

INTRODUCTION

What is the nature of the relationship between a people and the land they occupy? Cultural anthropologists tell us that different cultures arise from different environmental circumstances. The land makes the man and the woman. The great religions of the world, differing political and economic systems—all these are responses to the provisions of nature. Culture is, in a way, a by-product of the historic human effort to claim and divide resources. Culture is the complexity brought by humanity's other gifts—the spiritual, cerebral, psychological—to the simple struggle for survival.

If we borrow the cultural anthropologist's lens to examine the historic relationship of European Americans with their land, we find many complexities. Ours is a transplanted culture—an Old World culture planted in a new, uncrowded world of seemingly limitless fertile land. But the beaching of the first European shallop on American shores initiated an alchemy of nature and culture that produced a uniquely American society. With the motherland a two- or three-month sea voyage away, and with enough land and other resources to spread out and start anew almost continually, attitudes toward all traditions—including social conformity, civic responsibilities, individual freedoms, class and wealth, and the role of community—began an organic transformation.

But this is not the end of the story. People work the land while the land works on them. After four hundred years of working American soil and transforming American resources into a vibrant economy, we—the descendants of those first European Americans and the many immigrants who have arrived since—find ourselves in a different land, a

more crowded land of diminished resources; in short, a different environment. And, not surprisingly, these new environmental conditions have begun to influence our culture and its institutions, bringing about further cultural changes, although these are little examined or acknowledged.

Cultural transformation is a slow business. As more people or potential uses compete for the same or fewer resources, our nation's social and political institutions sort winners and losers differently. The government no longer gives away free land, for example, but it does subsidize many aspects of our daily life and many of our industries, such as transportation, home building, and some agricultural production, to name only a few.

As competition for resources increases, conflicts increase, even amid our tremendous affluence. These conflicts fill our headlines today. The cry of "Not in My Backyard!" greets many development proposals. But other issues nag us from the headlines: Will we use our forests for economic purposes or for human enjoyment and wildlife? Who gets western water—farmers or city dwellers? Who gets to profit from the distribution of that water? Is it acceptable that our development patterns create sprawling settlements that are difficult to administer, consume ever more fuel and time to navigate, and are beginning to consume economically productive land such as farmland, timberlands, and land atop oil fields? Should a rancher own the oil, minerals, and water under his or her land, or is it legitimate for the rest of society to take what it needs from belowground? Should that rancher have access to public land for grazing cattle? How or why should we provide affordable housing in most of our major metropolitan areas where housing costs are spiraling out of sight?

These issues require us to measure the individual rights and benefits associated with land against the interests of all of us together—the community. And it is that central calculus that gradually changes as a neighborhood or a nation becomes more crowded. The way one person uses his or her land comes to affect more people more dramatically. The history of that contest between individual and community needs in the division of resources—traditionally mediated by policy and law—is, for that reason, a theme of this book.

That contest shaped American government. Without wealth but with a vast store of land, and a population clamoring for it, the federal

government in its first century dealt extensively with land distribution. The government subsidized early transportation investments to support the commercial vitality of different regions. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the federal government began to oversee water distribution to support western agriculture and western growth. The federal government began to promote zoning in the 1920s to help reduce land use litigation in growing metropolitan areas and suburbanizing rural areas. And, since the 1960s, Congress has passed many acts of legislation aimed at protecting the public health in the face of deteriorating air, soil, and water quality, as well as many acts of land conservation. Government also directs resources in subtler ways, through supports for specific industries and for commerce in general. So the question now facing us is not whether government should oversee the apportionment of resources—it already does—but how.

Because the American legal and political systems, along with our attitudes toward property, owe so much to the English colonies and the precedents on which they relied, the book begins there. Certain basic injustices associated with our early use of land—the way we acquired it from the Native Americans and made it productive through the use of slave labor—are such large topics, and so well covered in other books, that I have touched on them only tangentially here, as they relate to our attitudes toward land and the development of our economic system. Chapters 8 and 9, however, discuss slavery's aftermath, in which a large population of socially and economically displaced African Americans vied for a place in northern industrial cities.

The relationship between people and their land is indeed complex, and the discussion in this book is only a beginning, intended to bring further attention to these issues. Land is only one of the resources we share, but it became the focus of this book for several reasons. Land is home to most other resources, including fresh water, minerals, oil, gas, and plant life. Since it cannot be imported or acquired except through territorial expansion, the stresses of sharing land have become more obviously pressing than the stresses of sharing other resources—except oil, gas, and, increasingly, water.

There is, of course, no agreement on the actual extent of most of our resources. Even a simple calculation such as the area of the United States does not tell us how much land is suitable for home building, with adequate water supplies, or how much agricultural land or other

economically productive land can be safely sacrificed to home building as our population grows.

For that reason, an inventory of resources is not necessarily the most revealing indicator of America's future. We are the most revealing indicator of that future. Long before we consume our last drop of water or oil or our last acre of land, we will have become a different society. Will that society pursue more or less equitable ways to apportion remaining resources? How will we confront the pressures that scarcity places on a democracy? How will we decide who gets to use the water and who gets to foul the air? The decisions we have already made are a good guide to our future, and it is the history of those decisions that this book attempts to trace.