Protecting Our Environment

by Marilyn Loser

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It can be easy to take the environment of Alamosa, the San Luis Valley and the surrounding mountains for granted. I moved to Alamosa 30 years ago after living for a few years in the outskirts of Hooper (3rd house down) and along the Rio Grande outside of South Fork.

When I decided to return to school, I choose Adams State so I could stay in the valley. I couldn't bear to leave the site of fourteeners I'd climbed or to get too far away from the Weminuche Wilderness area where I cross-country skied and camped in a snow cave below Rio Grande Pyramid.

After moving to Alamosa I spent much of the little free time I had along the Rio Grande. Back then, I jogged along the dike and was inspired by the runners from Adams State and the high school. For many years I walked my dogs Maggie and Rita along the dike. I loved watching the wildlife on what is now the Alamosa Ranch. Thirty years ago, a Halloween snow storm coated Alamosa in a blanket of white that latest all winter. We were able to track-ski on the river until February.

I am very concerned that the proposed land exchange between the City of Alamosa and RV Resort developer Dan Russell will undermine the balance in the local ecosystem. Much of the wetland in the Alamosa Ranch that harbors wildlife is on the chopping block.

It has always been a struggle to preserve parts of our environment.   In fact, the first federally designated wilderness area is the Gila Wilderness in southern New Mexico. Forester Aldo Leopold fought for the designation, which was approved in 1924--just 12 years after New Mexico became a state.

In his book *American Canopy*, Eric Rutkow reports, "Leopold encountered staunch resistance from many of his colleagues in the Forest Service who believed that any potential development took priority over wilderness preservation."

In the late 1940s the Bureau of Reclamation began making plans for a billion-dollar dam project that would flood a portion of Echo Park in Dinosaur National Monument. Echo Park is in Colorado at confluence of the Yampa and Green Rivers just three miles from the Utah border.

According to Rutkow, it seemed the dam would inevitably gain approval; there were simply too many corporate interests. However, the Wilderness Society, through articles, speeches, and mailers gradually turned public sentiment against the project. In 1956 Congress passed legislation banning any dam building in Echo Park. A proposed federal Wilderness Act followed, but didn't gain enough support in the 1950s.

When J.F. Kennedy won the presidency, the movement gained an ally. "Kennedy wanted wilderness preservation to be part of his ambitious domestic program," according to Rutkow. The congressional stalemate regarding wilderness legislation "dragged out through two legislative sessions and seemed unlikely to break, but then an assassin's bullet pierced the young president's skull, and a mourning nation began to demand that Congress push through the domestic agenda of the fallen leader."

It wasn't until the fall of 1964 that President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law. And that was only after a backroom negotiating session when New Mexico Senator Clinton Anderson, who had been championing the bill for years, made some crucial concessions in order to gain permanent federal recognition of the wilderness ideal, states Rutkow.

My beloved Weminuche Wilderness, which contains the headwaters of the Rio Grande and three 14,000 foot peaks, didn't become a designated wilderness until 1975.

I'm not suggesting Alamosa create a wilderness area. Rather, I'm drawing a parallel between the struggle to preserve our land and heritage (agriculture heritage in our case) in the face of private development. I understand the City's desire to own both sides of the dike. As a citizen, I don't want to lose access to the dike and paths. I also don't want to lose the precious wetlands on the Alamosa Ranch.

"A society is defined not only by what it creates, but by what it refuses to destroy." John Sawhill