

Steve Duerr's Thin Green Line: Part One

[Todd Wilkinson](#) October 5, 2006

EDITOR'S NOTE: On Friday October 6, New West proudly commences its first conference on real estate and development meant to help broaden the discussion about how we live and profit from the landscape around us. Among the very distinguished speakers is attorney, conservative Republican, and former Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce Director Steve Duerr, who is known nationally as one of the greenest promoters of commerce in the country. Duerr's approach also speaks to the spirit of our conference. Below is an expansion of a profile that New West correspondent Todd Wilkinson wrote for Jackson Hole Magazine.

Steve Duerr has that healthy rugged look which could easily cause people to mistake him for the kind of Western redneck that most visitors who come to Jackson Hole believe is authentic.

Duerr, a granite jawed, stockily-built, cowboy-hat-wearing, pick-up-truck-driving, Republican attorney in the prime of middle age is also a hard-skating hockey player from Minnesota. He isn't disposed to casually slinging touchy-feely catchphrases that sound like sappy punchlines on Hallmark greeting cards.

Yet when Duerr strings together three simple words — POWER OF PLACE — the former executive director of the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce turns soft. He believes the bon mots convey something diffusely magical—yes he says, even profound—about his adopted home valley that begins along the eastern edge of the famous Teton Range.

Until recently, Duerr the tough guy perched himself on a hot seat in Jackson Hole and it was Duerr, the appointed defender of capitalism, who recognized that rhetorically speaking, Power of Place represented a new faultline opening between Jackson Hole's mythologically tranquil past of old-style rubber tomahawk shop tourism and its still undefined future. Today, of course, Jackson Hole—like Aspen, Vail, Sun Valley, Taos, Santa Fe, Park City, Whitefish and others—is a bastion for the rich, famous, and some of the highest average private property values in the U.S.

Ask Duerr where Power of Place came from and he openly acknowledges the idea behind Jackson Hole's new "brand identity" isn't his own. The concept finds its first origin in a poetic aside written by famed ecologist and local conservation activist Olaus Murie, one of the seminal figures in wilderness preservation.

In 1943, Murie wondered: "How can we encompass it in words? I have heard residents try to pin it down in outbursts of enthusiasm, but they couldn't find the words...No, we can not describe the spirit of Jackson Hole—the 'Spirit of Place'—but many of us FEEL it."

Duerr, whom some have described as a brilliant visionary while others call him Quixotic and a wheeler dealer—is convinced that Power of Place can also deliver Jackson Hole paydirt in the

bank, be invoked to inspire world leaders to visit and become better caretakers of the planet, and position the valley as “the Geneva, Switzerland of the northern Rockies in the 21st century.”

He certainly doesn’t come across as your typical chamber of commerce spokesman. Five years ago when Duerr and the Chamber adopted POWER of PLACE as Jackson Hole’s modern mantra, it signaled, for the descendants of homestead families, an abrupt shift away from the area’s quaint and nostalgic motto: “The last and best of the Old West” which has played out like a theme park ride every summer for decades in the form of nightly gunfights, staged by local two-bit actors, around the downtown square which is marked by its elk antler archways.

The trademarking of Power of Place followed months of consultation with citizen focus groups involving business leaders, including real estate brokers, and prominent conservationists. It also cost thousands of dollars to slick up.

Surprising to a few observers, perhaps, is that the Chamber’s branding exercise captured attention across the West and won awards because it was radically different from the stuff of your typical vacation guide. Seized upon by neighboring resort communities, Power of Place was cited as an ingenious example of how private enterprise can look upon the natural environment as an asset rather than an impediment to the local economy.

Duerr suddenly became a rising star receiving invitations to speak on the subject across the country, including serving as keynote at a major convention of resort town planners in Banff.

Yet back home in Jackson, Power of Place’s local traction had been tempered by suspicion and distrust. The phrase may indeed have descended from Murie, but today it is synonymous with Steve Duerr himself.

“The fact that Steve [wasn’t] fired for developing the Power of Place theme is an indication of the kind of tolerance you find at the Jackson Hole Chamber, an open mindedness that you don’t encounter at chambers in a lot of other communities,” says Jan Brown, executive director of the Yellowstone Business Partnership, a sister regional organization to the Chamber. “Everyone recognizes the power of Jackson Hole’s scenery but now the question becomes: How much farther beyond the slogan are people willing to go and can [people like] Steve Duerr take them there?”

Across North America, nearly every community large and small has a local chamber of commerce, an advocacy organization dedicated to aggressively promoting business opportunity which often involves land development. Many chambers subscribe to the political agenda and free market ideology spelled out by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has tended to look upon planning, zoning and environmental regulation as leftist impediments to progress.

Not the enigmatic Mr. Duerr.

Duerr says he did not subscribe to the U.S. Chamber’s rigid playbook.

Still, he knew full and well that when push came to shove, the Jackson Hole Chamber must ultimately choose a side in the chronic polemic between economy and ecology. A chamber, after all, can't have green both ways, or can it? Duerr believes it can. He believes that thoughtful planning is actually one of the strongest allies of businesspeople who are concerned about maintaining the blue sky value of their hard work over the long term.

"As Jackson Hole is not 'anytown USA,'" Duerr once told me in a story I once wrote, "then our Chamber can not be 'AnyChamber USA, either. Regardless of politics or philosophy a common shared value is the glue that brings us together. In our town, the elements of a community that works are a vibrant commerce, stable jobs and families, but based on a balance between commerce AND CONSERVATION."

Commerce and conservation. Economy and Ecology. The Green of Money and the Verde of Trees That Shelter Us, Make Our Communities Attractive To the Eye, and Are Recognized To Be Sinks Of Carbon. Duerr, the unapologetic capitalist, says without any shame at the high-end cocktail parties he attends in Jackson Hole, that he is a tree hugger who lives in a home made of wood.

Ironically, two generations ago Jackson Hole fought a bitter culture war over the then seemingly incompatible words of commerce and conservation that almost tore the community apart. When he was a young man, former U.S. Senator, Wyoming Governor, Interior Secretary and present large Jackson Hole ranch owner Cliff Hansen tried to stop the U.S. government from creating Grand Teton National Park out of private ranchland. Hansen argued that the park, being spearheaded by the Rockefeller family, would hamstring commerce.

In recent years, the honorable Mr. Hansen has pronounced on several occasions that he was, in fact, wrong and that Grand Teton "is the best thing that ever happened to this valley."

The Hansen family is today on the verge of selling a huge portion of its historic holdings for a princely sum and they acknowledge that the high property values are owed in large measure to Jackson Hole zealously protecting its natural assets. The family, purportedly, is selling to the buyer because the purchaser is committed to continuing to protect the open space on the ranch that is valued by all in the valley.

On the other hand, Hansen also denounced the federal government for promotion of wolf and grizzly bear recovery, for tightly regulating logging and oil and gas development, and for setting aside tracts of national forest as wilderness. During their day, Hansen and Olaus Murie found themselves at bitter odds. One could argue that Hansen's attitudes are probably still shared by many members of the Chamber of Commerce.

Duerr says that in the present politically polarized atmosphere of Washington, D.C. that has also become manifested in the hinterlands, citizens need to put aside their blind adherence to political labels and identity and think broader. He says there are no family values more priceless than loved ones who spend time outdoors together, in an inspiring environment and count their blessings each day that they fortunate to live where they do.

Every person is a stakeholder in his or her community and while commerce is important, it's what folks do when they're off the time clock of work that speaks larger to the kind of values that he believes makes inhabitants of the Western United States people who understand what true family values are.

It might be easy to mistake the 50-something Duerr who became executive director at the Jackson Hole Chamber in 1999, as a re-dyed in the wool greenie—a PREZERVATIONIST—but both environmentalists and their adversaries would be deluding themselves. It wasn't that long ago, actually, that Duerr was a hired legal gun for the oil and gas industry and he encouraged the Chamber years ago not to take a stand against energy development on the valley's periphery.

He believes that people can and do change through enlightenment but they need to open their eyes. “We [in Jackson Hole] are far removed from most U.S. Chamber of Commerce issues, but make no mistake the job of a chamber executive director must be all about business,” he says. “I [was there] to advocate for business issues and business people and to focus on advancing sound management policy with regard to the core mission of the Jackson Hole Chamber.”

Duerr believes, however, that keeping natural landscapes healthy is an important to promoting economic well being as maintaining an infrastructure of roads, air service and high speed internet. “Idealism must be tempered by practical action,” Duerr says, who together with Jonathan Schechter, a land use guru who is also speaking at this week’s New West conference, helped found the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs. It has actually become a player in the international dialogue over climate change.

“My job at the Chamber,” Duerr told me, [was] to represent business, but it’s all about mindfulness to the big picture and continually seeking the right balance. If I tend to be too far green, I should be fired. Being a conservation activist wasn’t not my job, it’s not what I was paid to do.”

Nonetheless, “Steve talking about Jackson becoming the Geneva of North America raised eyebrows. It is bold and there’s not a lot of chamber of commerce directors I know who have the creativity and courage to propose it,” says Luther Propst, founder and executive director of the Sonoran Institute which promotes protection of agricultural and natural landscapes in the West through community planning. “Would such a concept benefit the owners of rubber tomahawk shops? Probably not. But Steve’s thinking about where Jackson needs to be in 2025, not in 1955.”

Pining for the past nostalgically leads more often to heartache than to a time portal that can magically be engaged simply by having the right rhetoric, Propst says. Change is constant, it is inevitable, and it is unstoppable. The only uncertainty is that communities which anticipate change and hold onto the assets that make them special will be better positioned in the future and more prosperous.

National parks and other federal public lands, such as national forests and wildlife refuges, have proved to be multi-faceted economic engines. No study, including several analyses completed by Sonoran Institute, has ever disputed this fact. Dennis Glick, who oversees the Northern Rockies

office of Sonoran Institute (and who is also speaking at the New West real estate conference), says that with very few exceptions, whether its protection of public lands, establishment of conservation easements on private ranchland, construction of trails and pathways, or simply designating green space in a development, conservation is not a liability to nearby property values. And in every case, an agency or developer gains permanent satisfaction from doing something that benefits the local community in perpetuity.

Park gateway towns, Glick's boss, Probst notes, have been attracting huge blocks of lone eagle entrepreneurs and executives—the brightest and most successful business people who can locate their offices anywhere in the world but settle next to parks and other public lands. Why? Because they deliver a higher quality of life. These communities also attract retirees who live off their investment incomes. Generally older, the newcomers pump money into the local economy without putting a greater demand on local services such as schools.

Propst tells the story of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, gateway community to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, whose volume was traffic is nearly double Grand Teton's. "People traditionally took vacations to the Smokies to see a bear or watch the leaves turn color. Then some of the city fathers transitioned Gatlinburg into an amusement-based economy which worked for a while. Unfortunately, society's tastes changed and Gatlinburg was left behind in its own past. It kind of lost its mystique because it was no longer the quaint and attractive gateway town on the edge of the Smokies. As a result of people no longer coming in the numbers that they came before, Gatlinburg has gone through a period of decline."

The only way a traditional park gateway community can successfully carve out a niche in the future, Propst believes, is if the town is able to safeguard its rare uniqueness which imbues it with greater meaning in a hectic world. "It's better," he says, "to aspire to be Geneva instead of Gatlinburg."

Half her lifetime ago, Suzanne Young was a successful rock-n-roll concert promoter in Michigan, then packed up her bags and came west to Wyoming in search of a more meaningful existence. Her story is no different from most outsiders who settle in western valleys.

Unable initially to find work in a strategic public relations post, her specialty, she took a grunt job cooking in an oil and natural gas roughneck camp near Evanston as major energy production boom was underway. She remembers how the money flowed almost as easily as the billions of cubic feet of gas being extracted from the flanks of a rich geologic zone called "the Overthrust Belt" that runs along the Rockies from southern Colorado into the Canadian province of Alberta. But that earlier boom, which has been replaced by another modern oil and gas frenzy, didn't leave behind long-term prosperity for the locals.

During the mid 1980s, Young got what she described as "the perfect job" beating out an impressive pool of candidates from across the country to become the Jackson Hole Chamber's executive director. As a measure of her standing in the community, she is one of just a few honorary lifetime members of the Chamber (two of the others are Sen. Cliff Hansen and rancher Ralph Gill who owns a huge swath of remaining open space in Jackson Hole).

Young, who makes her living today as a nationally renowned business consultant and professional mediator, once strode the perilous thin green line that Duerr walks.

Her arrival coincided with several fateful decision that were about to converge and change Jackson Hole forever. At Teton Village, Jackson Hole Ski Corp founder Paul McCollister and his young attorney, Steve Duerr, were working with the local business community to subsidize direct commercial jet service from Chicago to bolster skier numbers. At the polls, voters in Teton County approved a lodging tax whose revenues were used by the Chamber to advertise Jackson to the world. And across the valley, several well-connected and deep pocketed socialites were touting the beauty of Jackson Hole to their friends—including actor Harrison Ford, former World Bank President James Wolfensohn, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, current Vice President Dick Cheney, a former Congressman who was raised in Casper, and a longer list of influential power brokers—who were enticed to buy property and begin constructing huge vacation homes.

The fuse for a real estate explosion burning supernova had been lit and when Jackson Hole became a darling of the elite, prices surged and have showed little sign of stopping, creating a huge lucrative play on land that persists to this day. One of the tools that slowed down what would have been a steamroller of clutter was a comprehensive countywide plan that today is being re-examined.

Under Young's leadership, as the advertising campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s that touted Jackson Hole's beauty and quality of life also brought a flood of tourism, the Chamber membership enjoyed an unprecedented era of prosperity. But even that boom didn't last.

Now, more than 15 years later, American travelers are savvier, more discriminating with their money, and more crunched for free time than any of their predecessors who took part in the classic American driving vacations centered around western national parks, Young says. Her conclusion is corroborated by statistics. Since the 1990s, visitor numbers at Yellowstone and Grand Teton started to stagnate.

At the same time, the greater Yellowstone region has experienced an influx of another sort: A wave of retirees and business people who uprooted themselves from the city seeking Mayberry. The 20 counties that comprise the greater Yellowstone region are among the fastest growing rural areas in the West. Moreover, in Jackson Hole where only three percent of the land is privately owned and 97 percent managed by federal or state government, real estate is hyper inflated, and a buyer's market only for the wealthy. In 2004, Teton County, Wyoming was ranked the richest county per capita in America based upon U.S. Census Bureau statistics. And it has continued to be positioned in that rarefied air.

In other words, local retail is no longer the only pulse of measurement in the local economy. Real estate values, as reflected in Jackson Hole's desirability as a home, has surpassed it. "Jackson Hole may not be better than its quaint past, but this is the upside of the downside of growth," Young says.

Young and Duerr insist that every business person within Jackson Hole's visitor economy, from restauranteurs to home builders, realizes that sustaining natural and historical assets provide a foundation for opportunity, attracting brilliant entrepreneurs AND millions of tourists.

"The more expensive the land gets, and the more that these owners of large homes demand that things stay aesthetically nice, the more people are UNWILLING to put up with anything that negatively affects their experience," Young says, adding that preservation of real estate investment values is also linked to preservation of the scenic beauty and wildlife that exists on and around those properties. Even if a citizen isn't impelled to advocate for environmental protection on altruistic grounds, economic self interest has given many people a reason to protect nature.

The challenge facing Jackson Hole, she suggests, is finding the tipping point in which an unwillingness to embrace self restraint when it comes to development and sprawl ends up impairing the environment to the point that property values suffer.

Young believes that Duerr wrestled with the conundrum, as much as any of her successors, and adds that the chamber's Power of Place campaign has resonance far beyond the Tetons because other communities, across North America, are coping with the same delicacies of trying to find balance.

In fact, Duerr says it was the valley's picturesque, unblighted landscape that led him to tout Jackson Hole as the Geneva of the Rockies, a setting for international summits. He points to 1989 when then Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze chose Jackson Hole as a venue for talks that ultimately helped lead to the end of the Cold War. They did not pick a hotel in suburbia for the meeting. They wanted Jackson Hole because Secretary Baker, who later bought a ranch near the Wind River Mountains (ironically today located near one of the largest expanding sprawls of natural gas development in the world in the Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Field.

Like Vice President Cheney, who owns a home at the gated Teton Pines subdivision on the west side of Jackson Hole, Baker recognized that having an inspirational backdrop would help them look past historic tensions. Baker's and Shevardnadze's visit prompted Duerr and a few friends to create the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs today under the leadership of Dr. David Wendt.

The Center has served as a catalyst of late in promoting clean coal technology in the Shanxi Province of China and the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana. Both are the largest coal producing regions in their respective countries. In that way, the Geneva of the Rockies concept is already happening though informally. Both presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton used Jackson Hole as a stage for discussing national environmental policies such as clean air and the Theodore Roosevelt approach to protecting lands to bolster their political legacy.

Despite considering himself a conservative Republican pragmatist, Duerr has a dreamy vision that would make any bleeding heart swoon. Jackson Hole economist and social commentator

thinks of Duerr as a heroic figure. But he admits that he is biased. Schechter has helped cultivate the Power of Place campaign and helped establish the Center for Global Affairs. Together, Schechter and Duerr also coordinated ongoing Power of Place conferences at Teton Village.

“Steve, in some ways, has gotten caught between people’s expectations of what worked in Jackson Hole in the past and his own sense of idealism. He [tried to] convince his membership that he is right,” Schechter says. “He sees clearly where the business community needs to go but the chamber is the personification, in some ways, of the old economy. Typical chambers of commerce do not do a lot of long-range thinking. Steve is good at looking around corners. He sees what has happened in other communities and he wants Jackson’s fate to be different.”

Duerr says his own “enlightenment” grew out of a series of personal trials and epiphanies. Schechter tells anyone who might be skeptical that his friend’s process of philosophical transformation is sincere. Duerr’s awakening, he says, started with tragedy and for him makes plain the balming effect of Wyoming’s natural environment on a wounded soul and frenetic world.

Duerr met his first wife, Rebecca, when the two were high school sweethearts in Minnesota. They ended up marrying young and have four children together. During their early years, the couple set out on auto roadtrips from Minneapolis to Nevada where Duerr’s father in law had cattle operations. Along the way, the Duerrs loved to pitstop in Jackson Hole.

Just before Christmas 1980, the same year Duerr finished law school, his former wife’s father and her two brothers were killed in a plane crash that devastated the family and opened up a crack of emotional trauma that would never heal, Duerr says. In 1984, with his wife desiring to escape the pain, the couple packed up their belongings and moved west to the Tetons to make a fresh start. “Everyone who comes to Jackson Hole has a reason. They’re usually trying to get away from something,” Duerr says. “We were no different.”

After passing the Wyoming Bar, attorney Duerr landed his first job working as general counsel and executive vice president for the Jackson Hole Ski Corp headed by Paul McCollister. McCollister was pursuing his ambitious dream of building Teton Village, set at the foot of Rendezvous Mountain, into a world-class ski resort. However, he faced continual funding challenges trying to create an infrastructure that would give him a critical mass for fully capitalizing on his real estate holdings.

McCollister became entangled in a drawn out legal struggle with John Deuss, a Dutch billionaire and oil finance tycoon who had displayed shrewd designs on taking control of the Ski Corp. He relied on his firebrand lawyer Duerr to fight the hostile takeover bid, which hinged upon an investment in the Ski Corp that Deuss had made. Fallout from that tumultuous episode led to a deal that stripped McCollister of controlling interest and led to a series of subsequent Ski Corp ownerships. Today, however, the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort is the giant that McCollister had envisioned.

By 1989, the year that Baker and Shevardnadze met on the shore of Jackson Lake in Grand Teton Park, Duerr wanted a normal law practice and he started representing the utility, Lower

Valley Power and Light, that continues to this day. From the mid 1980s until 1991, Duerr's family life, despite the stress at work, was a picture of relative bliss. Steve and his wife, Rebecca, believed they had found the ideal place to raise their kids.

The family resided for a time at Teton Valley Ranch on the east side of Grand Teton Park. Rebecca's enthusiasm for quarter horses was matched only by her children's love for riding. They got involved in rodeo and every week attended the friend competitions staged at the Teton Barrell Racing Club. On some mornings, Rebecca drove the kids to school in a horse drawn buggy. As Duerr nostalgically recalls today, they went "trotting through groups of buffalo and antelope and long horn cattle...It was a perfect life in a perfect place. The Kelly School was run by Ken, Bobby, and Dan Thomasma. A family staff and a dream western family setting."

Eventually, Steve and Rebecca would divorce. Both moved back to Minnesota, though Duerr commuted to Jackson to continue his work for the Ski Corp. Duerr had his own share of personal challenges. Trying to sort them out, he bought a quarter section of ranchland south of Jackson Hole between the Green River and New Fork Lake about 15 miles north of Cora on Green River Road. The property, located in the foothills to the Wind River Mountains, had never been developed. Duerr escaped there to decompress and to think about decisions he made in his life.

For eight months, he and his oldest daughter, Josie (then in the seventh grade) lived in a wall tent without electricity or running water. It was their shelter as he built a log cabin. Every morning, Duerr made the hour long drive to bring Josie to school in Jackson and returned at night. "On that ranch the sun rises over the Wind Rivers and sets over the Wyoming Range with the Gros Ventres and Union Pass to the north and in the other direction the view leads all the way to South Pass," he says. Here, Duerr says he began to undergo a transformation and it emanated, literally, from the power of a place.

"We lived very close to the land," he says. "Moose and elk were frequently present. The song and wetland birds were there in enormous number. In the winter, there wasn't a sound on clear calm nights and the nearest artificial illumination was miles away. We would sit there under the sky and admire the Northern Lights in peaceful darkness."

Serendipitously, Duerr says his sabbatical in Cora, away from the rat race, was accompanied by three other converging influences: He has since remarried; he discovered the paintings of Carl Rungius which are part of the permanent collection at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson; and he was introduced to Harvey Locke, founder of the Yellowstone to Yukon conservation initiative, which aims to safeguard the wildness of the northern Rockies stretching from the Canadian province of Yukon more than a thousand miles to the southern end of the Wind River Mountains south of Jackson. Duerr is devoted to the principles of Y2Y, which he says possesses none of the "lock up the land" ideals that conspiracy theorists have tried to attach to it.

Both Duerr and Harvey Locke believe that painter Rungius recognized the value of aesthetics both in Wyoming and the Canadian Rockies, where Rungius is regarded with the same level of reverence that Americans pay to Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and Charlie Russell.

Early in his career at the turn of the 19th century, Rungius had painted in the Wind Rivers within the vicinity of the Upper Green River drainage. Specifically, Rungius, the celebrated wildlife artist, had rendered several paintings of antelope in and around Cora. “Antelope is a code word for Steve,” says Suzanne Young, Duerr’s predecessor at the chamber. “Antelope symbolize the fragile environment and what might be lost forever if we’re not careful.”

“When Josie and I were building the cabin in Cora, we watched the same antelope herd that spends its summers in Grand Teton pass through on its annual migration hundreds of miles to winter range near the Winds,” Duerr says. “The survival of that herd is now threatened by the gas boom.”

If one drives south of Jackson into the sagebrush and timber coated hinterlands around Pinedale, you will encounter the largest oil and natural gas drilling frenzy the state has ever known but its effects are felt in Jackson Hole on the antelope herd that is beloved by all visitors who come to Grand Teton Park.

Duerr believes strongly that industries which exploit the environment ought to give back. Wyoming’s history is littered with the remains of mining and energy booms gone bust and promises broken, leaving local communities MORE impoverished.

During the autumn of 2004, Duerr embarked upon yet another path in his professional development. He ran for a seat in the Wyoming legislature, hoping to represent citizens in Teton and Sublette counties. Although he lost, he logged thousands of miles meeting people, including executives from oil and gas companies that are drilling in neighboring counties. He says that most have a green ethic at heart and love to recreate themselves outdoors in pristine settings but they need to carry those values into their board rooms.

Duerr says that rather than lament the oil and gas juggernaut, which cannot be stopped, citizens should instead speak up to try and ensure that some of the huge profits being pulled from the earth, and exported out of Wyoming stay here to benefit local communities and prepare them for the post boom. Such money can go into land protection. Pinedale, he says, may not aspire to be like Jackson, but what happened in the Tetons hold lessons for the value of melding economy and ecology.

Duerr suggests that federal environmental regulations are limited in what they can accomplish. As an attorney who once worked with energy companies, he says one of the most potent tools reside within the corporate constitutions of oil and gas conglomerates, compelling them to be good neighbors and stewards. Unless energy companies do it right, Wyoming is going to suffer and Jackson Hole, too, will be hurt if the land and wildlife are despoiled, he says. Communities that do not speak up and fail to advocate for themselves and their long term quality of life are destined to become victims.

“Leaders must not be guilty in hindsight of a failure to imagine,” Duerr says. “That’s the challenge of our time. Imagine Jackson Hole becoming the Geneva of North America and the southern anchor of Yellowstone to Yukon. How can commerce invest in that vision, especially

the trillions of dollars that will come out of the Upper Green River and Sublette Mesa regions from oil and gas development?"

Recently, the Chamber gave its first-ever Power of Place award to Bill and Joffa Kerr, co-founders of the National Wildlife Museum. Bill Kerr is an heir to the Kerr-McGhee energy company and the son of a prominent U.S. senator from Oklahoma. The Kerrs are also ardent conservationists and built the museum around a collection of Rungius paintings with the hopes they would inspire visitors. "By their life example and investment of their interests and fortunes they are the first and best example of the brand promise of Power of Place," Duerr says.

The late conservationist David Brower, who delivered several speeches in Jackson, said that most environmental battles are never permanently won, but rather fought to a draw and fated to repeat themselves anew with each generation.

The dynamic tension between the business and conservation community was overt and flared during Suzanne Young's tenure at the Chamber. She recalls a luncheon meeting at a local restaurant in the 1980s with conservationist Phil Hocker who wanted to brief her about the threats that oil and gas development posed to area's scenic beauty and wildlife habitat.

"Phil had maps of the Bridger-Teton Forest spread out across the restaurant table and then Grant Larson (a prominent businessman and state senator) came walking in. By the appearance of things, Grant thought that I was consorting with the enemy and being subversive." Soon thereafter, Young received phone calls from chamber members saying they were upset with her. "I wasn't in bed with conservationists," she says. "I was only trying to educate myself on the issue."

It should be noted that Larson, who today is president of the Wyoming Senate, is a firm believer in land protection. He recently went to China as part of a US delegation sponsored by the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs and he is both an outspoken believer in clean coal technology and in the need to implement it as a strategy for arresting the effects of climate change caused by carbon dioxide being emitted into the atmosphere from industry. That doesn't make him anti-industry, he says. Rather, he's opposed to harming the Earth in ways that inflict harm on future generations.

Both he and Cliff Hansen see the undeniable connection between economy and ecology.

To some, the schism of the past in Jackson Hole is ironic because conservation measures, in the minds of most citizens, are credited with increasing Jackson Hole's desirability as a tourist destination. Residents of Jackson Hole know what is at stake, Young says, and the Chamber has been a bellwether in the thick of it.

"To be a successful manager of the chamber you have to recognize the value of natural resources, but I don't mean just the value as measured by what those resources may return for individual chamber members," Young says. "You've got to be clear about how certain things [business activities] affect the economy and which things add value to it. For those latter things, you've got to be willing to protect them above all else."

Jackson Hole is no different from every other community in the West. Without its natural beauty, its level of prosperity wouldn't exist.

END OF PART ONE. TOMORROW: Jackson Hole and Steve Duerr come of age in recognizing how protecting ecology is vital for the economy.