

Save Poudre as signature of eternity

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For The Coloradoan

Dear Congressman Brown: "They constitute a signature of time and eternity; once lost the loss would be irrevocable." So Carl Sandburg pleaded in a letter to Senator Paul Douglas in 1958, trying to save from industrial development the Indiana Sand Dunes on Lake Michigan, adjacent to Chicago. I will borrow these famous words as I write to you, another congressman, faced a quarter of a century later with a similar decision. The Poudre River and Canyon also constitute a signature of time and eternity; their loss would be irrevocable.

Many who wish to save the canyon find it difficult to articulate what they value there, especially to put seemingly softer values against the harder demands for water and power. Sandburg's point to Douglas was that Chicagoans in their sprawling metropolis needed the dunes and the lakeshore because they supplied to an urban people a natural symbol of time and eternity that contrasted with and complemented their too metropolitan life. Sandburg loved the city, but he knew that the dunes could best enrich the city if they were left wild. Poudre Canyon and its river can do as much and more for the increasingly urban Front Range.

An age-old gorge, the river-cut strata, rocks exposed back to the Precambrian Period, today's river still flowing free, surprising us

last spring with the volume of its runoff — could there be better symbols of movement and stability, permanence and flux? Such an impressive signature of time and eternity would be valuable anywhere, but it is 10 times more so when it is adjacent to an urban people, just as the dunes were more valuable because so near to the hustle and bustle of Chicago. They provided ranges of experience for which Chicagoans had few or no substitutes.

What we value during a day spent in the canyon is often called recreation. Put that way, such value can seem trivial in conflict with those who need irrigation water or flood control. But much more than recreation is at issue here. We gain a sense of perspective and place, serenity, insight into who and where we are in the earthen world, a sense of human transience and of the perennial, encompassing natural certainties. That canyon is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations that individuals and society cannot afford to do without.

All this sinks down into the hinterlands of our consciousness and makes us whole persons, better proportioned in our outlooks. We are stirred to be global citizens, more cosmopolitan just because we are exposed to these everlasting, cosmic forces that have carved and created the Earth we inhabit. We are thereby better educated than we can be in a merely metropolitan or even rural environment.

Just the primeval character of the canyon, preserved as purely as possible, heightens this experience. Primordial nature is precisely what a people need who already have ample supermarkets, hamburger stands, and television channels. Time and the river flowing, the rocks of the ages — what these can teach us overrides any benefits that I can envision from development of the canyon. Further, this kind of wild value is what we cannot look to the market or other economic forces to supply or protect. So as citizens we must turn to our government and to our elected representatives, such as yourself.

Senator Douglas used to say that when he was in early life he wanted to save the world, and when he was in his middle years his country, but at his life's end he would be satisfied to save the Indiana dunes. He succeeded, but in one of the most bitterly contested environmental fights in history. You may still be young enough to wish to save the world, or perhaps your country, both laudable and urgent goals. But I predict that if you act to secure wild and scenic designation for all the eligible portions of the Poudre River, one of your deepest satisfactions in later life will be that you saved this river and its canyon, keeping for us all this signature of time and eternity.

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