to this place, even if it becomes as bare as a parking lot, it will be natural and therefore good."

This was the critical "ah-ha" moment for Dagget.

"I realized that this is the essence of contemporary environmentalism," he writes, "this assumption that the only way we can really heal the land is to protect it from impacts created by humans: to 'leave it alone.' This assumption – that the only way we can heal the land is to protect it – isn't just the domain of activists in the environmental trenches, it is woven into the very essence of our society's awareness of what we call the 'environment.' We think of it as a matter of fact, like gravity."

attainment is the uneven but proper path and rigid laws and rigid political positions sometimes restrict that.

It is understandable on both sides but together we can move forward if we really tried to be more sensible and balanced and trusted each other's willingness to do so and put the results above scorekeeping and partisan success.

It is always time for moderates seeking balance to get involved rather than let the extremes have all the air time and create win/loss or loss/win or gridlock.

A certain kind of President or Interior Secretary could do a lot to help that. There are good examples in the past. That criteria is not really met today.

Mark R.

White's columns get to the heart of the matter

I have been subscribing to Headwater News for awhile... years now. I sometimes print out articles that I want to keep.

I just discovered that many of the articles that resonant with me have been written by Courtney White. Awesome, thoughtful person.

You write what I believe in my heart!

Nancy Fishing

The ecological health of the ranch, however, belied the Leave-It-Alone philosophy.

After a lot of thought, Dagget reached the conclusion that to our way of thinking about the environment, "the health of a piece of land or a collection of ecosystems is not a matter of their condition. It is purely a matter of how that land is managed." If land is left alone, goes the paradigm, then its condition is automatically assumed to be good. If it is used by humans it is less healthy.

"The Leave-It-Alone assumption," Dagget says, "has brought us to the absurdity that the actual condition of a piece of land is irrelevant to determining if it is healthy or not."

The absurdity became painful to Dagget as he began to study places where "no use" (read: no ecological disturbance) intersected with declining land health, such as the famous Drake Exlosure, in central Arizona, which had been excluded from livestock use for forty years. The land inside the fence had become a biological wasteland – a condition that was unacceptable to the now-awakened environmentalist. Dagget knew something was very wrong with this picture.

And that's where the Gardeners of Eden came in.

The Lost Tribe

Provocatively, Dagget now calls the "protection" of land a form of "abandonment." What he seeks instead, and details in his book, are examples of nature/human mutualism and symbiosis. The key to the future, he believes, is maintaining the relationships that create life.

"One could say the purpose of this book is to establish that humans actually can be a part of this sort of relationship with nature and to make us better able to recognize the instances in which we are."

To make his point, Dagget chronicles the work of landowners across the region who are healing nature by working within natural models.

Ranchers Tony and Jerrie Tipton, for example, have successfully used the 'poop-and-stomp' action of cattle to grow grass on eroding and desiccated mine tailings in western Nevada. They believe a similar approach could restore life to the now lifeless Teels Marsh, once a thriving home for migrating waterfowl.

David Oglivie, manager of the U Bar Ranch, west of Silver City, N.M., oversees a landscape that is home to nearly half the world's population of critically endangered southwestern willow flycatchers.

A recent restoration project on the ranch resulted in habitat that is now home to the fifth largest population of southwestern willow flycatchers – where none existed before. The U Bar Ranch also has one of the highest densities of nesting songbirds in all of North America.

A comparison of Gene Goven's ranch land, which employs progressive cattle management, to a neighboring stretch of "retired" land reveals that the water cycle and soil fertility of the Goven Ranch is significantly healthier – a consequence, Goven believes, of the hoof action of his cattle.

These and other stewards are members of what Dagget calls a "Lost Tribe."

"They're like a lost tribe dispersed among us whose members possess an important skill that could be extremely valuable to the rest of us if we would bother to ask and to listen, but we don't," writes Dagget. "We don't

listen because we consider the members of this "tribe" to be irrelevant, out of date, out of fashion, weird, crude, obsessed. That's not a lot different than other lost tribes – indigenous peoples scattered and neglected, whose skills and knowledge are considered to be little more than curiosities in our cocksure technological society."

It is to these leaders of the Lost Tribe, these Gardeners of Eden, that we must now turn and listen, concludes Dagget, if we are to create a healthy, sustainable and equitable planet for the long run.

As well as a West that works.

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