



*Proceedings of the Sixth International Permaculture Conference
September-October 1996, Perth, Western Australia*

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Crestone/Baca, Colorado

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[Submitted Paper]

Crestone/Baca, Colorado in the Southwest United States, is an example of the on-going transformation of a community toward sustainability. This 25 year old, rural, mountain wilderness community, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of acres of ranch land, was originally planned as a resort/retirement development. It has grown slowly and is still in a formative stage. A large number of spiritual and environmental organizations are based in this area, and have in recent years attracted younger people with great interest in alternative and ecologically sound living. This presentation includes an overview of the diverse and unusual demographics of this locale and its residents and the great opportunities and challenges inherent in present endeavors to create sustainability: environmentally, spiritually, socially and economically.

Natural resources

Crestone/Baca is located in the vast 5,000 square mile San Luis Valley of Colorado. This valley at 8,000 feet above sea level, is surrounded by snow capped peaks of up to 14,000 feet on three sides, and sits on one of the largest fresh water aquifers in the world. Air quality is usually of very high calibre, and clear content. The mountains and valley make their own climate in this unique combination of high desert and alpine geography. The soil is a mix of sand, clay, cobble and rock. There are streams and greenbelts of aspen, ponderosas and cottonwoods, coniferous and aspen timber are thick on the mountains; pinon pine and junipers are sparsely scattered on the lower foothills to the open prairie valley floor.

There is great interest by residents in setting sound standards for environmentally friendly activities, interventions and development, identifying key natural resources, and establishing conscious programs of stewardship to preserve them, including, but not limited to – water, power and transportation conservation, sewage treatment, building materials, methods and techniques, and careful consideration of community and neighborhood design.

Wildlife

Crestone/Baca is wilderness, and is home to a variety of wildlife, including – elk, pronghorn, mule deer, mountain lion, bobcat, black bear, coyote and a variety of fish

and small animals. Because bear and mountain lion live here, standard wilderness precautions apply. Feeding of game animals is strictly prohibited, and the feeding of all other wild animals is strongly discouraged. The San Luis Valley is a global flyway for waterfowl, songbirds and raptors (eagle, hawk, owl), some on the edge of extinction. Biting insects of many kinds are prevalent spring through midsummer.

Many homes and building sites are located in wildlife breeding, birthing and feeding areas. The natural habitat decreases with increasing human encroachment; encounters with bears (no longer hunted) are increasing. People are attracted to the beauty of the mountains and their high, wild places, yet, we face the challenge of protecting the wildlife and their habitat from the negative impacts human presence can bring.

Weather and climate

The climate at 8,000 feet above sea level can be quite harsh. Natural and man-made events include extreme temperatures, intense sunlight, heavy snows, wind and dust storms, torrential rains, lightening strikes and wildfires. Annual precipitation in this semiarid valley averages 7 inches. In the foothills, precipitation is nearly double that in the Valley, and temperatures are warmer, particularly in winter. Sub-zero temperatures at night are common during the Winter months. In the coldest month (January) average high temperatures are 35°F (2°C) and average lows 9°F (-12°C). During the hottest month (July) average highs are 82°F (27°C), average lows 50°F (10°C). Average annual snowfall 69.5". The San Luis Valley averages 330 days of sunshine yearly.

Human presence and impacts

Crestone is a small town (one quarter mile square), in existence since 1880 – gold mining days – with a current population of about 60 people. The Baca Grande is a housing development adjacent to Crestone, designed in the 1970's, with 5,527 lots for homesites – 328 homes built to date – 105 miles of roads on 19.57 square miles of land, and a population of approximately 600. Manitou Foundation holds approximately 1,600 acres of land adjacent to the Baca, mainly in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountain chain. Hundreds of square miles of San Luis Valley ranch land borders the Crestone/Baca community on the other three sides. Ranching is a dominant activity in this area; the first ranches were established in the mid-1800s, with many families ranching here generation after generation, with most of the land being used for cattle pasture and/or hay production.

Manitou Foundation is a Private Foundation developing a land preservation program for most of its acreage, and also offering some land grants to qualified organizations in the following categories – religious organizations and spiritual projects, ecological and environmental sustainability projects, and related educational endeavors (youth and adult). Manitou Institute is a charitable organization that fund raises and distributes funds to religious organizations and spiritual projects, ecological and environmental sustainability projects, related educational endeavors (youth and adult), and indigenous peoples projects, particularly in the San Luis Valley of Colorado, with national and international outreach and networking.

Manitou Institute and Manitou Foundation, have significantly contributed to shaping the community, supporting a wide variety of spiritual and environmental projects to locate in the area. Crestone/Baca is not a contained intentional community – anyone can choose to live there – and the diversity is remarkable: ranchers, retirees, priests, nuns, old hippies, spiritual seekers, young families striving for wholesome life styles, Tibetan lamas... and the list goes on! The predominance of spiritual centers offers opportunities for inspiration to those seeking to develop their spirituality and a spiritually sustainable life-style.

Established churches and Spiritual Centers in the area include, two churches in or near the Town of Crestone – The Crestone Baptist Church, and the tiny Little Shepherd in the Hills Episcopalian Church. A number of others, representing many of the world's great religious traditions are in various stages of getting established, such as:

- Spiritual Life Institute & Nada Hermitage Retreat Center – Carmelite Catholic Monastery;
- Crestone Mountain Zen Center, a Zen Buddhist Monastery & Retreat Center;
- Haidakhandi Universal Ashram, a spiritual center inspired by Haidakhan Babaji of India, dedicated to the Divine Mother, with devotional practices from the Hindu tradition; • San Luis Valley Tibetan Project (Kagyü lineage);
- Sri Aurobindo Learning Center;
- Samten Ling Retreat Center, a project of Mangala Shri Bhuti – a Tibetan Buddhist organization of the Nyingma tradition;

Environmental and Educational Projects based in Crestone/Baca include:

- SUBUD's Atalanta Project, an inter-disciplinary eco-center, planned as a living/working demonstration of the relationship between culture, healing and the environment, offering experiential education for people of all ages;
- BCHASA, the Baca Center for High Altitude Sustainable Agriculture;
- EDUCO, an international youth training organization providing camping retreats for youth in the development of self esteem, wilderness skills, respect of nature, healthy relationships and team work;
- Baca Institute of Ethnobotany, offering educational programs and ethnobotanical tours, on medicinal plants, plant dyeing, and the intricacies of the human-plant relationship;
- Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP) – Household EcoTeam Program;
- Eco-village Gatherings, held once or twice monthly, for video programs, information exchange, discussion, action projects and support in living sustainably.

Many residents were attracted to move to Crestone/Baca to be near a spiritual center or environmental project that is based here. The wilderness conditions stimulate awareness of sustainable life-style practices necessary to keep from destroying the

natural beauty of this area. There is a significant interest in alternative and natural building and gardening practices, and sustainable community concepts. This community, represented by Manitou Institute, was invited to participate in the Global Eco-village Network seed group, comprised of twelve communities from around the world, all aspiring and striving toward sustainability.

Social climate

The social situation in Crestone/Baca is rich and diverse – a stimulating scope of experience ranging from fulfilling to demanding, strong in groupism and individualism. In this wilderness area, the magnitude of the mountains seems to amplify personal experiences – psychologically, emotionally, physically and spiritually, providing the distinctive atmosphere for inner personal work and contemplation. Some people find that it is advantageous, or even necessary, to leave the influence of this setting periodically. Life is simple, away from the “conveniences” and activities available in more populous areas. This is particularly challenging for the children.

Major issues which have galvanized the community over recent years are – keeping the water of this Valley in the Valley versus selling and piping it to distant large cities; military flyovers in our airspace, and exploration for gold and oil by a mining company that owns significant mineral rights in this area. Such highly charged issues have provided common ground for otherwise vastly different social groups, contributing toward an attitude of respectful and cooperative – unity through diversity – and social sustainability.

Governance

Four entities of a traditional nature govern in this area – the Town of Crestone Board of Trustees, Saguache County Government, Baca Grande Water & Sanitation District and the Baca Grande Property Owners' Association. The Baca Grande is a covenanted community, with Covenants & Restrictions created in the early 70's, now being reviewed for changes. Present landowners have inherited the many major challenges of a massive development designed with maximum sales as the main consideration. Some lots in the development are not buildable for reasons varying from the existence of wetlands, waterway diversions, ancient trees, other significant environmental features, significant wildlife habitat and mountainous topography. Properties in this development, both vacant and improved land, range broadly in price relative to their actual assessed value. Some are being sold in the Pacific region for many times their assessed value.

Until recently there has been a notable deficit of County regulations, zoning and codes controlling land use and development. Though with growing concerns of the danger of this area becoming another suburban sprawl and spoiling the wilderness, efforts in proactive planning are in progress. The challenge here is to protect, without limiting the innovative and creative flair that has flourished in the freedom for experimentation.

Commercial enterprises and sources of local employment

There is not an abundance of jobs, nor are there many places to spend an income. Since it is still quite small, the local community lacks many of the amenities and

commercial opportunities of a more mainstream community. A high level of voluntarism is required to cover community service needs such as – the property owners Board of Directors, Environmental & Architectural Committees, Library Committee, Emergency Medical Tech Association, Fire Department, Charter School, Saguache County Search & Rescue, Crestone-Baca Community Arts and Recreational Center Association, among others.

There are only a handful of local businesses serving the community, such as – two small family owned and operated General Stores, three Restaurants/Cafes, a few gift shops, a liquor store, laundromat and small apartment complex in Crestone, a townhouse and college satellite campus complex, the Baca Grande Property Owners Association office and maintenance staff, and Water & Sanitation District staff, six privately owned Bed & Breakfasts and four real estate offices.

Self employment in the area includes – contractors, builders, carpenters, alternative building consultants, handy man and house cleaning services, small cottage industries (herbal preparations, clothing manufacture and tailoring, gift item production), organic produce growers, photographers, artists (pottery, painting, sculpting), writers, massage therapists, counsellors, child care providers, extremely limited professional services (legal, accounting, computer, and architectural). In addition, there is work provided by local ranches. Some residents commute to jobs in larger small towns approx. one hour away. The limitation in opportunities for a livelihood is an ongoing challenge to creating economic sustainability, yet, there is also the strong inclination of community members to protect the wilderness life-style and reject an influx of commercial enterprises.

The ongoing Crestone/Baca Sub-Area Master Planning process, initiated in 1994, has helped the community to identify its values and common interests, begin to establish a community vision, and identify goals and objectives to guide land use and development for the future. Plan principles that have clearly emerged include -preservation/conservation of agricultural land, protection of view corridors, open spaces and linkages between them, density reduction in the development, expansion of community services and creation of a community center, respect for and preservation of the contemplative atmosphere and wildness in nature. Other initiatives that parallel the Master Plan include, evolution of the Environmental & Architectural Guidelines and Committees with emphasis on sustainable materials and methods. Through this great variety of efforts, there is gradual, yet steady progress toward sustainability – environmentally, spiritually, socially and economically, in Crestone/Baca.