

While New Mexico locked down in the spring and summer of 2020, I was able to spend several weekends hiking in the gorgeous Sandia Mountains with a few friends. During one hike, our most experienced companion led us off the trail, through a jumble of granite boulders, and across a sandy ravine to a tiny spring and a pool of clear, cool water. We filled our water bottles and spent some time resting at the spring, enjoying the serene, secluded scene. Shaded by tall ponderosa pines, the site stuck out not just for its picturesque confines but as a rare oasis in New Mexico's desert climes. We returned to the spot several times over the year, drawn almost instinctively to the water and more profoundly to the unique and beautiful environment. In the autumn of the year, a friend and I were setting up camp in the nearby ravine when a couple hikers scrambled down towards the pool. We talked to them briefly; they were trying to follow the established trail, but had lost it under the fallen oak leaves. We were able to point them in the right direction, but I felt that our tiny sanctuary had been violated. Later, at home, I looked up the spot online, and found that it was marked on a map online. My first instinct was to edit the map and erase the little spring from the internet. I was dismayed by the idea of hordes of clumsy hikers invading, afraid of them wading in the water and sand, degrading the land, leaving piles of trash and campfire ash behind.

I resisted that impulse and left the map alone. I had an impression I couldn't quite express until I found the elusive sentiment in the pages of the *Land Ethic*, where Aldo Leopold articulates what conservation is in terms of morality and respect, for others and the land. It instantly became clear to me why I hadn't wanted to delete the coordinates of the spring. The spot demonstrated to me the preciousness of the environment and highlighted to me each element in the land: the earth and flora and fauna that make up the circuit of energy. I realized that other visitors, instead of treating the area with disregard, would also feel the urge to protect and guard it. Others with any inclination to conservation would be jarred to think about protecting and tending the land, becoming stewards of it like Leopold suggested.

Leaving the pond and ravine behind, I travel upwards to gain more perspective. Moving up above the trees, I lose sight of the oasis but staring at new expanses replaces my glances at the old spaces. I can see all of Albuquerque, and a new set of problems becomes clear. Returning to the pool over two years, I have seen the water level drop slowly, as the changing climate slowly disturbs the

natural cycle of the land. Looking out over the valley, I'm amazed that the city exists at all. The Rio Grande winds through the city, a thin strip of lush green dwarfed by wide plains of tan and gray. According to the NOAA's January 2022 Global Climate Report, last month was the sixth-hottest January in almost one hundred and fifty years. They predict that 2022 will be one of the hottest years on record. The report also notes that global temperatures for the past 37 years have been above the last century's average. Recently, the Colorado River sank to its lowest two-year average in a century.

I'm not alone in my concern over these trends; on social media and in school, I hear my peers voice similar worries about the changing climate and what it means for us as New Mexicans and humans. These issues are urgent and it's important to find solutions, but we must be measured and rational in our approach to resolving our climate problems. In some parts of New Mexico, restaurants no longer carry plastic straws. This change, designed to cut down on pollution and plastic waste, was advanced in the political and legal arena by activists, many of them in my generation. This was a high-profile environmental policy change—who hasn't heard heard the refrain “save the turtles!”?— but given the lack of either a sea turtle population or an ocean in New Mexico, I question the impact of the plastic straw bans. These serve more to alienate people outside the environmental movement than to actually protect the land. As an older relative remarked, “they don't sell plastic straws wrapped in paper, just paper straws wrapped in plastic.”

My generation will bear the cost of climate change. Future New Mexicans will have to deal with a shrinking river and potentially catastrophic disruption to our ecosystems. It may not be long before my favorite hiking spot has dried up and vanished. Rather than pursuing questionably effective and morally and legally ambiguous policies (which tend to restrict freedom in uncomfortable ways), however, I'd encourage my peers to enter STEM fields with passion and a focus on solving our problems through innovation. Just last month, engineers at the University of Illinois published the results of their attempt to build a carbon-capture device. They built an artificial leaf that uses less energy than a normal light-bulb to capture carbon from the atmosphere at a rate more than 100 times more effective than previous systems.

Despite the challenges facing us, I'm optimistic that, guided by a land ethic, my generation can solve the daunting environmental problems facing us and our native land.

Works Cited

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