

OBSERVATIONS

This is the first of two articles to be submitted by Scott Pittman about his travels with Bill Mollison. We welcome submissions from readers for what we plan to be an on-going column on observations of incorporating Permacultural ethics into our lives.

Travels With Bill

By Scott Pittman

This letter is being written from the DuBose Natural Farm in Blanco, Texas, following a long day of lecture from Bill Mollison. I thought it would be interesting to share with you readers my travels through Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, seeing the world through Bill's eyes.

We travelled from the Sunglow Ranch north to Safford then west toward Globe - our destination being the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum.

The landscape from Safford to Globe was mostly cotton cultivation with a lot of riparian areas in cottonwood, tamarisk and sycamore. The overwhelming feeling is one of land mismanagement and a collapsing landscape. Overgrazing had reduced the area to eroding hillsides and scant vegetation. The transition from the Sonoran to the Chihuahuan desert scape is startling between Superior and the arboretum. Within two miles the transition is complete with very little species overlap. You go through a tunnel and you are in the Chihuahuan desert, agave to yucca.

The Boyce Thompson Arboretum is an incredible resource for a wide range of arid land and riparian plants of the southwest. Bill was amazed at the range of eucalyptus types from all over Australia. He commented that the planting out had not been carefully done, with riparian species being on the high ground and visa-versa. We had a feast of pomegranate which Bill provided by vigorously shaking a tree while I was on the look out for resident botanists. The carob plants were heavily browsed by deer and heavily fertilized by their droppings. There was a wide variety of fig, date and olive species which could expand the plant repertoire of many of us in the southwest. The arboretum also has a very good book store and nursery plants for sale.

We backtracked from the arboretum to Safford then took Highway 666/78 west into New Mexico. This part of our trip was highlighted by intensely overgrazed land. An obvious feature of this part of our journey was that we were travelling in an enormous lake bed. As we approached the Mogollon, the ancient shoreline was illuminated by a setting sun that set out in sharp relief the shelves or pulse lines of the ancient lake shore. This basin lake was enormous at one time and the sudden erupting flood must have been devastating. By watching the cut banks of the road we were able to look at cycles of flooding - a large deposit of gravel then silt then once again gravel. Then we were out of the lake and into the mountains.

An interesting water harvesting technique was right on Highway 78. Some enterprising rancher had turned the highway runoff with an 18" concrete dam across the bar ditch and piped it to a 80-100,000 gallon tank thirty yards away. The tank was brim full - all harvested from

the highway.

There was a brief transition of oak and juniper and then we were in ponderosa. The forest had very little undergrowth and seemed heavily browsed both by cattle and deer. After a few miles we were in grassland and rolling hills.

The grasslands look to be the result of intense deforestation to provide cattle grazing. There were large areas eroded and arroyos were in various stages of development. Bill's ideas were that forests needed to be restarted and large lakes formed in the valleys. He thought that nut trees would do well as a forest tree along with Ponderosa.

We stopped at the Mimbres Hot Springs Ranch for the baths and a walk around the property. Again we were confronted by hillsides in various stages of collapse. The yucca seemed to be the only plant that was holding to the hillside and in the old cattle trails that still show on the mountainside - even though it hasn't been grazed in over 10 years. It seems part of a strategy for reclaiming those hillsides would use the trails as swales. In the folds of the hills, oak and juniper were starting to reestablish.

The oak seemed to need help going upslope. The downslope was being planted by gravity and water-born acorns, but there apparently wasn't enough animal power to carry seeds upslope.

Looking closely at the landscape revealed old bogs, lakes, forests and fields that no longer exist but have left their imprint and suggest appropriate design.

Our journey next lead us up and over the continental divide. This stretch of our journey was the only part of our 1100-mile trip where man hadn't trod too heavily. Lots of conifer on the north facing slopes. And juniper and oak on the south face. These tree covers and understory are all that holds this steeply sloped landscape in place.

Hillsboro, New Mexico, and suddenly 150 miles of greasewood, without which the landscape would be dirt and stone. New Mexico has imported a herd of camels to help deal with this lonely pioneer. God only knows why! Heard on the radio, the Texas Department of Agriculture is importing some forms of root grubs to deal with the mesquite "problem." Shades of kudzu!

We stopped at the Bosque del Apache Wildlife Refuge and found enormous flocks of sandhill crane and snow geese but the whooping crane was nowhere to be found. We ended the midpoint of our journey in Santa Fe where we shared Thanksgiving and friends.

The main experience of travelling with Bill was the amazing balance of his view. Where I have found myself depressed at the loss of topsoil and tree cover, Bill found solutions and thereby hope.