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LANDSCAPES FOR A CHANGING WORLD

OUR LOCAL ECONOMY'S MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE

By NATE DOWNEY

Since the days of the Spanish explorer Onate, tourism has brought northern New Mexico more money than any other industry. But tourists are not our local economy's most valuable resource. That would be water.

We often hear about how the people of the Rio Grande Valley survived through many dry spells over the centuries. Perhaps we don't talk enough about how, during a drought, the 900-year-old Hokoman culture vanished from what is now southern Arizona. Without water, civilizations disappear.

New Mexico's water supply is shrinking at an alarming rate. Sure, the Buckman Diversion project will buy Santa Fe some time, but we must look at our regional water supply much more creatively if we want a flourishing economy. Fortunately, by using a wide variety of techniques, methods, and systems, many concerned citizens and well-meaning groups are providing hope in the form of practical solutions to our water woes.

In my just-released book, *Harvest the Rain: How to Enrich Your Life by Seeing Every Storm as a Resource*, I reference over 100 people, organizations, and businesses based in northern New Mexico. Many of them are part of the growing water-harvesting industry; others are backyard gardeners, while others hold positions of power among those who make political decisions on the water front.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Ecological landscaping, water harvesting, wastewater treatment, and watershed protection, all provide excellent green-collar jobs at all skill levels. Laborers, arborists, plumbers, engineers, educators, entrepreneurs, water-quality scientists, product manufacturers, and community organizers all have critical roles to play. Given the economic importance of both water and tourism, let's look at three upcoming events that focus on regenerating local watersheds as they attract tourist dollars to northern New Mexico.

For anyone with political-activist leanings, the highlight of the three events will probably be Oscar Olivera's appearance at Northern New Mexico College on Saturday, November 6. Olivera, who will be speaking at the Traditional Agriculture and Sustainable Living Conference, and his group of Bolivian activists succeeded in forcing Bechtel, Inc. out his country. Back in the early part of this century, Bechtel tried to privatize the water system in Olivera's community, but when people began to realize that only the very rich would be able to afford Bechtel's pricing structure, Olivera and his group rose up and turned the international conglomerate back. Although one "water warrior" was killed in the struggle, Olivera sets a hopeful example to local people everywhere: It is unacceptable for mega corporations to own entire communities by controlling the resources necessary for their survival.

Local organizer Emigdio Ballon expects excellent turnout even given a tough economy. "In previous years we've had 500 people come to our conference," Ballon told me. "This year we have some incredible speakers, so we are very excited to see what happens." The fifth annual conference on Friday, October 5, and Saturday, October 6, costs \$75 per person, down 25% from last year's price. Sponsored by the Native Earth Bio-Culture Council and Tesuque Pueblo, the conference culminates with a circle of Aztec dances, a seed exchange, and a native traditional ceremony. More information can be found at www.foodandseedconference.info.

For people wanting a smaller crowd and more hands-on experience with water harvesting, Ampersand Sustainable Learning Center will be worth checking out on November 6. Located between Cerrillos and Madrid, New Mexico, Ampersand is hosting a workshop called “The Natural Kitchen” with Los Angeles-based author and sustainability coach Deborah Eden Tull. The cost is \$50 to \$65, sliding scale.

Sustainable agriculture, green menu planning, zero-waste meals to go, and solar cooking represent some of the topics to be covered, but water harvesters and water-harvester wannabees will be particularly inspired by the workshop’s setting. “Living off of rain catchment has attracted a lot of attention,” says Ampersand executive director Amanda Bramble. “People don’t believe that you can do it on 10 inches of rain per year, but we do. It’s not like we are living on a farm, but a little frugality can go a long way, especially when we divert a lot of our wastewater to the plants around the house.”

Ampersand offers a wide variety of classes, workshops, and tours throughout each spring and autumn. Bramble says the last stretch of road before you get to the center is too undependable to attempt to plan large events in the snowy and rainy seasons. Visit www.ampersandproject.com for a full list of upcoming events.

Less than a week after making the tough decision between the events described above, the Quivira Coalition’s 9th annual conference will take place in Albuquerque from November 10 through 12. Titled “The Carbon Ranch: Using Food and Stewardship to Build Soil and Fight Climate Change,” the conference will attempt to weave a thread through a variety of important issues. “If we can sequester carbon in the soil, we can fight climate change by growing local food, improving the health of our local watersheds, and helping our local economies,” says Quivira’s executive director Courtney White, “There’s no downside to increasing the soils capacity to hold water.”

White expects to have about 500 people in attendance at the two-and-a-half-day conference, which costs \$125. One-third of the attendees are likely to be ranchers, he told me in a phone interview, and speakers are flying in from California, Missouri, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C., Wisconsin, and Vermont — not to mention Australia. To sign up, check out www.quiviracoalition.org.

It is hard to put a dollar figure on the effect that water problems have on a local economy, but leave it to people from the City Different and the Land of Enchantment to make the best of a difficult situation. As a national leader in water-conscious policy, we do ourselves and our local economy right. There are solutions to our water woes and thanks to people like Emigdio Ballon, Amanda Bramble and Courtney White, we are likely to find them right here at home.

If you happen to be looking for more stories about the water harvesters in our community, please check out www.harvesttherain.com.