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## **Electronic Green Journal**

### **Title**

Urban Open Space: Islands of Inspiration and Repose Under Pressure from Invasion

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1b32d4zk>

### **Journal**

Electronic Green Journal, 1(20)

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2004

### **DOI**

10.5070/G312010560

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## **Urban Open Space: Islands of Inspiration and Repose Under Pressure from Invasion**

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A bibliography of urban open space, listing 128 books and 56 articles devoted to a variety of issues relevant to urban open space was published in the spring 2003 issue of the *Electronic Green Journal* (<http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/egj18/johnson1.html>). This bibliography also listed 33 subject headings to facilitate further examination of the literature. This column presents the information gained from an interview and two literary sources, which exemplify the variety of issues around which urban open space is created and managed. Author spoke with Scott Anderson, Director of the Riparian Institute in Gilbert, Arizona, in December 2003 and examined a chapter devoted to urbanization in southern Arizona in the book *Ranching, Endangered Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest: Species of Capital*. A review of this entire book is available in this issue of the *Electronic Green Journal*. Finally, the author discusses the contributions of *Adbusters*, using a single issue to illustrate the artistic dimensions of urban open space issues.

### **Riparian Institute - Gilbert, Arizona**

The primary purpose of the wetlands managed by the Riparian Institute is to store water. The Groundwater Management Act of 1980, passed by the Arizona Legislature, called for reductions in per capita water use in cities across the state. Unlike many of Arizona's municipalities however, the Town of Gilbert, chose to create an urban open space attraction at two of its groundwater recharge sites. This attraction consists of two areas where wildlife, water, and residents come together.

The original site was designed with the relatively narrow focus of recharging water, resulting in basins, which were rectangular in shape and sloped to minimize the establishment of plants on a 72 acre site. In spite of this specific orientation fostering groundwater recharge, various shore birds visited the site, attracting many birders. Input from these wildlife enthusiasts as well as various community groups caught the attention of town officials who saw a golden opportunity to attract residents by enhancing the town's open space offerings as they stretched their water budget and added a second site (The Water Ranch) of 110 acres. Many of the improvements added to the second, larger site were made possible through a grant from the Heritage Fund of Arizona. Many other municipalities in the region and beyond have followed suit. The recharge

basins at the Water Ranch were designed to enhance wildlife and vegetation, not just facilitate the percolation of water into the ground.

Visitors to the Riparian Institute were surveyed in 2000 and leading the list of reasons to return was "peace and quiet." Many other reasons were also listed, such as recreational activities (walking, fishing, horseback riding, etc.), nature (birds, nature, wildlife, etc.), and amenities (playground, library, park, etc.). However, nothing topped the list like, well *nothing*. While peace and quiet are something, rather than nothing, you get the point. Local residents, living in the sixth largest metropolitan area in the country, desired a place where quietness, calm, and stillness fostered rest and inspiration. The prospect of hiding in a closet at home may have accomplished the same sense of quiet as a sunset by a pond with waterfowl swimming nearby, but there is more of a sense of satisfaction by the pond than in the closet. Peace and quiet is not simply a quantitative lack of external stimulation. It is a qualitative experience, which varies with the individual.

The demographic make-up of the typical preserve visitor sheds some light on these survey results. Nearly half of the 17,200 visitors in 2000 were between the age of 40 and 60 (54,500 in 2001 and 87,100 in 2002). Who could use more peace and quiet in their lives than those coming off the hectic hustle and bustle of personal and professional endeavors associated with this age group? Nearly a third of the visitors were between 20 and 40. Only 12% of the visitors were under 20 while another 12% were over 60. Most visitors came to the site between October and April and 10% of the visits were associated with formal school groups. Nearly half of all visitors came to fish, suggesting that they see only a small portion of the Preserves, since this activity is limited to a relatively small area at the Water Ranch, the most extensively developed site of the two. Regardless of the demographic profile, most visitors to the Riparian Preserves expected a natural experience that was distinctive from that of their typical (sub)urban setting.

The boundary between nature and civilization is often characterized by a certain amount of conflict. Here the greatest concern expressed over urban and natural area values focused on the occurrence of mosquitoes rather than coyotes and the like. In spite of such concerns expressed by nearby residents, use of the site is growing rapidly. Visits in 2001 increased by 217%, to 54,500. Visits in 2002 increased significantly again, this time by 67% to 87,100. Thousands of these visitors have participated in Riparian Preserve programs ranging from viewing Mars to viewing hummingbirds. These popular programs don't necessarily promote wise water use, but it is hoped that a popular experience with planets will lead to greater appreciation and support for the basic mission of the Riparian Institute-water

conservation.

The qualities that make the Riparian Institute site so attractive are not unique to this area. Crowding lots of people together in any metropolitan area creates a hunger for natural spaces. Whether these spaces are green or brown, rocky or heavily vegetated, wet or dry, makes little difference.

Recreational programming interests aside, the Riparian Institute preserves a critical habitat in the arid Southwest-wetlands. Reliable surface water in any desert transforms the area into an oasis, attracting a greater variety of plants, wildlife and, of course, people. It is estimated that water environments account for less than 1% of Arizona's landscape, however, they support more than 60% of the state's wildlife.

Regardless of the "extra" uses, to which Gilbert has found for its Water Ranch, the critical issue is just that, water and its reclamation, storage, and use. The water used by the Riparian Institute is reclaimed, that is, it has already been used. This is quite important as far as the Town's water budget is concerned. Reclaimed water does not have to be counted in the per capita water use calculations used to determine compliance with the law. The water is also treated at the Water Ranch site so that public contact is perfectly safe.

These riparian preserves are significant in that:

1. They set aside areas for water recharge to implement Gilbert's water policy and to sustain the town's growth.
2. Wildlife habitat is becoming increasingly important.
3. Research conducted at the preserves is applicable in many other areas.
4. The preserves offer educational institutions a living laboratory to better understand the value of these habitats.
5. Life-long learning opportunities can be demonstrated at the preserves in such diverse fields as astronomy, paleontology, ecology, and archaeology.
6. The preserves embody the four elements of the vision statement of the Town of Gilbert: Provide a sustainable mix of land uses that will maintain the quality of life elements that make Gilbert a "Community of Excellence" and promotes economic development and redevelopment at appropriate locations.

While originally part of the town's organizational structure, the Riparian Institute is an independent, non-profit organization as of 1999. However, the town continues to support the Institute financially since memberships, sales, and donations constitute only 5% of the Institute's operating budget. With a staff of two, a large pool of volunteers operate the Institute day in and day out. Currently, some 60 individuals serve in this capacity.

Most of the literature, books and articles, on urban open space deal with areas other than the Southwest. However, the variety of open space available to those in the Valley of the Sun alone is staggering with its linear canal system, municipal mountain preserves, rugged county parks, fully developed city parks, and federal lands nearby or adjacent to large population centers. The Southwest offers a fascinating laboratory whereby a vast array of urbanization issues may be examined at many levels. The Center for Environmental Studies and Arizona State University offers a wealth of information on research into urban issues in a desert setting (<http://ces.asu.edu/>).

For more information on the Riparian Institute in Gilbert, Arizona, check out their Web site at <http://riparianinstitute.org/>

## **Book Review**

### **Ranching, Endangered, Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest: Species of Capital<sup>1</sup>**

*In Ranching, Endangered, Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest: Species of Capital*, Nathan F. Sayre, closely examines the connection between urbanization and competing land values over the past 100 years. While Sayre discusses a complex variety of issues, we will focus upon his treatment of the interaction between declining stock prices in the face of increasing land values. While the physical conditions of the land for ranching across the Southwest have declined since the advent of large livestock herds in the 19th century, ranching mystique has not declined. Developers simply adapted to the changing urban landscape, thus ranchettes were born. Also, shifts in regional demographics, technology, and management techniques have completed the transformation from rural ranching to urban sprawl since World War II.

Cold war defense spending concentrated in the Southwest, fostered affordable homeownership, easy travel, as well as personal and institutional amenities. Translation? Air conditioning in cars, homes, and places of employment became the standard in the mid 20th century with swimming pools at many home sites setting a new standard at the dawn of the 21st century. Additionally, paved roads created a convenient network of access points leading to urban sprawl. Public transit like that in bigger cities on the east and west coasts of the United States has not been well developed in the Southwest and continues to be anemic, hence, inconvenient and relatively little used.

Water developments of course played a significant role in stabilizing habitats

in support of large herds of livestock first, extensive farming developments second, and finally the creation of large cities. Initial water developments were local and enjoyed only sporadic success. Later, with large federal subsidies, regional water developments took shape, leading to numerous impoundments, wells, and far reaching canals such as those of the Salt River Project and, of course, the Central Arizona Project. Lagging behind developments in California and embroiled in various legal battles, Arizona has finally adopted a comprehensive water development strategy.

However, until local residents realize that this is a desert and not the mesic Midwest or humid Southeast, water budgets will continue to operate in the red. According to Sayre, the "lawn" became a test of faith in residential and recreational areas and the rise of suburbia catered to an Arcadian fantasy where the nuclear family was plucked from the negative social fabric of the city to become purified by their contact with greenery across the landscape. Land values under these conditions became associated more with the land's potential to support the scenic and recreational interests of people, than its ability to support a specific number of livestock.

Ultimately, urbanization undermined the economic viability of ranching. Outside investors brought in needed capital to prop up equity values, facilitating credit. Land speculation drove values up, beyond the ability of livestock to keep up, making them a lesser consideration than transitioning to other types of land uses.

Urbanization proceeded along three fronts: economic, ecological, and sociocultural. Economically, land values increased so cattle were no longer a viable means of paying down a mortgage. The trend toward land development for homes matched the shift away from sustainable land management for livestock. This was followed by a subtle shift in vegetation types due to the water dynamics of groundwater depletion, leading to occasional land subsidence and widespread soil loss.

Unfortunately, the lucrative economic activity of land speculation eluded government regulation early on. Great debt was encumbered for a view and to fit into the "right" neighborhood. Ultimately, according to Sayre, the government underwrote the wholesale conversion of the desert for a leisurely lifestyle-the good life. Whether it was a cattle boom or a real estate boom, both simulated an ecological force, like a non-native, invasive species. Humans have replaced cattle as the most significant, direct ecological force in the region. Environmentalists, according to Sayre, have been slow to address this force. They express greater concern over the environmental impact of ranching, despite the fact that its greatest impact

was felt generations ago.

***Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment***  
**May/June 2001 - I Want to Live**

*Adbusters* offers an artistic, even curious combination of text and imagery. I would call it a scrapbook of the mental environment rather than a journal. However, if you look hard enough, especially in this issue, you'll find something of substance relative to the issue of urban open space. The liberal bias is obvious, though and the meaning on the page may be difficult to draw out from the curious combination of fonts, colors, and images. You could look at a page for some time and be unable to answer the question, "What's the point?" The review of urban open space presented in this issue is disorganized along these lines:

Contents:

- Dead Space: Where the City Forgets
- Empty Space: Where Possibilities Emerge
- My Space: Where Escape is Ever Present
- Shared Space: Where Control Fails
- Head Space: Where 1,000 New Cities Already Exist
- The Sinister Quarter: Where the City Restores the Ancient Balance
- Contested Space: Where Nothing is Certain
- Wild Space: Where the City is Constantly Reborn
- Doom Space: Where the City Lays Down to Die

The tone of this issue is fearful and suspicious. It is unlikely that this tone would attract the readers who most need to consider the impact of their behavior and attitude on the environment. For example, conservatives who drive SUVs to church or liberals driving Hummers with license plates promoting environmental conservation would do well to consider the topics presented. The primary readership is probably college students who have yet to become comfortable with the status quo. Unfortunately, the negative perspective offers so little in the way of constructive strategies for positive change that one wonders if the point is to make a difference or to simply stir up the emotions.

Many of the suggestions for reclaiming cities in this issue display ignorance, waste time, and give people a false sense of accomplishment. For example, illustrations of people tearing up a square foot of sidewalk to plant a flower in the name reclaiming a sliver of the concrete jungle lack sense because the effort is not sustainable. The plants chosen cannot survive without more space for development. They are likely to be cut down by maintenance

personnel controlling "weeds." Plants, like people, are more likely to survive in groups rather than as isolated individuals. A single human voice can certainly make a difference but the chorus of like-minded individuals is much more effective. So too, with plants. A hedge or a grove will survive when a lone flower has long since faded from the scene. Therefore, efforts to change the landscape within a city should focus on coordinated projects aimed at larger tracks such as neighborhoods or city blocks rather than a single square foot of a parking lot.

This issue also examines the true cost of space, suggesting that the true value of a blocked view or ecological impact of a parking lot on groundwater recharge be passed along to developers. Hidden costs should be born by individuals, who would not just pay for a car and fuel but also for the cost of air pollution, not only for their homes but also for the cost of a lost forest, not only for electricity but also for species extinctions and ozone depletion. This idea has intellectual merit, but without practical guidelines, the good idea dissolves into an academic debate.

This issue of *Adbusters* also claims that humanity is building something that has never existed. However, the city has existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years with the same worries raised here. Perhaps in the past there were more alternatives available to that of living in the city. Now fewer options exist and they are more difficult to choose.

It is nice to see some humor in this issue. They picture wild space with goats on the roof of a high-rise apartment building grazing, and green bombing Los Angeles with seed packets. *Adbusters* makes a good point: cultivating an appetite for nature when you have lived apart from nature all your life often involves "drastic measures." *Adbusters* does a great job of promoting drastic measures to stir up debate and get people to think about the important issues of our day.

Endnote

1. Nathan Freeman Sayre. *Ranching, Endangered Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest: Species of Capital*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 320 pp. ISBN 0-8165-2158-1 (cloth). US\$48.00

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