

ARE THE ROCKIES TOO BIG TO WORRY ABOUT?

Float an image of North America in your mind. Feel the weight of water and soil in enormous amounts. Then the mountains from which water and soil flow. It is the Rockies that will capture your attention first, and rightly so. The continent seems to arrange itself around this range, running more Northwest and Southeast than directly North and South—as do the Rockies. They stretch from Northern New Mexico to Yukon Territory, just south and east of Alaska. For all its range and mass, the Rockies remain a distinct and continuous bioregion; flora, fauna and human culture are more consistent than inconsistent, north and south, up and down.

Despite their extent and despite the fact that the Rockies receive little or no academic or administrative recognition as a continuous bioregion, people in the Rockies always know where they are. There is a long climbing wave moving through the land that works under everyday expectations and floats them up toward limitlessness. And the sky, an enormous backdrop for all human activity. The power of the seasons, the unquestionable situations they create; of penetrating cold; of sudden square miles of wild-flowers; of whole forests spotted with color overnight. These are events which fashion the identities of Rocky Mountain people.

Outside the Rockies, people carry a catch-all of notions and romances about them. The Rockies are “out there,” resort and retreat. Historically the mountains hang in the imagination as the great obstacle to continental exploration and settlement, the lonely places that gave rise to mountain man mentality. The vastness of the range gives meat to the myth of “inexhaustible natural resources.”

There are continental realities to replace these romances, more difficult to grasp, but solid places to put your feet. Consider that nine other biogeographical provinces around the Rockies are to some degree dependent on them for water supply and soil fertility. This makes the mountains a base source of food and water for most of the plant, animal and human communities in the western half of North America. (See “Rockies—the Source.”)

Acknowledging the volume of water and nutrients they provide, it is possible to think that the mountains’ capability to continue this provision is boundless. In fact, The Rocky Mountain bioregion has never reached climax condition; there are no reserves. The soils in the mountains wash down onto the Plains and Great Basin even as they are formed (“Backbone—the Rockies”). Damage done to the Rockies not

only has broad consequences geographically, but may have consequences that range into the future relative to the great reaches of geological time.

Impractically managed timber harvests and mining, ill-conceived notions of water use and exportation, unplanned or ill-planned industrial, recreational and suburban development are all abuses that could do possibly permanent damage. Denver already has an air pollution problem on a par with any city in North America. The most alarming possibilities for abuse are in the rate of human population growth in the region. “There are more people here now than the Rockies can continue to support unless alternative technologies are sought out,” (Bruce Bugbee, “Wild Idea . . . Wild Hope”). Population gains (percent increase) between 1970 and 1977 for the Rocky Mountains region are the highest for any similar number of contiguous states in the United States. Montana, up 9.6%; Idaho, up 20.3%; Wyoming, up 22.2%; Colorado, up 18.5%; New Mexico, up 17%; Utah, up 19.7%. (U.S. Census estimates July, 1977.) Similar growth is occurring in eastern British Columbia. The mountains are attractive and there is no sign that these rates of growth will slow down.

These are not simply environmental issues, but indicate a major cultural and political problem requiring new directions in education, land use philosophies and resources management. There is adequate new evidence for considering the Rockies as a whole and continuous biotic province (Dasmann, 1973) or biogeographical province (Udvardy, 1975): a neutral natural zone whose real survival is based on biological and geological processes rather than on the priorities of nations, states or provinces, and corporations whose boundaries and self-interests run willy-nilly throughout the region.

This collection was undertaken out of the conviction that it is imperative to initiate the rapid development of strategies for the maintenance and defense of this delicate place, this endangered bioregion. It is necessary for people who live in the Rockies, and it is an appropriate concern of all inhabitants of the continent.

Planet Drum Foundation prepared this Bundle from materials gathered in the region. Special credit is due Robert Curry, Thomas Birch, and Roger Dunsmore as contributing editors.

Peter Berg & Linn House

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ROCKIES—THE SOURCE: A pictorial presentation of the volume and reach of water originating from rain, snowpack, springs and glacier-melt in the mountains with new information about soil nutrients that are carried with it. Rockies water empties into all the oceans surrounding North America.

Note on “Rockies—the Source”: Rivers and tributaries of rivers that start in the Rockies are shown. Two corrections should be made: the river without an indicated name flowing into the Pacific north of the Columbia is the Fraser; transpose the Peace River from the western slope of the mountains to the eastern so that it joins the Slave. Special thanks to Robert Curry for the new figures on the flow of water and nutrients out of the Rockies.

BACKBONE—THE ROCKIES: The geological origins of the Rockies and the significance of their “adolescent” condition for people living in and around the spine of the continent.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN LIFETIME: A vision of time as species events circling through the seasons (some blank spaces have been left for noting personal observations). Retreat of the last glacial advance from the mountains set the pace for the calendar of biological events which exist today. Recent observations of the sun and stars from the “medicine wheels” found in and around the Rockies show they can be used to ascertain the timing of equinox and solstice.

THE EYE IN THE ROCK: John Haines wrote this poem after Carling Malouf led part of the editorial group for this Bundle to a narrow rock ledge on the shore of Flathead Lake facing a sheer cliff covered with sepia-colored pictographs.

WILD IDEA . . . WILD HOPE: A collection of journal excerpts, tape-recorded comments and poems centering on the synthesis between wildness and human need for order in the Rockies.

- Beth Chadwick has spent several seasons observing and filming wild mountain goats
- Thomas Birch teaches Philosophy of Wilderness at the University of Montana
- Roger Dunsmore is a poet with questions about what is “civilized” and “wild”
- Bruce Bugbee deals inventively with land use decisions and planning
- Gary Nabhan, poet and naturalist, writes here of wild fire in the Southern Rockies llano country

A HOUSE AT 8000': Paul Shippee’s first solar heated house became an exploration of spirit and practicality through attention to site and the materials surrounding.

A COMMUNITY OF TREES AND PEOPLE IN THE SLOCAN VALLEY: A British Columbia community’s proposal for responsible defense and maintenance of their home valley and economic base from the excessive and short-sighted demands of extra-regional logging interests.