

A Knight to Remember

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I just returned from a long series of trips throughout the Western United States. Two of those trips were to Albuquerque, and one was to Southern California. Sandwiched in between these trips, I spent four days in Las Vegas, where the 19th Annual Meeting and Conference of the Family Farm Alliance took place.

The conference was a great success, but it's always a relief when it's over. While many of my friends sounded envious that I was going to be spending time in Sin City, it's not really all that fun when you're responsible for the conference attendees, making sure that guest speakers show up on time from all over the country, and ensuring that the proper audio-visual equipment is in place to allow live videoconferencing with speakers sitting on Capitol Hill. It is not until the three-day conference is over that I get a chance to sit back and reflect on the highlights.

This year one particular speaker grabbed the attention of the audience and held it for over an hour. That speaker –a wildlife conservation professor, for goodness sake – drove home a message that had conference attendees atwitter for days.

A critical moment is rapidly being reached in the changing West and much is at stake.

So said Dr. Richard L. Knight of Colorado State University in the first presentation of this year's conference.

I had heard much about Dr. Knight before I met him in Las Vegas, and all of it was good. The President of the Family Farm Alliance, Patrick O'Toole, is a sheep and cattle rancher on the Wyoming – Colorado border, not too far from Ft. Collins, where Dr. Knight lives and works. He and Knight have worked on many collaborative projects in the past, and Pat and his wife Sharon have regaled me with stories of Knight's energy in the classroom, the books he has authored, and of his conviction that private landowners are the best stewards of Western land.

Rick Knight is a fascinating guy. While a student in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, he conducted his research at Aldo Leopold's farm, living in "The Shack" that was immortalized by one of history's most influential conservationists. He previously worked for the Washington Department of Game, developing the non-game wildlife program. He sits on a number of boards including the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy's Colorado Council. He is on the Board of Editors for both *Conservation Biology*, and for *Ecological Applications*. He is an ex-Marine who served in Vietnam.

Rick Knight had the Las Vegas audience in the palm of his hand within minutes of flashing his first overhead transparency (no fancy PowerPoint presentations from this

guy) on the screen.

“We live in very interesting times,” Dr. Knight said. “The fate of the West and even the fate of our entire country are on the line. The fates of all of us are entwined with the fate of the land.”

Nationwide, two-third of the land is in private ownership. In the West, ownership is blended – half private, half public. According to Dr. Knight, the private lands are the most productive, the best watered, and contain the richest soils. However, the nature of private land is changing. About one million acres of agricultural land in 11 Western states is being lost each year. It is the first time in more than 100 years where more people are moving to rural areas than from rural areas.

Demographic changes are not going to subside in the immediate future. The West is the only region that has captured more share of national growth than the year before, dating back to 1850.

Dr. Knight expressed concern that 2004 was the first year that the United States imported more food than it exported. That creates huge homeland security risks for a population now reliant increasingly upon foreign food sources. It is coming about largely because so much agricultural land is being taken out of production for urban growth.

“Producing food on land is a sustainable economy while selling land for development is valuable only once,” Dr. Knight said. “A secure homeland to me is where urban people realize sustainable farming and ranching are possible,” he said. There has to be recognition that rural cultures matter and that the public must be ready to compensate farm producers “for a healthy food product, and for the open space, water and wildlife habitat they protect.”

As I reflect back on the conference, Dr. Knight’s words still echo. Society, he said, must decide whether ranchers, farmers and loggers are an anachronism or whether or not they are fundamental.

“We’re living in this temporary bubble that is going to burst one day and we’re going to realize what we’ve lost,” Dr. Knight said.

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