River Flowing From The Sunrise

Aton, James M

Published by Utah State University Press

Aton, James M.
River Flowing From The Sunrise: An Environmental History of the Lower San Juan.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9418.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9418

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=204147
This book has focused primarily on the riparian landscape that people found along the San Juan and what they did with it. Clovis hunters stalked mammoths and mastodons and perhaps killed them to extinction. Indians, from the Clovis down to contemporary Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos, gathered ricegrass, hunted bighorn sheep, and later planted corn. Spanish and Anglo explorers and settlers introduced European-based agriculture and domestic animals. Later, Americans developed highly sophisticated technology to control water in the San Juan basin. The ripple effects of that technology—dams—are still being discovered, felt, and analyzed.

Underlying the physical adaptations are the values that shaped the day-to-day decisions people made as they lived in the San Juan area and used its resources. A particular group’s cultural values will always influence the way they interact with a landscape’s plants and animals. The first two chapters discussed the values of Indians in the Lower San Juan. Because Euro-Americans have had the greatest impact on the San Juan landscape, we have spent more time discussing it, but because more is known about their values, we haven’t talked about them. This chapter, however, will show the ways various Anglo-American mythologies have tried to illuminate and so have affected the San Juan.

No single story has dominated. American mythologies have evolved from national as well as local trends and events. That local-national dichotomy of values, in fact, has often surfaced as groups and individuals contended for the river’s resources. More often than not, conflict rather than concord has been the theme. Local writers who lived along the river and knew it from making a living often exhibited a proprietary attitude toward the land that excluded other views. National writers and artists sometimes condescended toward local Anglos. Both usually ignored Indian values and experience, although national writers sometimes paid lip service to them. Signs of change abound.

The Montana writer William Kittredge writes about “living in a story” and finding the right story to live in: the mythology that defines us and the way we interact with others and the landscape. These stories, images, songs, buildings, dances, even billboard advertisements say, “This is who we are, and this is what we believe.” A mythology, Kittredge writes, “can be understood as a story that contains a set of implicit instructions from a society to its members, telling them what is valuable and how to conduct themselves if they are to preserve the things they value.” Since people along the San Juan have told diverse stories, their conduct toward the landscape has varied greatly. Although narratives have tended to break down along the local-national fault, a new kind of narrative may be evolving which combines parts of the two Anglo traditions, as well as the Indian experience. The San Juan area, one must remember, has never had the national significance of the Grand Canyon. Therefore, it has never attracted the great artists or writers. Nonetheless, in many ways, the story of the San Juan may be maturing.

Writers like Albert R. Lyman, Kumen Jones, and many current San Juan County residents who descended from Mormons have represented local ideas. On the other hand, novelists and nature writers such as Wallace Stegner, Ann
LDS faith. But in a broader sense, he saw the mission as the purveyor of Euro-American ideas of order, private property, and civilization to people (Indians and outlaw Texas cattlemen) who threatened to unleash a plague of evil and disorder on what he considered an untamed landscape. Thus, when Lyman described the San Juan River, he used the same kind of metaphors and language—“grim monster,” “evil,” “wild,” “abominable,” “ravages,” “ruthless”—as he did when talking about Paiutes, Navajos, and outlaw cattlemen.

Lyman’s first version of the story, the unpublished “History of San Juan County, 1879–1917,” characterized the river in adversarial terms but also with wistful affection; he often called it “the old river.” Over the course of his writing career, however, his figures of speech became harsher. His later writing is powerful and engaging because of his colorful language, but his metaphors also reveal a writer who viewed Bluff’s settlement in the black-and-white terms of a struggle between good and evil. He saw the Mormon mission taming the wild and savage elements of “the seething triangle” between the San Juan and Colorado Rivers in the same way that he depicted taming the natural forces of the San Juan. Interestingly, as he
moved further away in time from the very real struggles that he and fellow pioneers faced with the San Juan, his writing began to emphasize conflict with nature and Indians more. It was as if those elements became magnified in his mind.

Since *Indians and Outlaws* is one of a number of published versions of San Juan County’s founding, that harsher vision has prevailed, especially in the imaginations of Mormon descendants of early settlers. In speaking of nature and the river in such demonic terms, Lyman was writing out of a nineteenth-century Mormon tradition that adopted its idioms and ideas from the Old Testament, says Charles Peterson. Nineteenth-century Romanticism did not shape the imaginations of Mormons like Lyman. But the grip of his vision on subsequent local writers, as well as the general Mormon populace in San Juan County, has been remarkably strong. Examples of his influence are apparent in works such as Andrew Jenson’s “History of San Juan Stake”; Cornelia Adams Perkins, Marian Gardner Nielson’s, and Lenora Butt Jones’s *Saga of San Juan*; and Norma Perkins Young’s *Anchored Lariats on the San Juan Frontier*. Jenson, for example, idealized the Bluff community’s efforts to construct an irrigation ditch, saying, “in this wonderful colony . . . there remained a splendid element of invincibility. . . . that invincible spirit clinched its jaws tighter, and attacked the Bluff ditch with angry force.” Or listen to Marian Gardner Nielson describe the heroism of the Hole-in-the-Rock group in a poem, “. . . dedicated pioneers . . . young zealots with heads high . . . confident in their manhood and the integrity of their quest.” In addition to these local antiquarians, *Blue Mountain Shadows*, a journal of San Juan County history, often publishes articles by locals whose ideas and spirit are clearly directed by Lyman. It is the spirit of triumphalism.

If Lyman’s vision greatly influenced local perceptions of the San Juan, his greatest legacy is ultimately his scholarship. From his youth he manifested an interest in writing and the history of the San Juan colony. The collection of written and oral materials on San Juan County was his life’s work. Both his published and unpublished writings are a treasure trove of information on the area for historians. Nonetheless, Albert R. Lyman’s recording of the settlement of the San Juan, depiction of the river, and vision of the
county’s history have contributed in no small way to the embattled attitude county residents often hold for “outsiders.” (Many forget that in 1880 Mormons were outsiders.) Sometimes these outsiders have been eastern do-gooders like the Indian Rights Association. More recently, they have taken the shape of the federal government and environmentalists. Both groups reflect national values, something Mormon pioneers have often viewed as poisonous.

In contrast to these local writers are a score of writers and photographers who did not grow up or work in the San Juan region and brought a decidedly different perspective to the river landscape. Their aesthetics, values, and recommendations for land use sometimes sharply disagreed with those of Lyman and the Bluff pioneers. These national artists lacked day-to-day experience of working the land along the river. Unlike the Grand Canyon, the San Juan has not yet found its great poet, its Clarence E. Dutton or John Wesley Powell. Nor has it inspired a great painter like Thomas Moran, W. H. Holmes, or Gunnar Widforss. Nonetheless, the writers and artists who have interpreted the San Juan have profoundly affected the way Americans have looked at the river. At the same time, these artists reflected a changing attitude toward the environment in the nation as a whole. That sea change began with Romanticism.

The first and foremost Romantic artists to visit the San Juan were photographers. Their images made the area familiar to many Americans, as well as international audiences. One example from the earth sciences will suffice. From the late nineteenth century to the present, photographers from Charles Goodman to Ansel Adams have been drawn to the spectacular view of the river winding back on itself—the Goosenecks—just downriver from Mexican Hat. Published photographs of the Goosenecks eventually caught geologists’ attention. To them the view was more than beautiful; it dramatized the geologic principle of the entrenched meander. Thus, images of the Goosenecks now show up in geology texts as frequently as any other single landscape feature in the United States.10

In 1962 Utah enshrined this view as Goosenecks of the San Juan State Park by sectioning off a ten-acre parcel of land on the ledge overlooking the river. More than fifty thousand visitors a year peer over the edge and contemplate this geological and aesthetic wonder.11

But beyond textbooks and scientific illustration, photographic images of the San Juan began seeping into the American consciousness as early as 1875. That year, one of the greatest western photographers, William H. Jackson, visited the San Juan while working for the Hayden Survey. He started a procession of photographers that have included the lesser-known but increasingly recognized Charles Goodman, as well as such luminaries as Ansel Adams and Timothy O’Sullivan.

William Henry Jackson grew up with the frontier movement, and his classic images of Yellowstone, the Colorado Rockies, western railroads, and other scenes helped shape the story of the western experience. Indeed it is hard for a late-twentieth-century viewer to think of the frontier experience without subconsciously calling up one of his photographs. In his own time, he defined the West as much as any single artist for an eastern public hungry for frontier images. Most of his work was sold as stereographs, and virtually every parlor in America owned a device to view them. Jackson’s photographs were among the most popular landscape stereographs circulating at the time.12 He was the right artist in the right place at the right time. Like his contemporaries—Timothy O’ Sullivan, Carlton Watkins, Jack Hillers, Charles Savage, and Andrew Russell—Jackson became a kind of point man for American culture. He was, as Jackson scholar Peter B. Hale says, “raised on the nature-worshipping milk of American Romanticism and the bread of American democratic acquisitiveness.”13

Jackson and his photographs embodied many of the contradictory ways Americans looked at nature in the post–Civil War era. On the one hand, they marveled at the sublime and awesome landscapes of the West. Simultaneously they celebrated the conquest and acquisition of these grand scenes as they were absorbed into the nation. Thus, in what might seem to today’s viewers as a contradiction, Manifest Destiny and nature appreciation coexisted in the same images.

Ferdinand V. Hayden moved his survey to the San Juan mining district in southwestern Colorado, then west into southeastern Utah. One of his motivations was discovering and publicizing
Charles Goodman took the first photograph of the Goosenecks of the San Juan in 1895. It is the most famous view of the entire river. (Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah)

more Anasazi ruins like the ones found in the Mesa Verde area. Survey member Jackson photographed many of the ruins north of the San Juan River, as well as Casa del Echo Ruin (also known as Sixteen-Window Ruin) across from Bluff. He also pointed his camera at unique geologic features. Like his contemporaries, Jackson was drawn to anthropomorphic qualities in the landscape. His famous 1873 image of a cross formed by snow in the cracks of a mountain in the Rockies, “Mountain of the Holy Cross,” is a good example. His images of the river, however, say much about American culture’s views of nature at the time.

Jackson took all his photographs of the San Juan just below the mouth of Chinle Wash, which he called Rio de Chelly—the headwaters of Chinle. At that point, the river enters its first canyon, so Jackson conveniently set up his wet-plate photography outfit there. He took at least three images from either shore. All were entitled “Canyon of the San Juan,” all appeared as stereographs, and all carried the inscription: “A few miles below the mouth of the Rio de Chelly immense great walls of dark brown sandstone hem the river closely in, and which grow in height and crowd still closer upon the river until they accumulate in the great canyon of the Colorado.” Jackson’s words suggested the remoteness and grandeur of the San Juan canyons. There was a serenely smooth river in the foreground or center of the photograph. In one a small figure sat in the lower right-hand corner, perfectly positioned on a rock which angled into the water.

This common technique of western landscape photographers derived from the Luminist painters like Martin Johnson Heade, John F. Kensett, and Fitz Hugh Lane. Luminism describes a group of mid-nineteenth-century, East Coast painters whose landscapes tried to capture the subtle effects of light. Often their canvases were organized horizontally and displayed calm water. In contrast to some of the large, grand, operatic paintings of artists like Frederick Church and Thomas Moran, Luminist landscapes were small and quiet, inviting the onlooker to transcendental contemplation. Often they contained small figures who sat or stood, watching the light. These figures instructed viewers to contemplate the serene landscape in front of them. Behind Jackson’s figure
loomed dark, shadowy, almost-engulfing cliffs and tangled vegetation. In the foreground, by contrast, flowed placid waters, framed by massive layers of sedimentary cliffs.

Although many, if not most, of Jackson’s photographs of San Juan country celebrated the triumph of American civilization, these images of the river asked the viewer to meditate on nature’s stillness. In doing so, they joined the paintings of Lane, Heade, and other Luminists who extolled the quietly feminine sublime. Ultimately, they expressed some of the values of the national culture which eventually led, as Alfred Runte has shown, to the creation of national parks and then wilderness areas.¹⁷ These developments have often clashed with the values of both San Juan County Indians and Mormons, who feel they have a deeper attachment to the land because they live there.

In addition to photographs, people in the world at large have learned about the San Juan through commercial river trips. River companies, originating with Norman Nevills of Mexican Hat in the 1930s, drew their ideas from photographers and writers promoting scenery and the wilderness experience. They created an advertising package based on those values and in turn encouraged other image makers and wordsmiths to follow and promote their businesses. Nevills set the trend.

Born in California and the college-educated son of an oil prospector, Nevills took the first commercial passengers down the San Juan from 1935 until his tragic death in his airplane in 1949. He introduced a whole generation of outsiders to the San Juan. At his death, Nevills himself and at least some others considered the Mexican Hat resident to be “the world’s number-one fast water man.” With his wife Doris, who often accompanied him on trips and provided the glue that held expeditions together, Nevills was a one-man publicist for the San Juan and river running in general. He was a short, brawny, theatrical, athletic figure who delighted passengers with all manner of performances and stories about the river, natural history, and

---

Local and National Values 155
legends. Few men have influenced public perception of the San Juan more because he was so successful in attracting well-educated, relatively well-healed clients to this remote corner of America. He especially sought out writers and photographers.\textsuperscript{18}

In looking at trips conducted by Nevills and later businesses like Wild Rivers (now the oldest San Juan river-running company), one must consider the very delicate and slippery interplay between the preconceptions of tourist writers like Alfred Bailey, Ernie Pyle, Wallace Stegner, Tony Hillerman, and Edward Abbey and the expectations created by the river companies’ advertisements. Moreover, river tourism was part of a larger boom in western tourism from the 1920s on, expanding in importance after World War II. Western tourism capitalized on what it thought visitors wanted to see. This is certainly true in the way Nevills once advertised and Wild Rivers and others promote now. In one sense these river-running companies script the way tourists encounter the river.

It remains to be seen if tourism and river running in San Juan country will become what Hal Rothman describes as a “devil’s bargain”: Success attracts so many people that the cultural and environmental amenities that make a place special are destroyed.\textsuperscript{19} So far the footprints of river runners, strictly controlled as they are, have been fairly light along the river, especially compared to dams and extractive industries. A few well-worn paths and stepped-on plants hardly compare to the devastation wrought by dams. As previously noted, a recent study of campsites showed relatively little impact by river runners.

Norman Nevills hardly had to worry about too many people despoiling the San Juan. He did not have much money for promotion early in his career. Instead, he relied on word of mouth, voluminous personal letters, films, and articles by national magazine writers. Wild Rivers spends much more on advertising than Nevills ever dreamed but still gets most of its passengers from personal recommendations. The themes of their ads, however, have been similar from the 1930s to the present: scenery, wilderness, adventure, history, and education. In the post–Earth Day era, wilderness, nature, and especially education get more attention in promotional ads.\textsuperscript{20} Popular mystery novelist Tony Hillerman summarizes Wild Rivers’s philosophy through Joe

Norman Nevills billed himself as “the world’s number one fastwater man.” He introduced hundreds of paying customers to the San Juan country and was a larger-than-life character. (Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah)
Leaphorm, a character in *A Thief of Time*, who says,

This is Wild Rivers Expeditions out of Bluff. More into selling education. Take you down with a geologist to study the formations and the fossils, or with an anthropologist to look at the Anasazi ruins up the canyons, or maybe with a biologist to get you into the lizards and leeches and bats. . . . Older people go. More money. Not a bunch of overaged adolescents hoping to get scared shitless going down the rapids.21

Most San Juan River companies (as well as river-running outfits throughout the West) try to combine profit with environmental education. Few, if any, are getting rich.

Inviting writers to publicize his trips was something Nevills pioneered and mastered. Ernie Pyle, Alfred Bailey, and Wallace Stegner typified those who floated the San Juan with him and wrote articles about their experience.22 They all pictured the West as an exotic landscape, part of the frontier legacy. Except for Stegner, who grew up on a Saskatchewan ranch, they did not possess working experience of the western landscape. But they all emphasized exotic scenery, adventure, and colorful locals. Bailey’s *National Geographic* article in particular reminded the magazine’s large readership that the San Juan landscape represented the last part of a vanishing American legacy.23

Wallace Stegner gave that theme full play in his piece, which first appeared in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*. At the beginning of his article, Stegner twice mentioned being at “the end of the world,” pointing out that the San Juan country “is the heart of the last great wilderness.” In his conclusion, he even considered using the river as a hideout from the coming Armageddon (he was writing at the beginning of the Cold War and nuclear-arms race). He then dismissed the notion, citing evidence that the outside world was already creeping in. He ended the article lamenting, “This is the way things were when the world was young; we had better enjoy them while we can.”24

Stegner sounded a common theme of national environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, following Frederick Jackson Turner’s argument. To some extent, they still voice it: Only a small portion of the wild American frontier remains, a little of the legacy that made America great.25 While Stegner strongly advocated wilderness, his piece represented the first serious look at the San Juan in terms of the national discussion about wilderness preservation that began after World War II. Stegner used the same argument for “the geography of hope” in his famous Wilderness Letter: Modern life makes us a little crazy; we need to flee to those wild places where American values were shaped, or, as he put it, “the challenge against which our character as a people was formed.” He later talked about wilderness as “a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures.”26 The basic theme of wilderness preservation for spiritual renewal has formed the backbone of most discussions of the issue, along the San Juan or elsewhere. Certainly arguments have grown more sophisticated and less anthropocentric, but Stegner was the first writer to sound the theme in relation to the San Juan. He did not talk specifically about threats by dams, but he soon learned of them because of his involvement with the Echo Park controversy.

Although Stegner and other authors wrote about the river in national magazines like *National Geographic* and *Atlantic Monthly*, most Americans did not think much about the San Juan. In fact, it was excluded from the *Rivers of America* series that was just being published, an omission which Stegner lamented in his article. The San Juan was too far away from most developed, urban areas for many people other than a few writers, tourists, readers, and photographers to think about. Not until river running exploded as a tourist activity with the threat to the Grand Canyon did the San Juan become a must-do trip on anyone’s agenda. All of these articles, however, paved the way for the next generation of writers, who came armed with knowledge, a sense of advocacy, and a different vision of the relationship between people and landscape. Most were tourists, but like Nevills and Ross, some eventually settled in the area and became locals.

After World War II, the environmental movement began to change its colors. The movement became more populist, political, and scientific. Science especially influenced nature writers and landscape artists. In a technical sense, it manifested itself in the way writers spent more time learning the basic ecology behind the landscapes they were writing about.
Wallace Stegner, dean of western writers, wrote about the canyon country in his novels, biographies, essays, and historical works. He floated the San Juan with Nevills in 1948. (Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah)
This was not entirely new. Thoreau and many successive nature writers knew the land in a scientific way. This trend, however, became the norm for writers of the postwar period.

The science of ecology also affected the values of the environmental movement and its writers. Ecology emphasizes humans as part of the sea of life rather than sitting on the throne, directing the flow. Ecological studies also reported that the planet was in big trouble because of human agency. Many nature writers took these reports as a call to arms. Nature writing not only became more urgently political, but its arguments for nature preservation were less human centered and more life centered. Wallace Stegner’s Stanford student, Edward Abbey, typified these writers.

A number of activists have argued to protect the San Juan, but no one has been more influential on the national scene than Abbey. As someone who spanned the era of dams—old enough to have floated Glen Canyon before it was flooded and young enough to have opposed it—Abbey was in a unique position as a writer to espouse activism. He wrote on the cusp of the sixties in its politically charged atmosphere. His pugnacious, yet eloquent, writings on behalf of the Southwest moved a generation of baby boomers to radical environmental defense. Earth First!, for example, took its inspiration directly from his work. Ever the populist democrat, Abbey thought government had stopped listening to people and become the tool of big business. In the spirit of the Boston Tea Party, Abbey and Earth First! advocated monkey wrenching, or ecotage, as a truly patriotic defense of the American landscape against the dark forces of capitalist totalitarianism. Moreover, Abbey and his fellow activists supported a different set of values on people and the planet. Rather than arguing for wilderness as safety valve, refuge, and spiritual resource, Abbey took the life-centered position that nature has rights, too, and a basic core of democracy exists there. With that baseline, he could claim that “the wilderness idea needs no defense—only more defenders.”

When he wrote about the San Juan in Down the River, Abbey adopted the same humorous, ironic tone that characterized his two more-famous books, Desert Solitaire (1968) and The Monkey Wrench Gang (1975). Although he sprinkled his San Juan essay with plenty of nature appreciation, historical information, and camp humor, he saved his most pungent comments for those who would divert a river from its natural course: “Like many rivers these days the San Juan is . . . condemned by industrial agriculture to expire in a thousand irrigation ditches. . . . the rivers are too penned and domesticated and diverted through manifold ingenious ways . . . into the bottomless gut of the ever-expanding economy.” He concluded his essay by attacking his favorite target, Glen Canyon Dam, lamenting that rather than flowing to meet the Colorado as it had for millions of years, the San Juan now expired into Lake Powell, “better known as Lake Foul, or Government Sump, or the Gangrene Lagoon or Glen Canyon National Recreation Slum.”

Often sarcastic, Abbey aimed his barbs at wilderness despoilers and represented a new way of thinking about the San Juan River. Many writers have followed in Abbey’s polemical tradition. Of special significance for the San Juan was Paul W. Rea, who wrote about the river in his book, Canyon Interludes: Between White Water and Red Rock.

At about the same time Abbey was blasting wilderness wasters, his contemporary (and friend) Ann Zwinger was extending an older nature-writing tradition in San Juan country with her book, Wind in the Rock (1978). If Abbey represented a newer trend, the political nature writer, Zwinger updated the nineteenth-century tradition: the nature writer as naturalist. Both approaches derive from Thoreau, someone each wrote about. Zwinger set her book in the side-canyon drainages north of the San Juan—John’s Canyon, Slickhorn, Grand Gulch, Whirlwind Draw, and Steer Gulch. Her nonfiction essays combined science, history, poetic prose, and art. Trained as an artist, Zwinger schooled herself to become a respected naturalist. As she traveled by both foot and horseback down these canyons toward the river, she looked for stories in the plants, animals, and human artifacts she found. These stories might consist in the formation of a particular geological stratum, the replenishment of underground aquifers, the life cycle of Mormon tea, the exploration of the area by botanist Alice
Eastwood, or Anasazi lifeways on Cedar Mesa. Zwinger researched all aspects of human and natural history. Although she wrote personal narratives, her book is heavily footnoted; the notes are almost as interesting as her text.

Zwinger’s method of writing about the country paralleled her nearly sixty-five pencil sketches of plants, animals, and artifacts: Focus narrowly on some feature in the landscape, study it, elicit its spirit, then convey it in poetic, yet measured, prose. She preferred small, private epiphanies to grand rhapsodies. After walking down John’s Canyon to a cliff overlooking the river, she wrote,

This brutal, dry, thorny landscape with the minimal river below is beautiful! . . . I have earned the uneasy euphoria of edging closer and closer to the drop of the cliff until I sit with my feet part way over, peering down only into time and water . . . . The exhilaration is worth every bit of the discomfort and the duress . . . . Perhaps once in a while everyone needs a little glory after lunch.31

Zwinger’s voice was quiet—unlike her friend Abbey’s—but in her own subdued way, her ideas reinforced a deep ecological consciousness of people and landscape. Hers was an apolitical voice for the San Juan landscape. Yet, like many writers who came to the San Juan, Zwinger did not reside there. Although as knowledgeable, perhaps even more so, than any native, she, like most of her readers, was an adventurer-tourist who could retire comfortably to her home on Colorado’s front range.

The same can be said about two popular, contemporary fiction writers, Louis L’Amour and Tony Hillerman. Neither, however, lived too far from the Lower San Juan. L’Amour called Durango, Colorado, home while Hillerman still resides in Albuquerque. Both wrote about the San Juan River, L’Amour in Haunted Mesa (1987) and Hillerman in A Thief of Time (1988), and both popularized the area. One of the best-selling authors in American history, if not internationally, L’Amour was noted for his western novels pitting tough, cowboy heroes against the forces of evil and the rigors of the rugged western landscape. In Haunted Mesa, he departed from his usual nineteenth-century cowboy setting. In the late twentieth century, the story’s hero, a writer named Mike Raglan, journeys to the San Juan to find a friend who has disappeared somewhere around No Man’s Mesa.32 The plot involves some bizarre twists, including people moving back and forth between this world and another.

Besides depicting the San Juan as one of the wildest, least-inhabited regions in the nation (which it is), L’Amour made some interesting comments about water development. In what he calls the Third World, descendants of the Anasazi live in a very carefully balanced, conservationist environment. They utilize every drop of water, recycle everything they have to nourish the soil, and only cut trees that are dead or dying. Although they use water and other natural resources intensely, they live, at least in L’Amour’s mind, in a kind of perfect balance with nature.33 In doing so, they suggest his model for civilization in an arid landscape.

L’Amour hinted at some of the environmental issues that have always confronted people along the San Juan—how to live in a dry land—but he largely used the landscape as a backdrop for his protagonists to struggle against evil. Nevertheless, the very fact that he wrote about the San Juan at all acquainted a large group of readers with the country and its most divisive issue—water use.

Mystery writer Hillerman is an Anglo who sets his detective novels on the Navajo Reservation and whose heroes are two Navajo policemen, Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn. He often writes about the area near the San Juan. But his 1988 novel, A Thief of Time, is set on and around the river between Bluff and Chinle Wash (which he calls Many Ruins Canyon). As we saw earlier, Hillerman has Leaphorn comment on responsible river running. Near the climax of the novel, the writer sends Leaphorn on a midnight kayak trip downriver in search of a possible murder victim, a woman archaeologist. Leaphorn’s wife, Emma, has recently died, and he is still grieving. Although he is considering retirement, Leaphorn finds that searching for this missing woman restores meaning to his life. Floating the river at night, he has a mystical experience when he sees a snowy egret along the bank. Like egrets, Leaphorn believes that he mated for life with Emma.34 By the time he pulls his kayak to shore at the mouth of Many Ruins Canyon, he has regained his equilibrium and solves the crime. In this Hillerman novel,
Leaphorn’s San Juan trip functions like Stegner’s “geography of hope”: The wild river restores the detective’s sanity.

Besides identifying the river as a place to restore one’s spirit, Hillerman, like L’Amour, emphasized the San Juan’s remoteness. Many Ruins Canyon is so far away from civilization that a schizophrenic can hide out undetected for twenty years, archaeologists can still uncover great treasures, and murder can occur unnoticed in broad daylight. Hillerman and L’Amour followed the theme of many tourist writers in emphasizing the value of the San Juan’s rugged wilderness. At the same time, they introduced the area to a large readership, many of them not outdoor types. At least one Boston-based travel company now offers four tours yearly of Hillerman Country, which includes the San Juan.35

Except for Norman Nevills and Kenny Ross, most writers and artists who depicted the San Juan were, like Zwinger, Hillerman, and L’Amour, outsiders. And since the San Juan includes so much federal land, national values have often shaped management decisions and laws. This situation has often rankled San Juan residents. On the other hand, some image makers of the San Juan came with aesthetic and environmental ideas shaped by larger currents but decided to stay. They in turn forged a local-national hybrid mythos of the San Juan. Photographer Charles Goodman is the most important.

If William Henry Jackson was the preeminent photographer of the West, Charles Goodman was a unique chronicler of San Juan country. Goodman’s images, as much as Albert R. Lyman’s words, helped fashion the mythos of settling the San Juan frontier, but they also created an aesthetic that fostered landscape preservation. His work appears throughout this book. Although not much is known about Goodman personally, his photographs of San Juan gold and oil mining are archetypal images. The New York–born Goodman followed Colorado’s mining booms in the 1880s from Pueblo to Aspen, Montrose, Creede, and eventually Mancos in the extreme southwest. By 1893, however, he had moved west into Utah, following the short-lived gold rush on the San Juan. Settling in Bluff, Goodman remained there until he died in 1912. Ironically, even though he lived nearly two decades in the Mormon village, at his death a local antiquarian described him as a “transient.”56 Whether transient or transplanted, Goodman clearly took to the San Juan and supported himself photographing landscapes, mining scenes, pioneer life, and Indians. Many of his photographs ended up as stereographs, sold to locals and miners passing through the country. Goodman was a skilled artist who handled his equipment well (he probably used the dry-plate method), framed shots artistically, and clearly loved his subject matter, whether human or natural.

Like Jackson’s photographs, Goodman’s work reconciles the seeming contradictions between awe of nature and celebration of technological triumph. He found many occasions to point his camera at the exploits of miners and
village builders at Bluff, many of which appear in earlier chapters of this book. Although his close-up of the gold placer at Raplee’s camp is probably his most-reproduced photograph exalting technology (see page 117), his image of E. L. Goodridge’s first oil well near Mexican Hat in 1908 is one of his best and most evocative. With the spires of Alhambra in Monument Valley barely registering on the perfectly flat horizon, Goodridge’s triangular oil rig frames and dominates the whole scene—land and sky. The men clustered in the picture seem to extend from the steel wheels, frame, and tank of the pumping apparatus. The dominant triangle of technology almost euphorically exults in its triumph in this remote desert landscape.

When it came to capturing pioneer life in Bluff, Goodman reveled in everyday activities. Probably few of these images were commissioned. One of Goodman’s favorite views of Bluff came from Twin Rocks, looking down at the town and the river flowing south. In many ways these Twin Rocks images not only reflected but helped shape the idea of the village as a monument to pioneer commitment. Charles S. Peterson wrote, As a landscape form, the village marked Mormon Country generally, but in combination with desert wilderness and scenic wonders it became a special insignia of Southern Utah, a form on the land that highlighted the already luminous landscape. It was in effect a human verification of a land naturally unique but now doubly set apart to become a scenic and cultural resource to the nation.37

What Goodman celebrated was a “middle landscape,” a harmony between pastoral and wild.38 Looking at the same San Juan canyon that W. H. Jackson peered down, Goodman depicts a wild, awesome scene. But perched on the brink of this magnificent wilderness to define it sits a garden of human order. According to Goodman’s aesthetic, a blend of the two formed the ideal western scene.

Another Goodman photograph of the Raplee Anticline placer mine and camp pushes this idea even further. The shadows on the right rake across the river bottom, nicely matching the lines in the sedimentary layers on the left. Raplee’s placer mine, dimly figured in the center of the image, extends naturally from the low
cliffs, growing out into the water to meet the approaching shadows. Such photographs suggest that people can live in balance with this rugged river landscape. They can blend in and become part of the land.

Blending in is a philosophy shared by two late twentieth-century immigrants, Ellen Meloy and Ann Weiler Walka. Both women resided at least part-time in Bluff, came to the area for the river itself, and were experienced river guides. Both were baby boomers who cut their teeth on Earth Day and the postwar environmental movement. Both writers were well schooled in the natural and cultural history of the river, and both sought to portray a new way of living along a river, inhabiting a landscape on its terms. Like Albert R. Lyman, each writer imagined creating a sacred bond with the landscape, but through accommodation rather than conflict.

Meloy, whose *Raven’s Exile* so fully evoked the Green River in Desolation and Grey Canyons, wrote with scholarly attention, humor, and elegance about the San Juan. In various pieces about the river that flowed in front of her house, she said that after the better part of ten seasons, “I find home in motion itself, in a meandering ribbon of bright water and a bed under a cottonwood tree or on a slender crescent of sand at the river’s edge.” Meloy wanted to achieve a Keatsian “negative capability,” where the river and San Juan landscape spoke through her. She did not imagine herself in conflict with the landscape but tried to find a way to merge her life and consciousness with the river’s.

If Albert R. Lyman spoke for the frontier San Juan, Ann Weiler Walka wrote for the post–World War II green generation. In *Waterlines*, a book that is primarily poetry, she sought to explore “the mysterious border between a river’s canyon and the terrain of my imagination.” Thus, rather than trying to grasp the river and twist it to her uses, Walka, like Meloy, let it seize her imagination, transform her consciousness, and speak through her. Walka did not have a literary imperialist’s spirit, come to pluck off some scenery and relate a little history and local color like travel writers of an earlier generation. Her poems emanated...
from a deep and long-lived attachment to the river landscape. She knew, for example, where the cliff swallows emigrate from, why the Mormons had to climb San Juan Hill, where the bighorn sheep live, how cobblestone bars formed on the benches above the river, and how an Anasazi potter made her bowls. She was aware of and respected all the traditions that had grown up around the San Juan—Indian, Mormon, and non-Mormon Anglo—and tried to incorporate these values in her work.

Like Meloy and Zwinger, Walka celebrated the San Juan’s cultural and biological richness, imagined a life attuned to its natural patterns, and quietly argued for its value. As she wrote in her preface,

I’ve come here again and again until the river feels like home. I’ve applied myself to learning the names and histories and relationships of the locals—the rocks and river channels, plants and animals. I’ve tracked down stories of two-leggeds, natives and newcomers, settlers and adventurers, and imagined the ways they changed this place and been changed by it.

Meloy and Walka wrote from the same set of environmental values as the hard-hitting Edward Abbey, but in a quieter way. Moreover, these women put values learned from the larger culture into practice in a local setting. The Navajos thought of the San Juan as a male river because of its raging, sediment-choked floods and northern origins. It is interesting that the current poets of the San Juan are women. Perhaps it represents a kind of Navajo union or meeting of the two different spirits.

Although the current generation of writers partially reflects the philosophy and ethics
of the Utes and Navajos about the sacred, there are significant differences. For traditional Indians, the San Juan landscape is a specific, god-inspired and god-inhabited world. Various landscape features do not just stand for something sacred; the feature is a holy being. Thus, for the Utes, the water baby who pulls people underwater and drowns them is not a metaphor for the river’s dangerous currents; it is a real being. Writers like Abbey, Rea, Zwinger, Meloy, and Walka, however, have an indistinct sense of nature’s sacredness, nor have they attempted to develop a cosmology around features of the landscape the way Indians have. These writers are clearly searching for something greater than themselves in the natural world, but they acknowledge the interplay of their own consciousness and nature. For traditional Indians, on the other hand, nature’s spirit is real and tangible. It may be too much to expect these nature writers eventually to combine traditions and create a unique San Juan religion.

Besides nature writers and photographers, another kind of voice speaking for the landscape emerges from two periodicals published in San Juan County, Blue Mountain Shadows and the Canyon Echo. The differences between these journals say much about the conflict over environmental issues that has surfaced over the years, especially when local values clashed with national ones. The older Blue Mountain Shadows originates in Blanding and advertises itself as “the magazine of San Juan County history.” Therefore, it covers more than just the river area, although in 1993 it devoted half an issue to the San Juan. This journal appears biannually and often contains scholarly, footnoted articles. It cleaves more to the local pioneer tradition initiated by Albert R. Lyman.

The Canyon Echo, a monthly journal from the town of Bluff, published a variety of news about the area between 1993 and 1997, but every issue contained numerous articles about the river, everything from reports of water flows to current scientific studies. It twice devoted entire issues to river-related articles, once in June 1995 and again in June 1997. The Canyon Echo envisioned itself as a voice for the natural and cultural landscape linked by the San Juan River, and its editorial slant was generally “green” and multicultural. Its values, in fact, often conflicted with the more conservative Blue Mountain Shadows. In many ways, these periodicals defined the ongoing conflict of values over the river landscape. Whatever the views and talents of San Juan journalists, nature writers, photographers, or artists, however, the river has yet to find, like the Grand Canyon, its great artistic interpreter.

To say that the San Juan is a contested landscape may be stating the obvious. Most public lands in the West are. Throw in competing, conflicting cultural values—from Mormons, Indians, the federal government, and environmentalists—and it is sometimes hard to hear above the din what artists and writers have to say. But their voices have been heard. Moreover, as the world becomes smaller, no one system of values—pioneer, Indian, or national—will prevail. Perhaps a synthesis is occurring as people decide how to live in this landscape. Perhaps the future will bring threats not from mining and overgrazing but from too much love. Like other relatively unpopulated regions of the West, the San Juan may be close to being overphotographed. You can’t help but wonder if one more published photograph of this redrock wilderness will help or hurt the landscape. Would it even be possible to limit the words and images about the San Juan the way the Bureau of Land Management restricts river travel—in the name of preservation? Writers and photographers publicized the San Juan country to the world. Some influenced the laws and policies that led to land preservation. Will these artists find a new way to imagine the San Juan country?

Perhaps the new artists will look back to some of Charles Goodman’s images for an updated, middle-landscape approach. This view may teach us that the San Juan is not a pristine wilderness, but it is also not a raked-over, spewed-out landscape where the human touch has been harsh and brutal. Perhaps, like Ellen Meloy, they will find a way to imagine how to live with the changes human beings have brought, yet somehow manage this naturalized, dam-controlled landscape along ecological lines. The San Juan is still a place of extraordinary beauty and natural diversity, a place where
plants, animals, and natural processes can evolve as they have for eons. It is a place where people have lived and can continue, though not in too great a number. These artists may show us that the San Juan is a place where a future is possible which revolves neither around the always-false and deceptive image of pristine nature nor human monuments. Perhaps they will reveal how humans with computer models which regulate river flow can fit into a sacred river landscape.