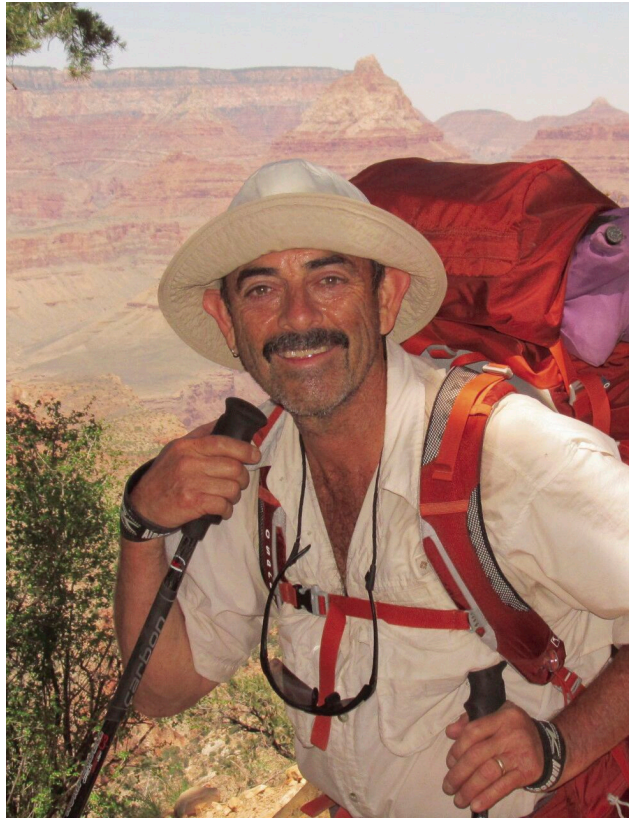


Writers on the Range: Farewell to two radicals with a common goal – changing the West

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The West lost two larger-than-life conservationists this year, and while I considered both friends, they couldn't have been more different. Yet both were radical in their own ways.

One was ranching reformer Sid Goodloe, the other the activist and “monkey-wrencher” Dave Foreman. Each changed the way we think about this region.

Goodloe, who was almost 93 when he died, bought a badly abused ranch in El Capitan, New Mexico, in 1956. Restoring it to health became a project that lasted nearly 7 decades.

Taking his young family to Africa to learn traditional livestock techniques set him on a new land management path. There he met Allan Savory who showed him the wisdom of short-duration, rotational grazing. Once home, Goodloe got Savory invited to range management schools to teach the rest of the West how to restore abused land. He also realized something surprising: His ranch had once been a savannah grassland.

Goodloe practiced “restorative ranching” long before there was such a term. He won a Leopold Conservation Award for using the chainsaw and prescribed fire as some of his tools to eliminate invasive pinyons and junipers.

Where eroded arroyos once ravaged his ranch with floods every time it rained, he filled in gullies to bring back flowing streams. His work restored habitat for endangered species and game animals, while at the same time, he made a living from his cow-calf operation.

Ignoring the accusations from some in the ranching community that land trusts and conservation easements were a sneaky, backdoor con to steal private property rights, Goodloe founded the Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust. He understood that land trusts were tools for like-minded ranchers to save working ranches from fragmentation and development.

While cowboy hats were de rigueur at Goodloe’s memorial, tie-dyed shirts were the choice at Foreman’s gathering, held in a national park campground and attended by environmentalists from all over the region.

As the Arizona Daily Star’s Tony Davis put it, Foreman, a friend of the writer and activist Ed Abbey, was a “redneck wilderness advocate” who believed in “direct action.” That meant he went beyond civil disobedience to underground activities such as pouring sand into the gas tanks of bulldozers used by loggers.

Co-founder of the radical group Earth First!, Foreman, who died at 75, was eventually busted by the FBI. What many Westerners will never forget was his unfurling a banner painted to look like a giant crack across the face of Glen Canyon Dam in 1981 to protest its existence.

Over the last decade, I got to know Foreman through wilderness work in New Mexico. As a local Chicano committed to social justice, I didn’t expect to like him based on some of his more extreme views, particularly around immigration policy and surging populations of brown people around the world. I was surprised to find him a warm and big-hearted person with an infectious sense of humor.

In his later years, I saw a subtle shift as he came to understand the importance of diverse cultural values and perspectives in the conservation community. Though his outrage at the exploiters of the West remained undiminished, his methods moderated as he co-founded the Wildlands Network and founded the Rewilding Institute, both with the mission of helping wildlife survive and flourish.

One more thing about Sid Goodloe: I was lucky enough for over a decade to serve with him on the board of directors of the Quivira Coalition, based in Santa Fe. It approached conservation issues through what we called the “radical center.” Environmentalists, ranchers and land managers checked their politics at the door with the shared aim of improving land health across the West.

Stepping toward the center isn’t easy in these polarized times. Even invoking Goodloe and Foreman in the same breath is probably sacrilege to some reading this. Yet I think if the two had ever met, they might have discovered a grudging respect for each other.

If we want to save what there is left to save in the West, we need to work together across the political spectrum. I mourn the loss of these two wildly different, but great, men who taught us to never give up on making things better.

Ernie Atencio is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is an anthropologist and writer who has been doing conservation work around the Southwest for 30 years.