

# Looking West

The Photographic Journey in Support of the Western Environmental Law Center

by

Tom Fischer

The temperature was 114 degrees, turning the salt-laden water to pungent steam. Crunching through the shell mound I came upon a shallow pit filled with the carcasses of large fish, bleached from the sun. The combination of intense odors bit my nostrils while the buzzing flies nipped my bare legs. All I could think about was how in the world I had gotten myself into this situation. After all, I should have been sitting on my favorite bench in the Luxembourg Gardens enjoying the Parisian children playing under the supervision of lovely grandmas. Instead of the elaborate plan for my wife, Sharon, and me to live in Paris for the summer, here I was photographing the Salton Sea, 270 feet below sea level, which puts it just about twenty feet above hell.

The fact is my friend, Mark Preiss, Director of the Southwestern office of the Western Environmental Law Center (WELC), offered me the opportunity to contribute. We worked together in 1999 on an important historic preservation project in Virginia City, Nevada, with a group SCAD student interns. That experience was so positive that the prospect of another collaboration was enticing and I felt it would be the honorable thing to do. Sharon, who is always supportive and up for adventure, agreed to give up Paris, thus sealing our commitment to photograph some 20 sites in the 11 western states for WELC to use as visual support material for its projects.

Since that fateful commitment I have traveled over 7,000 miles in a rental car, camping and photographing in places below sea level and above the tree line. The sites have included pueblos and ranches, national forests and wild and scenic rivers. Most have been hot and difficult, but the people I have encountered have made it a pleasure. Part of the process has been to submit daily journal entries along with digital photographs to be posted on the WELC web site.

On the 7th day of the journey I visited the Picuris Pueblo in Northern New Mexico, a site occupied by native Americans 400 years before the construction of Notre Dame Cathedral. Governor Gerald Nailor, the tribal executive chief of the Picuris People, taught me about the sacred places such as springs and clay deposits that his people have depended upon for centuries. Those places are now closed to the people because a mining corporation has been deeded the land by the federal government based on the mining act of 1872. The result has been the potential destruction of watershed and adverse impact on plant, animal and insect species in this unique ecosystem. It also severely impacts the traditions of and culture of the indigenous people of the region. This experience brought an end to my longing for the gentle and self-indulgent days in Paris. I knew that I was in the right place, doing the right thing.

After stops in the region around Taos, New Mexico, a little fishing in the central Colorado, and traveling through Wyoming, I settled in Ketchum, Idaho for a few days. There we put on a slide lecture about the project which we have titled *Looking West*. The highlight for me was seeing one of my favorite ex-students from the Savannah College of Art and Design, Rachel Ziegler. She is a resident of Ketchum and worked with Mark Preiss and me three years ago on the Fourth Ward School Project in Virginia City.

Rachel and her family then assisted me with photographing the environmental impact of giant corporate dairy operations in Southern Idaho. If mismanaged, these concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO's) can be devastating to the quality of life anywhere nearby. Rachel's dad, Tom, and her brother, Preston, arranged for me to do aerial photographs of the region in their plane. The operations were so widespread it was the only way to visualize the impact of the CAFOs on the neighboring rivers and farms.

Photographic investigations of farms and ranches as well as endangered places such as Walker Lake and Mono Lake, the Yosemite National Park, and river systems on the northern California coast have followed the experiences in Idaho. Still pending are the rivers, forests and farmlands of Oregon. In a way this has been an exploratory expedition. It is our hope that in the years to come we will be able to connect young artists and designers from SCAD with WELC and its clients to contribute to the protection of endangered lands, species, and cultures. For a comprehensive view of the *Looking West* project log on the the WELC website at [www.westernlaw.org](http://www.westernlaw.org).

As for Paris, there is always next year.

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