

Belonging¹

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Typically there exist some form of legal documentation that a particular horse belongs to a particular trail rider. That the trail rider belongs to that horse is a fact that is universally accepted without any need of legal documentation. The totally acceptable evidence lies in what the rider dreams about and how he/she spends leisure time.

Now, to beg the question: “Do the trail rider and horse belong on wildlands (wild ecosystems)?” Drawing a question for the answer from my own values and aspirations: “Would we really be ‘trail riders’ if we ‘belonged’ some place other than on wildlands?”

I ponder the vexing issue of belonging as I sit in an airport far from my horses and the lands that I love to ride. Uneasy reflections on the meeting in which I spoke yesterday haunt me. Does recreational trail riding have a place on public wildlands? If so, then which lands? To what extent is the issue driven by selfishness on both sides of the issue? To what extent is there a true concern for harmonizing recreational land-use with natural resource protection?

While the legal points of funding sources and legislative intentions are clearly the first battles to be fought over the issue, the more deeply abiding, and possibly dividing, question is: “Is recreational trail horse use compatible with natural resource conservation objectives?” The assertion that it is not is common in the controversies over what constitutes appropriate and acceptable uses of the public lands throughout the nation.

We live in a capitalistic, democratic republic populated with 280 million people of which 80 percent live out their lives in urban and suburban landscapes. Our nation, barely a century out of the wilderness from which it was wrenched, seems to be one of the world’s models for modernity. As a people we seem to turn our eyes to towards infinite prospects for creature comforts that each of us might personally experience. We seem to want to belong in a world insulated from the realities of land and our place on it.

As modern Americans, we take great pride in our environmental awareness, yet our environmentalism is largely theoretical because we are so far removed from firsthand contact with the land. Land is comfortably experienced through our TV screens. Nevertheless, our society quickly, and without reservation, reaches conclusions on what constitutes appropriate and in appropriate land-use. It is this conundrum in which people who have little experience with land, and deal almost

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entirely with secondhand information about land, make the final decisions about how land should be used. In the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, this is one of the risks inherent to American democracy.

Probably because we, as trail riders, seek escape from too much modernity, we have tended to ignore the realities of how decisions are made and implemented for natural resource conservation. Not only do very few people in modern America know anything about recreational trail horse use, decision-makers and implementers are a reflection of the experiences and knowledge of our society. And possibly more importantly, in a democratic republic, it is the public servant's job to serve the wishes of the people.

The upshot of it all is that, with increasing frequency, conclusions are being reached that recreational trail horse use is not compatible with the nation's values for its wildlands. *In other words we do not belong there.* Our horses and how we use them are viewed as incompatible with natural resource conservation objectives. If we have a trail horse cultural heritage, it is a tradition that should be left behind because we are degrading the nation's natural heritage. Is this true? If it is, then maybe the other side is right. If it is not true, will we be content to accept this increasingly important feature of modern America's conservation policy? If we do, then where will we belong?