We hope that you and your family are healthy and doing well in these difficult and trying times. Due to the coronavirus crisis, we have nothing new to report regarding our efforts to save the Dells, but we would like to share a story sent to us by one of our supporters. This story serves as a reminder of what’s been lost, but it also provides motivation to work to prevent other cherished landscapes, like the Granite Dells, that we value from being lost in the future.
An Alligator Juniper and my Dog
A Contemplation

For eight years, I had the privilege of living on a college campus in Prescott, Arizona. Much of the 500 acres of the campus remained natural, with scrub oak, pinyon pine, cliff rose, and alligator junipers. My dog Beanie and I would rise early in the morning, often at dawn, and walk along the trails, many of them created by the wildlife. Frequently we would hear or see the coyotes finishing their night’s work, yapping at each other, and families of javelinas rustling in the brush—pig-like creatures but not pigs—who do not see too well. Sometimes I would notice that the brush seemed different and would stop and look around, only then to see a mule deer move its head. And there was a porcupine who at special times would come out of his home in an old drainage ditch when I would whistle a song.

When time allowed, Bean and I sometimes would cross a barbed wire fence onto what is called Pioneer Park, about 1,000 acres of what was then natural land crisscrossed by those trails the wildlife had created. We would walk down a steep path with many large rocks and sprinkles of white quartz to a valley where one huge alligator juniper spread its cover. In the spring, the juniper would glow yellow/green from its pollen. Alligator junipers that size may be 1,000 years old so I would touch its scaly bark, admire its canopy, contemplate its age, and once took photographs of it. I remember telling the tree that because it was in a park it was safe. Bean and I never lingered for too long there because certain places on our walk made my dog, a Benji-type mutt, inexplicably and nervously hurry or hurtle herself through them, not stopping to smell or wander off. That was one of those places.

Twenty years ago, we moved two valleys over from the campus but still close to Pioneer Park. By that time, my dog was in her late teens and she had long stopped her walks with
me. In the spring of 1999, she died. She was a few months short of being nineteen, and I howled quietly to myself, a silent coyote. I knew I would never forget her, but as the days and the weeks passed after her death, I could feel her slipping even further from me. Her death not only ended her physical being but also was erasing her from my mind. I knew that that would happen. Regardless, it scared and bothered me. Insult to injury.

I took myself for many walks, alone, after her death in Pioneer Park. Once, soon after she died, I felt her walking and running parallel with me, bouncing, stopping to explore, chasing quail or rabbits. Doing her thing. That only happened once.

And not soon after her death, after little dialogue with affected citizens that I knew of, the county decided to build a major highway slicing the park in two. At that time, huge swaths of dusty brown dirt began to zigzag in areas of the park that Bean and I had wandered, often becoming lost, large packs of coyotes streaming silently by us, sometimes ending up in another valley miles from our starting point. Depressing as it was, one afternoon I decided to walk in this scar to determine its route through the park.

I turned one long curve and realized I was standing where the alligator juniper had spread its cover. Where once there had been a small valley, with jays squawking and ground squirrels scurrying and the ancient tree overseeing it all, there was dirt soon to receive a frosting of hard macadam. Not frosting. Soon to receive its artificial, suffocating, flat, macadam tombstone. I thought about the people in the future driving along that highway not knowing and if knowing, no longer thinking about what had been there before on the very ground their wheels rolled over, their feet kept neat and clean on the pedals.

And I thought how sad it was that just as with the memory of my dog, time erases. Maybe Beanie with all her dog prescience knew the fate of that ancient tree. Like Beanie, many years before, I did not linger in that spot. But I did not forget what once occupied that little valley where that regale alligator juniper had lived for countless years equivalent to
many human lifetimes.

In twenty years, a snippet of time compared to the tree’s, I have seen the antelope disappear from the hills aside of other roads; have seen strip malls proliferate with stores offering smoothies with double dose of vitamins and minerals to offset the general unhealthiness of our surroundings; dealerships offering shiny cars on blocks of parking lots and some stuck on ridges encircling the lots as if they had become lost from their herd; McMansions on what once were pristine hilltops and hillsides so people can roam around inside, never see another soul in their climate controlled bubbles, and look down upon what they think is their kingdom. I have seen numerous box stores offering supplies to landscape land bulldozed clean of its native vegetation. The box stores themselves required more swaths of denuded land for their construction with pathetic trees requiring irrigation planted on the once green hillsides once providing food and cover for birds and wildlife. No longer.

I continue to walk through the park, no longer going the entire perimeter as frequently because that means going over or under the four lane, high speed highway that supposedly made people’s lives so much better.

Usually, not too many vehicles zip along--enough, however, to disturb the quiet of the park, enough, however, to make my nose crinkle from their exhaust, but not enough to my way of thinking to justify the destruction caused by the highway.

Splotches of the park now are covered with soccer fields, baseball fields, more macadam of course, and then in one of its valleys and up the steep hillsides, is what a friend says looks like psoriasis, with its attending heartbreak, he adds. I call it the scar. To build new roads, the county’s Road Department “mines” the soil there and the result is not just a swath but a chunk, at least 30 acres of dirt that has had its protective cover of brush and trees ripped off, bulldozed into piles at various ends, a brown desert within an oasis of yellow grass and bonsai-like trees.
I read how native birds are being replaced by nonnative birds because of decimation of their natural food source, the brush and native trees, like the alligator juniper, that are willy-nilly bulldozed out of existence. I stare hard at this scar. It’s a mini scar midst major scars Prescott has been subjected to and will continue to be subjected to because people have become so accustomed to the roads, the scars, the noise, the Wal-marts, the Lowes, the construction of house after house in “divisions” named after the displaced plant or tree or animal, the donors who will become names only soon enough, their own lives forgotten. Pinyon Oaks, Antelope Hills, Cliff Rose. Some people, the newcomers, can’t remember and others don’t want to remember a time when where they lived had been different, a place of natural beauty. They begin to think that their surroundings are normal. And the next generation will think they’re even more normal. That scares and bothers me.

People tell me progress, progress being construction of dealerships and box stores and new houses cannot be stopped. I don’t know. But just as I never want the memory of my old dog to disappear completely because she meant something to me, I also don’t want what the land had once been to ever disappear from my mind, from others’ minds. I want the memory of its beauty to walk solemnly alongside of its destruction, a reminder that it meant something in and of itself. I want the memory of its beauty to walk along aside of its destruction, as both a reminder and a rebuke.

-E. Groom
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If you have any questions or comments about this message or to correct your contact information, please reply to this email.

Help us to ensure we have a beautiful community for years to come! Stay tuned for more information and more ways to get involved!

Paid for by the Save the Dells Political Action Committee (donations are not tax deductible)  
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