

THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

DOMINION, DRESSING,
KEEPING

By David Thomas Sumner



A summer running the Colorado River led David Sumner to reevaluate Mormonism's assumptions about land and the environment.

IN EARLY JUNE 1989, I was on my first trip down the Colorado River's Cataract Canyon as a paid guide. On the first evening, we set up camp, fixed dinner, did dishes, and watched the surrounding cliffs turn from the pale, sun-washed colors of

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midday to the deep reds of sunset. At dusk, I sat across a driftwood fire from a man with thick black hair and cheeks shadowed by two days' growth. His beard was coarse and grew from just below his eyes all the way down his neck. He was squat and thick and a professor of something somewhere. As the fire cast excited shadows on the cliff behind us, we talked of the beauty of Cataract Canyon and the Colorado River. We discussed the Glen Canyon Dam and the stagnant water of Lake Powell that we would

encounter in a few days. He commented on how much of the beauty of Glen Canyon is now lost under the man-made lake. I told of how it is now difficult for downstream wildlife to drink from the river the sand bars and beaches are eroding; the silt that should sustain them is trapped behind the dam. We lamented the loss. I told him my father had seen the canyon as a Boy Scout. We both knew we would never see the once great canyon. I then began saying, "I'm not an environmentalist, but..." The vacationing professor questioned my hesitation, "What's wrong with being an environmentalist?"

That night, across that fire, there were plenty of things wrong with it. I was brought up in Utah with the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Central Utah Water Project, and wilderness issues in the news. The conservative Mormon community I come from sees environmentalism as running counter to our pioneer roots. They see environmentalists as radical hippies who stand in the way of progress, in the way of "God's command" to make the desert bloom. To be put in this group, to accept this label, was to be set against my community, cut off from my culture, as a traitor to my heritage. On both sides of my family, I have ancestors who trekked west with the Mormon pioneers by handcart and covered wagon. The religious ideology of these people led them to abandon home, country, possessions, and often other family members in the hope of forging a utopian community out of the howling wilderness of the American West—a place where they could live their religion without persecution and exercise Old Testament dominion over the land. They wanted to create a garden from the desert. To be labeled an environmentalist seemed counter to what my ancestors had worked and sacrificed for, to what they had dreamed of for me. But the professor's question struck a reverberating chord. As I worked the river that summer, the river also worked on me, changing me not only physically but also spiritually. The thick waters carved my body and shaped my soul.

THE Colorado River melts out of the high Rockies and cuts its way through the rusted canyons of the Southwest. The clear, cold, liquid snow turns taupe with silt, taking on the colors of the desert as it descends out of the mountains. As it has for millions of years, the river still excavates the sandstone canyons, slowly carrying red earth seaward. I am comforted by the river's consistent, sustained movement.

The river is a constant. It is always changing and causing change.)

I spent those clear, desert days at the oars and the cool, star-filled nights on sandbars. The unrelenting desert sun lightened my hair and darkened my skin. My body took on the colors and hues of the landscape. My back, shoulders, chest, and hands spent four months becoming stronger, learning to work with the river, discovering they could not work against it. During these lessons, the river hardened my body, defined it. My back and shoulders became stronger. Calluses squared off my fingers. At the end of the day, my hands, arms, shoulders, and back radiated the dull, satisfying ache of physical labor. At the river's edge, I slept deeply to the river's low polyphony. I bathed in the silt-laden water at evening, and at midday, the river's thick coolness provided relief from the kiln-like heat.

My eyes became sensitive to the story told by the water—watching for rocks, logs, and snags hidden just below its opaque surface, looking for angle waves, holes, sleepers, rollers, and keepers. I developed reverence for the stark beauty of the sandstone canyons and a respect for the tenacious plants and animals that cling to life there. The juniper, the Mormon tea, the black brush, the salt and sage brush, the willow, the maple, the scrub oak—they all struggle against the arid climate and the imported tamarisk that threatens to choke all others out of their native strongholds. I marveled at the resourcefulness of the mule deer, the acrobatics of the desert bighorn, the survival skills of the coyote against a century of poisoning and hunting by sheep and cattlemen. I savored the refuge of the cottonwood and the box elder.

Each time my raft came out of Imperial Rapid into the upper reaches of Lake Powell, I felt disappointment. Here, where the power of the Colorado has been stopped by the Army Corps of Engineers, I remembered my discussion with the professor about the Glen Canyon Dam. I pondered what it meant to be an environmentalist.

Just as the beauty of the river upstream intoxicated me, the impounded, man-made reservoir downstream angered me. The dam was completed in 1964, two years before I was born. I will never experience the unique beauty drowned by the dam. I will never run the sixty silenced rapids of Cataract Canyon that John Wesley Powell and his brave companions ran. Nor will I ever float through or hike the deep corridors of sandstone now filled with water. We have all been robbed. I am bitter.

I wonder about the displaced wildlife. I

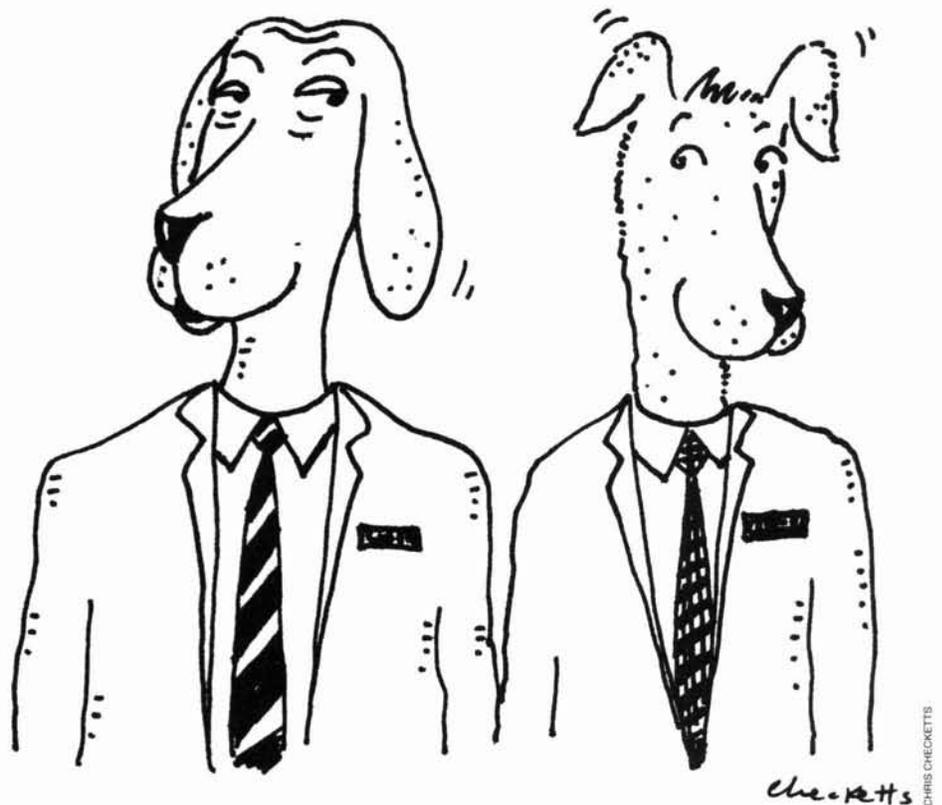
wonder about the countless Anasazi ruins that the water has buried—the pots, sandals, granaries, the kivas, the cooking and living quarters. I picture them in my mind, submerged, moss-grown, decaying, the walls collapsing. These lost artifacts are the voices of a mysterious culture, voices now muted by a reservoir.

As the river worked on my body and mind, I began to care deeply for its desert landscape. Questions about the environment became spiritual, moral questions rather than simply economic and lifestyle questions. Within the same religious tradition that caused my discomfort with the term environmentalist, I found some hope. In Genesis, Adam is given "dominion" over the world, but he is also commanded to "dress and keep" it (see Gen. 1:26, 2:15).

Although my pioneer ancestors changed the face of the West—cultivating, irrigating, and building—they did leave many places wild. This was not always deliberate. Often they simply lacked the technology to dominate more of their surroundings. Yet there are traditions in my culture of restraint, of place, of awareness, and of reverence. It is within these traditions that dressing and keeping can be seen. In early Mormon Utah, there

were cultural restrictions on mining and an emphasis on sustainable agriculture and communal living. These people dressed and kept their farms and homes, and they often left alone the remote canyons, the high mountains, the deserts. I like to think that they felt dressing and keeping was, in part, knowing human limits—knowing we must limit human desire. They made many mistakes, and theirs was not a perfect environmental ethic, but many of them reined in their wants, cultivated what they needed to live and left the rest alone.

Perhaps my attempt to locate value in dressing and keeping is weak. After all, it is still a human-centered ethic; it keeps humans on top. It is still an ethic that grows out of dominion. But it seems more productive to me, although perhaps more difficult, to reread and reinterpret the positive aspects of our cultural traditions rather than to reject them outright and search for others. Other traditions, even with their wisdom and perhaps their greater ecologic sensitivity, would not have the same historical and generational depth for me nor the the power that depth provides. All enduring traditions have problems, but all enduring traditions have wisdom. Dressing and keeping is not a per-



"First of all, forget everything you learned at the Training Center."

fect environmental ethic. It needs to be discussed and refined, but it can be applied in ecocentric ways. If we interpret it with sensitivity, dressing and keeping may be used to correct and check the idea of dominion.

THE Colorado River no longer runs all the way to the Sea of Cortez. Instead, it is sprayed onto the golf courses of Las Vegas and fills the swimming pools of Phoenix. By the time it enters Mexico, it has been diverted and dammed and sucked down to a trickle. Finally, short of its oceanic destination, it evaporates under the southwestern sun. The giant sturgeon that used to swim the river's length—fish bigger than a

man—are no longer found; the squaw fish, the humpback chub, the razorback sucker may soon follow suit. In our quest for dominion, we have wiped out countless plants and animals—even whole ecosystems. If we have been divinely granted any type of dominion, a concept with which I find much discomfort, we must realize that dominion does not include the right to destroy what we did not create. I hope the Mormon community can learn how dressing and keeping may balance dominion.

It is human vanity to think that we can forever impound the river that carved the Grand Canyon or that we can destroy a planet that took eons to create. We can, how-

ever, dam the Colorado River for my short lifetime and greatly deface the beauty of this planet; we can destroy this world for our species and for many others. We must be responsible for our dominion, whether it has been assumed or granted.

Running the Colorado River changed and shaped me. It molded me as if I were a sandstone canyon. It forced me to ponder what it means to dress and to keep, and it taught me that part of dressing and keeping is to know that often we must leave things be. I have emerged from the canyon an environmentalist, one who struggles with what it means to live ethically, with what it means to dress and to keep. ☐



ON WANAPUM MESA

The coulee below
curls away to the Columbia River—
the distant water like a window in the earth.
And you try to see
through that pane to the other side
believing there will be a clear image
as if through fenestral glass
which you see backward
stroking days and years
to some beginning your mind cannot find

(out of the air
the rumble of a loaded farm truck
wobbles your thoughts
and you try to remember
a significant event
that can arise as monument
to the traffic passing under your eyes)

forward through waves of light
to some edge where every act
will balance
your hearing, sight, smell, touch, taste
to a final sense,
commingled to an absolute order.

Two hawks glide by on the slow wind.
Fall orchard leaves tremble
apple trees toward winter.
You sit still
to wait for movement,
a traveler going nowhere,
waiting for directions.

—W. R. WILKINS