

Colorado Landscapes Past and Future: A Photographer's Perspective

An interview with John Fielder

John Fielder is a nationally renowned nature photographer, publisher, teacher, and preservationist. In 1981, he founded Westcliffe Publishers, one of the nation's largest publishers of nature books and calendars. A former department store executive who turned an avocation into a career, he is the photographer of 39 exhibit format books, guidebooks, and children's books, most about his home state of Colorado.

John has worked tirelessly to promote the protection of Colorado's open space and wildlands. His photography has

influenced people and legislation, earning him recognition including the Sierra Club's Ansel Adams Award, the University of Denver's Daniel L. Ritchie Award, and the Distinguished Service Award from the University of Colorado. He was an original governor-appointed member of the lottery-related Board of Great Outdoors Colorado, and speaks to thousands of people each year to rally support for timely land use and environmental issues.

His latest book is *Maria's Mysterious Mission*, his second children's book. His repeat photography book *Colorado 1870–2000* is still Colorado's all time best-selling title with over 170,000 copies in print. His gallery *John Fielder's Colorado* has locations in Denver's Art District on Santa Fe and in Breckenridge. Currently, John is photographing 50 Colorado working ranches for a book, *Ranches of Colorado*, to be published in October 2009 to promote preservation of Colorado's remaining ranchlands.

John is a featured speaker at the Plenary Session of the 2010 Joint Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America, 7–11 February 2010, in Denver, Colorado. John graciously agreed to an interview concerning his views of the changes in the Colorado landscapes that he has spent a lifetime preserving in photographs.

Question: You have spent a lifetime documenting and recording by photographs and books the natural wonders of the Colorado landscape. What is the most memorable observation you can recall from your vast travels across the state?

Answer: It's not possible to identify a single sublime moment. I've witnessed nature's diversity and thousands of ephemeral moments of light, weather, and wildlife, most of which are remarkable in some way. However, my 24 hours at 13,100 feet in Colorado's largest wilderness, Weminuche Wilderness, spent with a mountain billy goat was unique. I had met the goat on arrival to that night's high camp ... they like to lick the salt in one's urine deposited in the



John Fielder.



Billy goat in Weminuche Wilderness, Colorado.

ground, especially after a day of backpacking when it's yellow and salty. He hung around for a while then disappeared. The next morning while I was setting up my large format camera for a scenic sunrise, he ambled up behind me and laid down ten feet in front of me in the middle of my scene. The result was a wildlife image made with a 4×5 view camera (see above). Later in the morning he allowed me to lie next to him, only inches away, and converse with him about what life was like year-round in the wilds of Colorado. Of course I did not receive verbal replies, but he did seem quite comfortable with the sound of my voice. This magnificent creature and I had become friends.

From your perspective, what do you consider has been the greatest change in the Colorado landscape?

The loss of private lands, especially our mountain valleys, to exurban development and sprawl. We are losing working ranches faster than we are saving them. Nevertheless, we've protected millions of acres of ranches with conservation easements in Colorado and the West, and that's great. In addition, we've allowed an infatuation with the relative short-term gain from oil and gas development on our public lands to compromise their long-term value. Tourism and recreation (T&R), an industry that is sustainable as long as we protect the reasons why people visit the West, will always be a significant part of the economic success of the West; therefore, T&R will motivate us to protect the rural and natural environments. A healthy West, both economically and environmentally, can only exist if we focus on the "attractive" versus the "extractive." Given what we know today about the benign effects of ranching on our economy and ecology, I put this industry, if operated thoughtfully and holistically, in the "attractive" category.

What do you consider the greatest threat to our natural resources?

Climate change. I've personally seen the loss of ice fields and glaciers, disappearance of alpine water sources, and insect infestations change the character of Colorado in the 40 years I've lived and explored here, not to mention the massive amount of evidence mounting worldwide. Most recently the pine bark beetle has killed nearly 100% of the lodgepole pine tree forests in Colorado, and it appears that next to go will be spruce and fir species. Even the "weedy," if not beautiful, aspen is being affected by warmer temperatures. Our farms and ranches, and their productivity, will be negatively affected to no less of a degree than the natural environment.

Have you observed any activity or action that you consider to have made a positive impact on the conservation of our natural resources?

Protection of natural habitat, and as much as possible, is the foundation for preserving biodiversity and, therefore, human health and existence. Size of space preserved is everything. The science of ecology proves this. I am so impressed with the quantity and quality of conservation organizations that exist today, and how cutting edge ecological science is directing the process of protecting Earth. The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, Trust for Public Lands, and so many other nonprofits like these do such good work in the face of an ever-increasing and impactful human population. Here in Colorado, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, Colorado Open Lands, and a myriad of local land trusts are doing remarkable work protecting our working landscapes. In addition, when it is not suppressed or even rewritten, the science developed, promulgated, and applied by our public land managers is invaluable and necessary.

What advice would you give to a young range professional interested in conserving the natural resources of our country?

There is so much progressive thought in the community of land protection professionals today, and valuable empirical data is accumulating faster than ever. For example, we are finally beginning to understand the symbiotic relationship between animals that graze, both wild and domestic, and the health of rangelands. We are accumulating the data necessary to understand land uses, from exurban to open space to working landscapes, and their respective impacts on ecology and land health. Elected officials and decision makers now have the correct information needed to better plan land use in our communities. What an exciting time this is for conservation professionals. They must know that their hard work and focus on the truth can be applied to creating solutions and having an impact upon the lives of future generations.

What are some of the questions or challenges that the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America should be aware of and maybe work toward developing a solution?

We are quickly increasing our knowledge of the connectivity of ecosystems, their complexity, and their sensitivity to human impact. In the West, we have reached that moment in time when we recognize, like Europeans did long before us, that our landscape is no longer the infinite place we settled in the 19th century. The beginning of the third millennium marked the moment at which “sustainable” became the most important word in the English dictionary. We must move forward with one admission in mind: to acknowledge that our human health and economy can only exist within a functioning, healthy biosphere.

We must move forward with the confidence that we are a species that is exceptional, that we can employ our innate ability to reason, that we can allay our biological programming to perpetuate the species at all costs, and ultimately find a median in between the need to survive and the spiritual desire to preserve the miracle that life is, a unique and beautiful existence in a place within a vast universe where life may be more rare and special than we can possibly imagine.

Interview by Gary Frasier, co-chair of the Public Relations Committee, 2010 Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America (gfrasier@aol.com).