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### Circling the Welcome Wagons

\* Equity-rich boomers who yearn for wide-open spaces are heading for the Rocky Mountain West--Montana in particular--where the locals are waiting. With pitchforks.

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By **Jim Robbins**, **Jim Robbins** lives in Helena, Mont., and is the author of "Last Refuge: The Environmental Showdown in the American West," among other books.

For a long time, people settled in this country where the natural resources were, or along railroads and highways. That left giant swaths of American outback empty by default, and the Rocky Mountain West, with its mind-numbing distances and extreme environment, was, for a long time, among the emptiest. Thirty years ago, when I moved from upstate New York to Montana, it was still a high-country Brigadoon, hidden away from the real world by its location, climate and deficit of jobs. The few cities were islands in an ocean of drop-dead beautiful landscapes. Montana and the other mountains and canyons of the nation's cordillera, in Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico, weren't yet known as the Third Coast--the next major American settlement after the East Coast, the first, and the West Coast on the Pacific Ocean.

The problem with living on the Third Coast is that we all saw what happened to the second.

It's not that a little new blood isn't a fine thing; Manifest Destiny isn't all wrong. Migration brings interesting ideas and new money that does a lot of good, building restaurants and cultural institutions, creating sustainable jobs and restoring historic buildings. But there's a tipping point past which newcomers become too numerous, paving the way for one of the great paradoxes: They destroy what attracted them. "What is good in reasonable measure is often bad in full measure," the late historian K. Ross Toole once wrote, "and Montana has been a place of full measure."

If you believe that civilizations should be predicated on preserving the natural systems that sustain them, and on sharing them evenly with other species and people, then the balance has, in fact, tipped, not only in Montana but in the other states in the Rocky Mountain West. The migration has become an invasion.

In the 1990s, it was as if the gods in charge of trends had commanded that it was time for wealthy executives and celebrities to own prime stretches of ponderosa forests with trout streams in the Rocky Mountains. Many of those who bought into this trend were well-meaning. For every greedy invader there was a Liz Claiborne or a Ted Turner, welcome neighbors who hired locals, set up charitable foundations and protected their wide-open

spaces with conservation easements in which they sold off the right to develop their ranches and defended the land against sprawl--the darkest demon of the New West--in exchange for tax benefits.

The mega-trend they pioneered, though, has been like an earthquake for those who have lived here for generations. Out-of-state buyers spend what to them is chump change; to locals, the tens of millions paid for a movie-star ranch amounts to several lifetimes of savings. Even if they had the money, it wouldn't make sense to spend so much for a place where their cattle could graze.

"When I look to buying land I crunch the numbers on production value," says Bill Donald, president of the Montana Stockgrowers Assn. and a rancher near Melville. "Now you can't pay for the land with production values. It's not even close." In the last five years his property has more than doubled in value. If he sold it, where would he go? Many are leaving western Montana, he says, and buying cheaper ranches farther east, in something he calls the "eastern wave."

Montanans who get by on \$20,000 or \$25,000 a year and drive 10-year-old pickups crane their necks to look at the multimillion-dollar castles going up on the hills and hear about how the owners bought a personal quarry to provide rock for the construction crews, and we feel like vassals. The newcomers often don't understand the live-and-let-live philosophy of our way of life. One of the first things many do is put up stout, expensive fences and heavy-duty gates equipped with locks; they hire armed guards and cut off traditional access to their land--sometimes to public land as well. James Cox Kennedy, chairman of Cox Enterprises in Atlanta, built a fence in southwest Montana that prevented people from getting to the Ruby River. Last year, several hundred angry public access advocates took a flotilla of boats down the river through the billionaire's ranch. They enjoyed the trip, though it didn't make any difference.

No outsider generated more fire-breathing outrage than David Lipson, a Las Vegas developer who built the Resort at Paws Up in an unspoiled valley near Missoula and then proclaimed that he was appropriating the name "Last Best Place" and trademarking it for the exclusive use of his resort. "The Last Best Place," the title of a 1988 collection of stories by Montana writers, had been informally espoused by Montanans (who had done the same with "The Big Sky," a novel written in 1947 by A.B. Guthrie). Nobody had thought to legally adopt the phrase; anyone was free to use it, so who would steal it? Lipson was condemned by Gov. Brian Schweitzer and other state officials. Sen. Conrad Burns persuaded Congress to forbid the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office from using any federal money to register the trademark "Last Best Place."

I think the biggest problem with the rich and famous is that they're famous. With David Letterman, Michael Keaton, Mel Gibson, Carole King and Andie MacDowell gushing on TV and in the tabloids about their homes in Montana or Idaho or Wyoming, the Rocky Mountain West as we know it just doesn't stand a chance.

We understand why boomers are bailing out of their fouled nests elsewhere and coming here. It's for the safe schools, the abundant nature, the lack of traffic snarl, the fact that you can walk from City Hall to the mountains in 10 minutes, or get into a car and be fishing on a river in 20. And the old days have passed when you had to reside somewhere because your job or business was there. FedEx, computers, a change in the nature of work and a mammoth transfer of wealth from parents to their boomer kids have all combined to create a New America.

And a Third Coast. In the Rocky Mountain West, nearly "all net new jobs are in service--engineers, architects, maid, waiters," says Ray Rasker, executive director of Headwaters Economics, a nonprofit research firm in Bozeman, the seat of Gallatin County (the population of which, by the way, has shot up 55% in 15 years).

The relatively inexpensive cost of land is a big reason for all the immigration. Following the escape-fantasy lead of retreating celebrities, equity refugees--Southern Californians, for instance, who can't find anything there for less than a million dollars--are able to buy homes here for \$200,000 or \$300,000 or \$400,000 and effectively retire. People of modest means in Los Angeles or Seattle or Chicago are transformed into millionaires when they cross into Montana or Idaho or Wyoming. "It's the next big land grab," says Rasker, comparing the trend to the seizure of Indian lands by white settlers.

While the land costs are insignificant in the global economy, to those stuck in the local economy they're stratospheric. Studies have found that in Missoula, for example, the average person can't afford the average house (the median price for a single-family home was \$185,000 last year) because housing costs have gone up three times faster than incomes. The middle class is being run out of town.

And out of the countryside. I used to fly-fish, a sport I took up long before "A River Runs Through It" was filmed near Bozeman and Livingston. I can't muster the enthusiasm anymore. So many drift boats can be seen along the Missouri and other rivers that it looks like a Viking invasion. Or an "Orvis orgy," as some locals call it, referring to the expensive gear that well-heeled fishermen like to wear. Shouting matches and even fistfights break out. There are just too many people whose lives and incomes the locals don't understand.

"The new migrants are adept at running a global economy," Rasker says. "They are intelligent and well-traveled. They sell ideas, knowledge and experience. The locals, on the other hand, have bumper stickers that say 'true wealth comes from the ground.'"

It used to. In the old days, the settlers who ended up in the interior West made their livings by logging and mining and raising cattle. Few gave much thought to the impact that clear-cutting, open-pit gold mining with cyanide and overgrazing would have on the environment. In the 1960s and '70s, we began to realize the real costs of extraction. It wasn't just aesthetic, but economic as well: If rivers turned red with mine waste and forests were cut down and trucked away, they weren't any use for hunting and fishing.

So you can see how some might have viewed the Third Coast as the future, one in which nature intact was the primary value. As it turns out, the Third Coast is painting itself into a new ecological corner. There's only a small amount of high-quality habitat in the vastness of this region. That's precisely what the New Westerners are after.

In his office in a historic building on the tree-lined Montana State University campus in Bozeman, ecology professor Andrew Hansen explains the nascent science that measures the impact of so many people wanting to enjoy hiking and off-road vehicle driving, mountain biking and bird-watching, of so many people wanting to live near Yellowstone or Glacier or Grand Teton or Arches or Rocky Mountain national parks.

You're thinking they should be allowed to; it's a free country.

The problem is that most of the private, state and federal boundaries were decided during the 19th century and not based on a 20th or 21st century scientific understanding of natural systems. The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is a prime and well-studied example. In 1872, when Ulysses S. Grant was president, lines were drawn around 2.2 million acres to create the park, with the idea of protecting the geothermal wonders and the wildlife. But that acreage is only the core of the apple. In the last 20 years researchers have determined that you can't simply map out a preserve and allow development around it--it takes another 20 million acres outside to support the elk, bison and antelope that live most of the time in Yellowstone but that also depend on far-off river bottoms and wind-scoured valleys for winter range. Those 20 million acres are mostly public.

Hansen clicks on his computer. A map of the Greater Yellowstone comes up, and he points to areas in red outside the park. "These are ecological hot zones," he says, drawing his finger across the screen. He means places where the biodiversity is richest because habitat, food supply and other factors come together for a large number of species. Then he clicks on the next overlay--where homes are being or have been built--and it correlates almost exactly. "Ecological hot spots are disproportionately on private land," Hansen says.

Unlike, say, a gold mine, a single-family house or even a Ted Turner-size vacation ranch has a small footprint. "But each home has an aura, a zone around it," Hansen says. And when residential development is heavy, as it is here, there are so many of these zones that his hot spot map looks like a moth-eaten blanket. One after another the spots appear, tiny tears in the wild fabric. There are many reasons: Trees are cut down, which creates what's known as an edge effect, and a forest open to the elements in this way can be dried out by the wind. Grizzlies are attracted by garbage and dog food, and when they get into trouble, they are killed or moved. Magpies and cowbirds are lured by birdseed, and as their numbers rise they raid the nests of rarer songbirds and drive them out.

Exurban sprawl is a great homogenizer of natural systems. Human development creates a narrow spectrum of habitat where species that are known as generalists--skunks, raccoons, magpies, deer--thrive, often to unfortunate ends, and where "specialist species"--bobcats, grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolverines--decline. Colorado has been

experiencing large-scale exurban growth since the 1960s. But even this sprawl-savvy state is staggered by the current levels of growth.

Dave Theobald, a professor of conservation planning at Colorado State University, has been measuring the impact since 1995. The disruption in winter range for deer is a major concern, he says. Fences, roads, dogs and homes force deer to places they might not normally go and to gather in unusually large herds. Theobald recently co-authored a paper citing evidence that the change in natural patterns caused by human sprawl may be contributing to the spread of chronic wasting disease--the wild animal variant of mad cow disease.

Rapid exurban growth on the edge of publicly owned wildlands also adversely affects sound natural management. In the last 20 years, ecologists have come to understand that Western ecosystems have evolved with frequent fires, which clean and reinvigorate the natural systems by turning wood into fertilizer-rich ash. With people residing across the prairie and in the forests, fire, as essential and invigorating as rain, is denied its role, because, of course, we fight fire to protect our property. That will fundamentally shift the ecology.

"We're changing a lot of ecological processes very quickly," Theobald says. "We're trying to understand them all."

I don't know what the answer is. What the interlopers are after is the lifestyle of the people who live here--a lifestyle that can't be possible if too many more people join us. Just like logging and mining and overgrazing, population growth is a threat, perhaps the major threat. Yet it falls between the cracks of laws and rules and moralities that the other industries have to play by, and will no doubt continue to do so until the unique natural world of the Rocky Mountains becomes as homogenized and crowded as the rest of the country. And then, of course, it won't be unique anymore.

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