Introduction: Bringing Moral Culture into the Fray

Yellowstone holds a special place in America's heart—a young nation's Eden and the crown jewel of modern preservation. As the world's first national park, it is globally recognized as the prototype of natural purity and goodness. But in recent decades, Yellowstone and its surrounding areas have become a lightningrod for environmental controversy, an area plagued by social disunity and intractable political struggle. The unyielding battle for Yellowstone—the topic of this book— has become one of the most symbolically and substantively important examples of modern environmental conflict. The significance of this case is heightened by the growing set of interrelated and intensifying environmental conflicts facing human societies around the world: climate change, energy constraints, toxic waste, food and water shortages, genetic engineering, population growth, public land management, pollution, and decreasing biodiversity. In recent decades, these environmental problems have come to intersect with, and rival in importance, other social problems and conflicts in modern societies. More and more attention has been devoted to understanding environmental problems, as demonstrated by the growth in public concern, expanding laws, the emergence of new institutions, international (dis)agreements, and an explosion in the volume of research in the natural and social sciences about the causes, consequences, and solutions to environmental problems.

Nestled at the feet of the towering Teton Range, just off the shore of the picturesque Jackson Lake, and within minutes of the southern border of Yellowstone National Park, is the University of Wyoming–National Park Service research center. The center buzzes with teams of biologists, ecologists, and other natural scientists from around the world conducting research on myriad problems facing the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). Seeking affordable housing during my fieldwork, I was fortunate to stay on this beautiful campus, which provided me not only a temporary base for my own research, but also close contact with some of the world's preeminent natural scientists. From my discussions with these experts, I quickly learned how deeply committed they were to solving the most urgent threats facing the ecosystem. Equally captivating was the depth and

complexity of their technical tools and the capabilities they applied to this effort. This research center is only one small example of the massive endeavor, both inside and outside the GYE, by armies of natural scientists to supply vast technical expertise about this ecosystem. Alongside natural scientists are equally large groups of economists, lawyers, policy specialists, and other technical experts who work diligently on contentious issues in the GYE—creating a flurry of biological research, economic valuation, legal scrutiny, policy programs, city planning, cost-benefit analysis, and the like, in the hopes of providing enough scientific empirical analyses and evidence to resolve the many intractable conflicts that plague the area.

Accordingly, management decisions in the GYE rely on a hyperrationalized form of governance that privileges technical facts, scientific analysis of nature, bureaucratic administration, and legal formalism. Decision makers such as state agents (e.g., National Park Service workers, forest rangers, etc.), interest group members (e.g., environmentalists and cattle industry, tourism, and oil and gas groups), elected officials (e.g., judges, governors, representatives), and scientists are caught up in a world of prediction and world mastery—where, as Max Weber describes, "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (2009, p. 139). For example, when faced with an environmental problem, managers follow a long line of formal scientific procedures, deciding first whether a given "problem" is in fact a problem, examining potential causes, solutions, alternative solutions, long-term ecological effects, how to balance economic impacts, how to strategically push solutions through institutional channels (e.g., through litigation or legislation); and later analyzing whether solutions worked and how to improve upon them in the future. Decision makers in the GYE often "get stuck in one of these activities, such as calling for ever more research or endlessly debating potential solutions" (Clark, 2008, p. 23). These science and policy efforts are especially protracted in the GYE, involving hundreds of diverse interest organizations, dozens of state agencies, three separate state governments, hundreds of thousands of local residents, and millions of concerned Americans.

Scholars studying such problems—as well as the stakeholders in the thick of the struggle—rely on well-worn theories to explain this conflict: as simply a clash between experts and an ignorant, illiterate, or ill-informed public; or as the lack of sufficient ecological and biological knowledge; or as the need to simply reshape individual stakeholders' "attitudes"; or they turn to social movement explanations relating to resource mobilization; or to an innate struggle over political power; or more simply, to economic self-interest. To be sure, these theories matter a great deal. Yet, I found that they do little to fully explain the Yellowstone conflict. They tell us more about the *how* of conflict than the *why*. We are then left with the following puzzle: Why, with the flood of expert scientific, legal, economic, and political efforts to resolve disagreements over Yellowstone, are matters not improving? Despite all of these efforts, why do even the most minor issues still recurrently erupt into impassioned and long-lasting disputes? It became clear

that we need a better theoretical approach if we are to fully understand why this American icon of peace became, and continues to be, the site of intractable acrimony and toxic polarization.

Put in its broadest terms, my argument is that this modern obsession with scientific, legal, and economic reasoning misses out on deeper cultural mechanisms driving the conflict in the first place. Put more specifically, my argument is this: *any sociological account of this conflict should be built upon a more empirically accurate and philosophically sophisticated model of human persons and cultures, which does not presuppose narrow or deterministic motivational frameworks but understands that the "why," in the end, is a question of morality—perhaps even spirituality—stemming from our lived experiences as part of human cultures, shaped by narratives and moral orders that tell us most fundamentally who we are, why we are, what we should do, and why it all matters.* Drawing on work in cultural sociology and moral theory to make this argument,[1] I reorient our attention to the sorts of "whys" that make life meaningful for different cultures, and propel them forward toward particular ends, and not other ends. These are the sorts of answers to the "why" questions that we need to incorporate into our theories and methods if we hope to improve our understanding of the human–environment relationship more generally.

Thus, environmental conflict in Yellowstone is not—as it would appear on the surface—ultimately all about scientific, economic, legal, or other technical evidence and arguments, but an underlying struggle over deeply held "faith" commitments, feelings, and desires that define what people find sacred, good, and meaningful in life at a most basic level. The current and allegedly most important resources relied upon by actors and observers of the conflict do not, and cannot, ultimately define for different people why one *should* care about Yellowstone *in the first place*, why an intact ecosystem is better than a fragmented one, why aesthetic beauty should or should not be protected, why some animals should be venerated while others are considered pests, why some land is "too special" to drill while other land is drilled with indifference, or why people might view their old-west labor, recreation, and heritage as profoundly meaningful, perhaps even sacred. Answers to these questions are only possible and made meaningful in the context of larger moral orders and spiritual narratives that shared human cultures are built upon.

To be clear, my sociological approach in this book focuses less on the individuals themselves, and more on the cultural, moral, and spiritual contexts in which stakeholders are embedded, shaping their beliefs and desires. Somewhat implicit in my argument is that, for a variety of reasons, these deeper moral and spiritual meanings are often *ignored, muted,* and *misunderstood.* But only as we engage these sorts of questions at a much deeper level can we begin to understand

1 I draw primarily from Smith (2003). As I describe below, other influences include Jasper (1997), Taylor (1989), and Wuthnow (1989).

why the mountains of technical evidence marshaled in the Yellowstone conflict have done little to solve disputes that are, finally, not about the facts themselves, but about what make the facts meaningful. Further, this book shows that when we glimpse beneath the cultural context of the Yellowstone conflict, and bring these deeper moral and spiritual dimensions to the surface, we often learn what conflict is really about—and in some cases discover roadmaps leading beyond the thick pines of technorational policy stalemate.

More concretely, where does such an approach lead us? It leads us to the more peculiar cultural influences that structure life in the American West. It leads us to the more subtle, but ever-powerful, narratives informing what the "good life" looks like, and how one might go about living it. It leads us to investigate what it means to be a "good" person, and the larger contexts and practices that shape such commitments. It leads us to examine changing ideas about the natural environment, particularly with regard to what it is "good" for. Such narratives and commitments influence, and are influenced by, larger socioeconomic forces at work in American life during the 19th and 20th centuries. In examining the historical sources and contemporary effects of such commitments, my approach engages narratives about manifest destiny, rugged individualism, human dominionism, and other cultural ingredients making up what I call an "old-west" way of life. At the same time, we can shed light on environmental disputes by uncovering competing narratives and moral commitments that have taken hold in the American West, about the romantic vision for the spiritual redemption of nature, the intrinsic value of nonhuman animals, and the promise and progress of environmental science.

Beyond the specifics of the conflict, my cultural approach yielded a handful of important, and related, theoretical puzzles that are investigated along the way. How do aspects of social life that are thought to be about instrumental value or material preferences become infused with moral and religious meaning? How are habits of talk about morality and spirituality organized and patterned by larger social structures in American life? Why do individuals who are embedded within strong moral and religious cultures still struggle to recognize or coherently articulate their reasons for their behavior? Where, and how, does spirituality show up in "secular" contexts, and does it operate differently here than in traditionally religious contexts academics have tended to study? How are moral and spiritual claims used *in conjunction* with technical, scientific, and economic claims? What are the social and political conditions under which moral and spiritual factors can actually influence collective action? How do stakeholders engage in "moral boundary work" to mark their work, and their identities, as more virtuous than others?

In what follows in this introduction, I briefly present the conflict in Yellowstone, elaborate on my theoretical argument, and specify my substantive and theoretical contributions to the social scientific study of environment, culture, religion, and morality. I conclude with a roadmap outlining how these

Figure I.1: The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, approximate area shaded in gray. Yellowstone National Park is at the center, in white.

contributions unfold in the chapters that follow. Chapters 1 and 2 trace in historical detail the social organization of competing moral orders, providing the larger cultural and institutional context in which to understand the emergence of the conflict, and setting the backdrop for the finer-grained case studies that follow. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 pick up here and dig down into the inner workings of three of the most contentious conflicts in the GYE today, showing more concretely how morality and spirituality are tangled up in, and exert considerable influence on, conflicts that appear to be about rational, economic, secular, and scientific life.

Introducing the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

Yellowstone National Park (YNP) is part of a larger social and ecological system referred to since the mid-1980s as the "Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem." The GYE is a powerful symbol of the American West, and its natural and cultural resources occupy a privileged place in the American imagination. It is comprised of 20 million acres of diverse biological and topographic resources, and is one of the last large, intact temperate ecosystem in the world. It contains 60 percent of the world's geothermal regions. The headwaters of the Missouri-Mississippi, Columbia, and Colorado rivers are all located within the GYE. Spread over three states (Figure I.1), about 32 percent of the area is privately owned, while the rest of the GYE lands are under control of the United States Forest Service (seven

national forests comprise 32 percent of GYE), the Bureau of Land Management (19 percent), the National Park Service (Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park, 7 percent), indigenous tribes (5 percent), and other state and federal agencies (5 percent). Private lands are integral to the health of the ecosystem because they tend to be located in lower-elevation valleys and floodplains, meaning that many species in the GYE rely heavily on private lands for survival. Thus, even though only 32 percent of the GYE is privately owned, private landowners are especially critical in decision making about the health of the ecosystem.

In addition to vast wildlife populations, the GYE is also home to many small and midsize rural communities scattered throughout its 20 counties. Today, the population has grown to about half a million people. Unlike other rural counties across the United States, many of these 20 counties have experienced extraordinary population growth over the past few decades. Census data show that between 1970 and 2000, the counties making up the GYE experienced a 62 percent aggregate increase in population. Five of the counties within the GYE were in the top 10th percentile of overall population growth in the United States. From 2000 to 2010, counties like Sublette County, Wyoming (increased 73 percent), and Teton County, Idaho, ranked 10th and 12th, respectively, out of all 3,080 counties in the United States in percentage population growth. As a result of this population explosion, rural land development in these 20 counties increased more than 350 percent from 1970 to 2000, placing some parts of the GYE in the top five fastest growing land development areas in all of the United States.

The demographic, economic, and cultural changes that swept over the GYE region since 1970 are central to my story about the moral dimensions of conflict. I refer to this new social reality as the "new-west," a term describing a shift away from the "old-west" heritage of utilitarian extraction toward a new culture of natural amenity–minded transplants, influenced by new ideas about nature and motivated to both enjoy and protect its natural amenities.[2] The rise of the new-west was motivated in part by new moral and spiritual ideas about the natural environment that flourished during the mid-20th century. As I will show, these new ideas, and the growth that followed, would have major consequences on the old-west way of life. The hardworking, rugged rancher and dusty cattle drive were replaced with "cappuccino cowboys," college-educated telecommuters, wealthy retirees, and others seeking outdoor adventure lifestyles. New-west hubs, like Bozeman, MT, and Jackson Hole, WY, were transformed into premier destinations for a burgeoning cultural and environmental elite. Some came to enjoy the area, others came to protect it, but many came to do both. These dramatic changes redefined in the GYE what it meant to be a "good"

2 For more see Jones et al. (2003); Krannich et al. (2011); Rasker et al. (2003); Shumway and Otterstrom (2001).

person in relation to nature, simultaneously rejecting ecologically harmful old-west heritage and practices as ecologically evil and morally wrong. This led to the institutionalizing of an alternative moral order, rooted in new moral and spiritual values and ecological science.

In one sense, the current conflict is nothing new, as Yellowstone has always been roiled in some sort of controversy. As the world's first national park, its development during the 19th century required the violent removal of indigenous tribes and was a cash cow for the railroad industry. People have passionately debated for nearly 150 years how Yellowstone should be enjoyed, how much development is too much, and whether it could or should be more "natural." But in recent years the conflict has escalated and expanded to unforeseen levels. A main reason why the arena of conflict expanded was the decision by natural resource managers to expand the physical bounds of land management to include private and public areas far outside YNP. New research in ecology and biology showed that if Yellowstone was to remain in its "natural" state, managers would need to expand the area of protection from 4 million acres to the 20 million acres that make up the GYE today. Expanding the footprint of protection meant increasing opportunities for conflict, and in recent decades the GYE has been ensnared in intense struggles over wolf reintroduction, grizzly bear and bison management, oil extraction, natural gas "fracking," the viability of ranching, the explosion of tourism, and motorized (e.g., snowmobile) recreation in and around the park. These conflicts cycle in and out of the courts, often over decades, consuming millions of private and public dollars for scientific research, legal costs, and political lobbying. More often than not, when policy decisions are finally made, they are short-lived, as competing interest groups incessantly appeal for more technical knowledge, political favor, or public input in hopes of stalling administrative rulings or reversing policy.

For example, the highly contentious reintroduction of wolves to the GYE in 1995 followed a long process of nearly two decades of social conflict involving executive directives from six U.S. presidents, debates by dozens of congressional committees, 120 rancorous public hearings, bomb threats, more than 160,000 public letters written to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, incurring over $12 million in scientific research costs alone (USFWS, 1994; Wilson, 1997). Since their controversial reintroduction, this conflict over wolves has not subsided but has become more rancorous and technically focused, as anti-wolf and pro-wolf groups continue to battle about the effect of wolves on the ecosystem, their endangered-species status, hunting and trapping, and state control over species management. Or consider another issue, recreational winter use in Yellowstone, which has been tied up in research and litigation since 1998 in circuitous fashion: a 1998 lawsuit over snowmobiling successful in a D.C. court; a 2000 plan vacated by a Wyoming court; a 2003 plan vacated by a D.C. court; a 2004 plan upheld by a Wyoming court; a 2007 plan vacated by a D.C. court; and a 2008 plan upheld in a Wyoming court. In this tortuous process, new research and political lobbying has

caused a dizzying, lurching legal process costing millions for all involved. These
two examples are merely the tip of the iceberg.

These ongoing struggles have five sets of stakeholders in common: interest
groups, citizens, bureaucratic agencies, elected officials, and technical experts. Be-
ginning with interests groups, there are 243 nonprofit organizations participating
in environmental issues in the GYE; many are conservation organizations, but
some are "wise-use" groups that are at loggerheads with many of the practices
and ideals of conservation organizations.[3] Millions of citizens are also involved
in the conflict, at a local, national, and international level. These include citizens
who live in the GYE, those who visit on vacation, and many who have never
been to the area but nevertheless treasure and seek to defend it from afar. By
bureaucratic agencies I mean the collection of 28 different local, state, and federal
institutions that are charged with managing natural resources in the region.
Elected officials include members of presidential administrations, which have
been especially hands-on in some of the most contentious issues, as well as
governors, judges, congresspersons, state legislators, county leaders, and local
town officials. Because the GYE is the ideal setting for natural-science research,
scores of technical experts also exert an important authoritative voice in the
region, supplying piles of important biological and ecological evidence that frame
many of the hot-button debates. Technical experts also include economists and
various other social scientific and political professionals working in the region.

With so much attention focused on Yellowstone, experts are scrambling to
understand why, in the Yellowstone area, so "many issues are highly contentious
and not easily resolvable"—and why interactions between people in the region are
so "politicized and conflict-ridden as rigid ideologies crash against one another"
(Clark, 2008). Famed naturalist Jack Turner (2009) describes the Yellowstone
area as a "battleground that in years to come will make the conflict over drilling
in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge seem like child's play." Other experts have
used the metaphor of a "battleground" to describe the "heated controversy" over
Yellowstone (Keiter and Boyce, 1994), while others wonder why the area and
the handling of its issues "looks more like a bar room brawl than a professional,
scientific undertaking" (Cherney, 2011).

Toward a Theory of Morality and Environment

As I described above, the attempt at mastery by observation and calculation and
the resulting mountains of scientific evidence have brought little consensus and
done little to reduce the intensity and intractability of conflict. In fact, as I will
show in Chapter 2, conflicts have progressively gotten worse over time. But why

3 Building on data from Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative (2012) I constructed a new
database of all interest groups working in the GYE. See Chapter 2 for more.

has this area become a hotbed of bitter and emotional contestation? Why, with all of the expert technical efforts to solve issues in the area, does just about every one of them nonetheless turn into a vehement and malignant struggle? Indeed, these struggles involve good old-fashioned economic self-interest, the mobilization of resources, and the pursuit of political power. Certainly, they also involve earnest (and much needed) debates over environmental science and the need to inform an "ill-informed" public about the biological and ecological foundations of preferred policies. But I quickly learned, and as I show throughout this project, there is something much deeper and more profound going on here. Drawing on Smith's (2003) theory about the inescapable moral makeup of human persons and culture, my goal is to show the deep moral and spiritual underpinnings of what appears to be rational and scientific life.[4] I wish here to push back against theories and explanations that do not take into account the deeper moral forces that structure human culture and pattern human behavior.

Thus, as I scratched in my research beneath the surface of the flurry of natural science, legal disputes, and economic analysis, I found that below and behind all of this technical evidence and debate lay deeper moral and spiritual commitments that are sometimes unacknowledged, and rarely articulated, yet which ultimately propel these endeavors. The most basic scientific decisions about what is worth knowing in the first place and what evidence is important, are driven by normative commitments and the belief that analytical, rational, and other empirical facts about the world matter in some way, toward some good (e.g., "healthier" ecosystems; the preservation of a cherished way of life). Thus, even ostensibly purely rational or analytical research is first and more basically shaped by what people see as good and meaningful: Are biologically intact ecosystems better than disrupted or fragmented ones? Do animals have intrinsic rights apart from their instrumental value to humans? Are humans only one small part of nature, or are they sovereign over it? Why should we care about Yellowstone in the first place? Basic questions like these are, in the end, not resolved by natural science or economic valuation because they are, by their very nature, meaningful only in the context of larger moral commitments about nature and humanity. They are, at their root, moral, philosophical, and spiritual questions.

I claim that to explain the intensity and intractability of this GYE conflict we must recognize that—more than scientific disagreements and rational self-interest—at stake here are fundamental moral beliefs, feelings, commitments, and desires, so deeply held and so dear to those who hold them that they are often taken for granted as fundamental to reality. So to understand the conflict, we need to bring to the surface what people deeply care about in the first place. We need to know what identity-shaping stories, large and small, they tell to make sense of their world and their place in it. We need to know about their innermost sense of

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4 My theoretical approach is also influenced by Jasper (1997), MacIntyre (1988), Taylor (1989) and Wuthnow (1989).

who they are, why they and the world exist, and how they believe they should act. We need to know what it is about nature that they find meaningful, and sacred, that they put their faith in as scientifically nonverifiable presuppositions and commitments, and believe worthy of defending. Answers to these questions help uncover the moral commitments that motivate and make meaningful the mountains of scientific, technical evidence marshaled in the conflict. Without these deeper beliefs, desires, and commitments about nature and humanity, this evidence would itself be meaningless, existing only in a social vacuum. In other words, this GYE conflict is not ultimately a struggle over facts (true and false), but a struggle over moral truths (good and bad). Of course, technorational facts are not lost in this struggle—they are all that seem to exist to many combatants involved—but such facts, I will show, are actually merely tools in the deeper cultural struggle over the moral and spiritual connections between nature and human culture and the broader attempt by different groups to realize and protect their respective moral orders.

To be clear, by "moral" I mean an orientation toward what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust—not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences themselves can be judged.[5] Moral commitments shape basic practices ranging from how to treat friends, family, and coworkers, to public and political practices relating to civil rights, poverty, the "culture wars," biomedical ethics, corporate ethics, art conflict, gender, identity, and—for our purposes—the natural environment. Social actors more or less internalize moral commitments unconsciously (Haidt, 2001; Vaisey, 2009) and consciously from meaningful narratives, face-to-face interactions (Blumer, 1969; Collins, 2005; Goffman, 1959), external structures and boundaries (Alexander, 2003; Douglas, 1966; Geertz, 1973; Wuthnow, 1989), and through our experiences as physical bodies in the social world, as the recent explosion of work in moral psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience have shown (Cerulo, 2010; Damasio, 1994; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). The discipline of sociology in large part began as a quest to analyze the sources, varieties, and consequences of these moral questions, which first had their origin in philosophical and theological communities. Indeed, Durkheim himself considered the discipline of sociology to be the "science of morality" (Durkheim, 1997) and Weber described some of his most important work as the study of "the motives of moral action" (Campbell, 2006).

What I mean by "moral order" here is an interpersonally and institutionally shared structure of moral beliefs, desires, feelings, and boundaries that are derived from larger narratives and rituals (Wuthnow, 1989). Friendly to this definition

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5 This definition derives from Taylor (1989), and is also adapted by Smith (2003). For a broad sociological discussion about the question "What is morality?" see Abend (2011); Tavory (2011); Porpora et al. (2013).

(although a bit too strong, completely collapsing the social with the moral) is Durkheim's claim that "the morality of each people is directly related to the social structure of people practicing it" (Durkheim, 1973, p. 87). People act "morally," as I mean it here, when their action affirms and fulfills the shared beliefs and commitments of what is understood to be good, right, and just (and not merely a personal preference, taste, or desire)—whether or not those actions are normally considered "moral" per se. A few simple examples are worth offering: the environmentalist acts morally when she sells her car and begins cycling to work (believing that pollution is harmful and wrong); the U.S. citizen acts morally when he goes out to vote (believing in democracy and self-governance); in certain contexts a woman acts morally when she submits herself to—what she understands to be—naturally given gender roles (believing in communal duty and obligation). But of course the very same acts that are defined as right and just in some moral orders are deemed wrong in others. A woman who abandons her community's "naturally" given gender expectations is demonized and perhaps killed in one context, yet in another context she would be lauded as a pioneering hero. Thus, more important than the individual actions themselves are the social institutions, cultural systems, practices, and narratives in which actors and their actions are embedded and which define for them what is good, right, and just.

How does all this relate to conflict? A fundamental motivation for human behavior, and social conflict, is, I suggest, the struggle to enact and sustain moral order.[6] I argue that conflict can become especially intense and intractable when groups compete to enact and sustain moral orders that are incommensurable. By incommensurable, I mean instances when there is no common standard or metric by which we can compare the moral orders to each other to adjudicate which one is more worthy of being chosen or realized. In other words, conflict is intense and unending because the deeper narratives and moral commitments at the heart of the conflict cannot be resolved by recourse to some external, objective, equally applicable standard. They are more like faith commitments that are "true" only within their larger frameworks of cultural belief and practice. In the GYE, the current standards that are used (e.g., law, ecology, economic valuation) are themselves influenced by these presuppositional commitments that are first *believed* to be true and right: endangered species should not go extinct; nonhuman animals have rights to exist; biodiversity and wilderness have worth; aesthetic beauty has worth; humans have more rights than nonhuman

6 I draw heavily from Smith (2003) to elaborate this point. I want to caution, though, that this claim should not be mistaken for a commitment to hard structural-functionalism, because humans do not, of course, always act in ways that are consistent with their own and others' moral standards. But inconsistency in individual behavior does not itself dismiss the fact that humans are part of much larger systems of cultural and moral meaning that guide "good" and "bad" behavior. In fact, as Smith claims, inconsistency in moral behavior can actually reveal the influence of larger moral orders at work: a husband stays late at the office and violates his obligation to be at family dinner because he is motivated by larger gender expectations about being the breadwinner.

animals; individuals should have control of their private property without federal
interference; the culture of utilitarian work and recreation is sacred. This issue
of incommensurability raises deep questions about the effectiveness of practical
rationality in GYE management, because, if the standards themselves derive from
deeper stories and moral commitments, how, we might ask, can we rationally
decide which deeply held moral order should be realized? Meanwhile, most
social actors involved simply miss the fact that they are fighting tooth and nail
to promote and defend incommensurable moral orders, obsessively marshaling
evidence that is itself meaningless when abstracted from their larger narratives
and moral commitments, all the while in so doing obscuring what the debate is
ultimately about. My purpose here is to reduce the level of obscurity that clouds
these arguments and conflicts.

Human Believers, Narrative Structure, and Enacting Moral Orders

Shifting the analytical focus of the conflict toward these deeper incommensurate
and conflicting moral orders raises basic theoretical questions that need to be
addressed: What are humans, that they construct shared belief systems? Where
do these moral systems of meaning come from? And how are humans propelled
forward by these commitments, influencing—and being influenced by—social
structures and institutions? It is important to unpack the details of this theoretical
approach here because it guides the logic underlying this book. I focus narrowly
on three related claims: (1) *Humans are believers*, by which I mean that instead
of having some universal or indubitable foundation of knowledge, we as social
beings must place our faith and trust in unverifiable starting points that we
socially construct to define our worlds, (2) *Narratives structure moral orders*, by
which I mean that humans are believers embedded in stories big and small that
separate sacred from profane and tell us who we are, why we are, what we are
doing, and why it all matters. Moral orders are thus not static sets of individually
formed analytical propositions about right and wrong, but are part of larger
creative stories that direct our lives and make what we do significant, (3) *People
strive to enact and sustain moral orders*, meaning that moral orders have real-
life consequences—especially for social conflict—and that humans, often together
through morally animated institutions and social structures, seek to realize and
perpetuate their moral order. Thus, when groups in the GYE challenge—and are
challenged by—one another, it is not simply about politics or money, but about
who they are as a moral people.

My aim in this book is not to set up a false dichotomy between rationality
and morality, between science and religion, or any other clumsy dichotomy that
can be too easily assumed. Indeed, morality can be very rational in thought
and practice, and rationality, as I argue here, is meaningless without underlying

moral commitments. There is no need to choose one or the other, and in fact, the case of GYE conflict shows most clearly the interpenetration of fact (what is) and value (what ought to be). In other words, people often weave together into a mutually supportive whole what they think ought to be (e.g., Healthy ecosystems are good) with facts about the world (e.g., Yellowstone needs wolves to be ecologically healthy). Moreover, the lines between rationality and morality are blurred because they depend on the institutional setting in which they are performed. For example, the scientific "fact" that Yellowstone wolves improve ecological health is perfectly rational to pro-wolf advocates and ecologists, yet when viewed through the lens of an anti-wolf perspective it is seen as irrational, and even immoral, because wolves symbolize the intrusion of the federal government and a threat to human dominion over nature.

HUMANS AS BELIEVERS

Humans are necessarily believers because there is no indubitable foundation for knowledge other than the knowledge people acquire as participants in specific human cultures. While myriad thinkers since the Enlightenment have sought such indubitable foundations, they have no doubt come up short.[7] Instead, we enter into human cultures that are founded upon beliefs and commitments that could be very different (a visit to other cultures quickly proves this point). We have only what has been believed in and constructed. It is paradoxically a world of seemingly predetermined built-up social structures for those born into it, yet a world still open to immense creativity and change. The one thing we cannot escape is that we place our trust in beliefs that are not certain, and cannot be empirically verified as True.

Of course, to say that people put their faith in unverifiable commitments can sound awkward and preachy to some modern people. Consider a few basic examples of how different human cultures and moral orders are built up from very different starting-point moral commitments: some people believed, and still do, that whites are born free and blacks are born to be slaves. Some believe that humans are innately evil, and others believe that they are innately good. Some believe that a purposeful God created the world in six days, while others believe a random explosion 13 billion years ago was responsible. Some people believe that women are innately inferior to men, while others believe that they are equal. Some people believe that the struggle against oppression, injustice, and inequality is a moral obligation, while others believe that our only obligation is to improve the human race through domination and exploitation of the inherently weak. Some believe that the natural environment is a harmonious and spiritual balance of interdependent relationships, while others believe that the natural world is

7 For more on this see Berger and Luckmann (1966); Smith (2003); Taylor (1989); Jasper (1997); MacIntyre (1990); Rorty (2009). The massive and fragmented body of work characterized as "postmodern" also begins from this larger claim against strong foundationalism.

a material storehouse for conquering and consumption. The point here is that because we have no objective set of given knowledge—and no objective way to verify our beliefs as irrefutably true—we necessarily build our lives upon these sorts of deeply held moral commitments.

Even this short list of examples reveals the radical diversity of fundamental starting-point assumptions that have guided the course of human history. The radical openness of human cultures to socially construct meaningful moral orders has been obscured by our modern commitments to our own moral projects that posit indubitable foundations of knowledge and motivation, such as neoclassical economics, behaviorism, or social Darwinism. Not only do ostensibly rational projects like these begin with their own set of moral commitments that cannot be empirically verified, but they can completely miss the creative ways that human cultures socially construct their lives from deeply held moral beliefs about themselves and the world around them.

The fact that human cultures are at their root about deeply held moral beliefs explains why, following Durkheim, cultures persistently sacralize physical and mental objects. Thus, people do not believe in a detached, abstract, emotionless sense, but instead their believing impels them to set aside objects that are especially powerful, worthy, and important—deserving of honor, protection, and devotion. Deeply held assumptions at the center of a moral order (e.g., humans have rights; nature has intrinsic value; Jews are an inferior people; manifest destiny demands Indian removal) incline people to erect moral boundaries to protect what they believe to be sacred, explaining "the extreme strictness of the prohibitions that separate the sacred from the profane" (Durkheim, 2001, p. 237). We see this most clearly in the visceral emotional reactions to the breaching of sacred boundaries—people get angry, impassioned, and defensive. Various examples of the sacred include the environment, the nation-state, individual freedom, the burial site, the sporting event, animals, heritage, work, or private property rights—and post-Enlightenment moderns are no less inclined toward sacralizing and defending these than are "traditional" or primitive societies.

Because those involved in the GYE conflict are believers in socially constructed stories that give them meaning and direct their lives, they too sacralize aspects of the physical and mental world. Thus, explanations of the conflict that attempt to wholly reduce it to technical disagreements or the need for more scientific evidence or the pursuit of self-interest badly miss out on deeper cultural (and emotional) mechanisms that are continually operative. Of course, that does not mean we should disregard science and self-interest—because both are very real mechanisms in the conflict—but my claim here is that we need to contextualize each within its own moral story (e.g., Enlightenment rationality, *homo economicus*, objective science, empirical prediction), and examine their influence alongside other socially constructed moral orders about nature that I argue give meaning to the conflict in the first place.

NARRATIVES STRUCTURE MORAL ORDERS

Moral codes are not socially constructed in a vacuum, but are linked to larger narratives that creatively tell us who we are, where we are, what we are, why we are here, what we should do, and why it all matters. In other words, humans "are symbol-making creatures, who spin webs of meaning around ourselves. We proliferate metaphors and language for describing the world…and we tell each other story after story. Into this roiling cognitive activity we mix emotions and moral evaluations…attaching new moral values to existing ones…[creating] interpretive frameworks through which we filter all our experience" (Jasper, 1997, p. 10). The very basis of human communication is, and has been since the beginning, storytelling. We live within, tell, and retell narratives big and small. For our purposes, it is important to know that "narratives"—understood here as *meaningful* accounts of human actions arranged into connected events— are much more than historical recountings of factual events, but contain actors and a plot (middle, beginning, end) and are intended to convey meaningful points about the world.[8] Narratives have told of the origins of the cosmos, of different tribes and peoples, of heroic leaders, of evil villains, of lessons learned, of (re)interpreted pasts, and of futures promised. Today we moderns may not paint on cave walls to tell our stories, but we rely as heavily on narratives to convey normative insights about our experiences, how we should act, and what is real and significant.

People's understandings of the environment in the GYE are learned and acquired through day-to-day socialization experiences, much of which, I argue, is influenced by these larger narratives. To be clear, these narratives should not be mistaken as strong structures existing in every person's mind, but are general ways to understand and describe the cultural logic of different groups. Oftentimes they are not fully articulated by actors. Uncovering such narratives thus requires the researcher to construct them from sometimes piecemeal scripts, arguments, and observations. Guiding moral narratives I explore throughout the following chapters include manifest destiny, rugged individualism, human dominionism, old-western heritage, the rise of ecological science, place attachment to physical settings, and various environmentalist subnarratives about the spiritual redemption of nature. People "pick up" moral lessons in their day-to-day experiences as participants in these orienting stories: your grandfather did it this way and we should revere and respect our ancestors; we are in a battle against instrumental utilitarianism and should continue to fight for the spiritual redemption of nature; environmental laws are part of an ongoing attack from the federal government on our innate private property and states' rights; for decades we stumbled through the dark but now have scientific tools to precisely measure and predict ecosystem harm and ethics; this land has become part of who we are as old-westerners and

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8 For more, see MacIntyre (1981); Ricoeur (1984).

we must defend against attempts to destroy our identity and culture. We make these stories, and they make us. I am suggesting, in a strong sense, that "the stories we tell are not mere entertainment. Nor do they simply suggest for us some general sense of our heritage. Our stories fully encompass and define our lives" (Smith, 2003, p. 78). They elaborate the contours of the sacred and profane in deeply personal, *narrative* form.

ENACTING AND SUSTAINING MORAL ORDERS

Humans strive to enact and sustain moral orders, most often through morally infused institutions and social structures. They propel behavior toward certain moral ends, even though sometimes these ends are anything but singular, clear, consistent, or well-articulated. When there are competing moral orders, the issue of incommensurability becomes especially important. If, as in the GYE, no amount of empirical evidence can adjudicate, or make commensurate, different moral visions about what nature is good for, then conflict becomes especially intense and intractable. In some cases it is impossible to reduce opposing values to a common metric.

For example, in the midst of the conflict over abortion, opposing groups fight about how to weigh, measure, and assess scientific facts about the fetus, yet in the end it is not about the facts, but what the facts mean within an "internally coherent and mutually shared view of the world that is tacit, never fully articulated, and, most importantly, completely at odds with the world view held by their opponents" (Luker, 1984, p. 159). In the same way that science cannot ultimately determine the value of the fetus (or the proper role of women in American society), the value of "nature" in the GYE cannot ultimately be determined by ecology, instrumental cost-benefit analysis, or any other commensurable technique, because the "True" value of nature is first determined by deeper belief commitments, narratives, and practices of competing groups.

In the struggle between competing moral orders, groups attempt to transform their opponent's sacred stories and core intrinsic values from right to wrong, good to bad. I refer to this as "moral devaluation" and describe this process in more detail below. In the GYE, environmentalists have by and large devalued the old-western moral order by redrawing the boundaries about what is sacred and profane vis-à-vis nature, rejecting the utilitarian relationship with the land that was once the pinnacle of the good life in the GYE. Old-western cowboys represented the best of American exceptionalism, romantic nationalism, and material promise. God favored their work, and God favored the spread of liberty and self-government across the American West. Their labor institutions were a bearer of these values, incarnating their moral relationship to the land and making them morally worthy people. But in today's moral battle for the GYE, these ideals are no longer desirable or "good," but in a radical reversal, they are considered by many to be harmful and morally wrong. The utilitarian

moral vision of old-westerners did not simply lose authority in the area, but, more important, their sacred stories were completely rejected, and their role in history was redefined as immoral. Moral devaluation is intensely personal and elicits such a strong emotional reaction because it involves the condemnation of one's very self. This process of moral devaluation is made "objective" through scientific research about the harmful effects of traditional ways of life, and it is institutionalized through the establishment of environmental laws making these practices unethical and illegal.

Theoretical Contributions

It is my hope that this theoretical approach offers tools to improve knowledge and research in the study of culture, rationality, and conflict—in addition to more field-specific contributions in environmental sociology, sociology of culture, and sociology of religion. Moreover, even in the discipline of sociology more broadly, scholars have noted the surprising shortage of studies of morality "as it is actually lived" (Porpora et al., 2013), beyond the useful, but nevertheless limited, fMRI laboratories, abstract philosophical theories, large-scale surveys, or game theory experiments that accompany the reemergence of interest in morality from sociology, psychology, linguistics, and neurosciences. Drawing on these insights, but moving beyond them, this book provides a case-study account of morality "in the wild" (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010) that is both in-depth and comprehensive, rooted in the historical development of a particular place and particular peoples.

Turning to work in environmental sociology, I take a more critical and constructive approach, arguing that the "science of morality" has largely been ignored by environmental sociologists, and make the case that our theories about the human–environment connection would be greatly improved by a more rigorous focus on the moral dimensions underpinning human cultures. With regard to sociology of religion, I claim that, in contrast to the overemphasis on individual-level data and religious organizations (e.g., congregations and denominations), we have a lot to learn by searching for the influence of the sacred in "secular" places we might least expect it. In other words, I aim to demonstrate that despite endless debates about secularization, we should move forward by paying special attention to explosions of the sacred within, and across, institutions that we have not traditionally thought of as "religious"—especially highly bureaucratic, scientific, or rational institutions, such as those in the GYE. I elaborate why this is the case, drawing on recent work to show how this book offers a more fruitful direction of research for scholars interested in how religion impacts social and political life.

I end by bringing this introduction full circle, returning to the theoretical counterarguments posed at the beginning of this chapter about conflict, rationality, and self-interest. I further engage these competing arguments and

show how they offer incomplete explanations. Instead of a complete rejection of these counterarguments, I incorporate them into my theory by further drawing on conflict theory. In particular, I argue, consistent with my theory, that the moral and spiritual dimensions of conflict become entwined with—influencing and being influenced by—changes in the structure of economic, political, and status-based exchange markets.

BRINGING CLASSICAL QUESTIONS INTO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

I view this project as contributing to a much-needed focus on the moral bases of environmental problems. In this section I want to briefly reflect on the state of environmental sociology as it pertains to the theory I have elaborated throughout this chapter. My main goal is to provide a constructive critique of the field, arguing that while the moral dimension of the environment has flourished in other fields, it has by and large been ignored in environmental sociology's theories and empirical analyses. In doing so, I hope to point out blind spots that hinder the field from moving forward toward a more comprehensive, culturally informed, and accurate understanding of the human–environment relationship.

A science of morality has been neglected, in part, because Weber and Durkheim themselves, found less traction in environmental sociology than in other subfields. Another primary reason has to do with how environmental sociologists have operationalized "nature" as a resource—primarily as a material good for human survival (Van Koppen, 2000). Since the emergence of environmental sociology in the early 1960 to the 1970s, this definition of nature has been successfully used to examine the myriad threats human societies pose to the natural resources we depend on for our survival. The field itself is organized around material problems that arise in the interaction between humans and the environment on various issues such as ozone depletion, water scarcity, biodiversity, pollution, energy crises, food and hunger, globalization, and population growth. The social constructionism movement in environmental sociology brought some cultural (and moral) issues to the fore, but sustained attention to the moral dimensions of nature have largely occurred outside of the bounds of sociology, in history (e.g., Hays 1989; Nash 1989, 2001), law (e.g., Nagle 2005), religion (e.g., Albanese 1991; Tucker and Grim 2013) anthropology (e.g. Kempton et al. 1996) and environmental ethics.

An early hallmark of the field was its apt criticism of mainstream sociology that it had privileged "social facts" over biophysical ones. Thus, since the early 1960s, environmental sociologists have made a concerted effort to bind the material to the social. In this successful effort, much more attention has been given to the material aspects of nature, in the effort to point out the myriad threats human societies pose to the natural resources we depend on for our survival. As a consequence, the predominant theories in environmental sociology have—for

good reason—favored material-based theories and models. For example, early human ecology theories (Duncan, 1959; Park, 1952), Catton and Dunlap's model of the general functions of the environment (supply depot, living space, waste repository), Luhmann's system theory (1989), treadmill of production and other neo-Marxist theories (Dickens, 2002; Pepper, 1993; Schnaiberg, 1980), Beck's risk society theory (1992), and ecological modernization theory (Spaargaren and Mol, 1992). These theories have, in different ways, been extremely beneficial to the growth of what is still a relatively young field of research. Moreover, many environmental sociologists are aware of the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of humanity's relationship to the natural environment, despite the fact that a significant blind spot still remains with regard to any sort of deep theoretical account or rigorous empirical analysis of those dimensions.

While environmental sociology as a whole has focused on material problems rather than the cultural structures that produce them, there are examples of work that has, to some extent, engaged moral phenomena, albeit in indirect ways. The most well-known are the ubiquitous public opinion studies that measure environmental attitudes about environmental domination and environmental concern. Researchers use surveys to gather information on percentages of the population who agree or disagree about a variety of statements about values, justifications, and policy preferences (e.g., Dunlap et al. 2000, Dunlap et al. 2001; for similar work outside sociology see Kellert 1996). This valuable line of work correlates these attitudes with various demographic characteristics, often finding that the younger, well-educated, and politically liberal are most concerned about the environment. Others in the social-psychological tradition use similar survey methods to argue that in addition to demographic factors, we should pay close attention to social-psychological survey constructs that predict environmental concern (Dietz et al., 1998). These early studies formed the "value-belief-norm" theory of environmental behavior (Stern 2000). In addition to the aforementioned work, Ronald Inglehart (1971, 2008) uses surveys to identify broader intergenerational shifts in what he calls "postmaterialist" values, arguing that younger generations who are not strapped with material concerns about health and survival are freer to focus on postmaterialists concerns like aesthetics and quality of life, thus explaining their higher rates environmental concern. While it has come under widespread attack, the theory makes interesting theoretical claims about the relationship between moral concepts, like the "good life," and environmental concern. Nevertheless, this short analysis shows that the small amount of work on moral phenomena in environmental sociology has largely been relegated to this tradition of attitudinal survey work, which itself has traditionally ignored any sort of deep analysis of human culture.[9]

9 But see Bell (1994) and Feinberg and Willer (2013) for alternative examples. This body of work I describe above on environmental values, as measured through attitudinal surveys, operates with four implicit and questionable assumptions: First, surveys tend to include closed-ended questions and

The strong influence of the natural sciences within the discipline is an additional reason why morality has, unfortunately, remained on the sidelines. Because environmental sociology is the study of how social systems interact with ecosystems, environmental sociologists rely heavily on natural scientists for knowledge about ecosystems. The natural sciences provide environmental sociologists concrete metrics by which to understand the actual impact of individuals, institutions, and societies on material ecosystems. These measurement tools and metrics, which again emphasize nature as a *material resource* for human health and survival, are critical for environmental sociologists who strive to build useful knowledge about how we might organize society in more sustainable ways. Thus, in this sense, it is quite easy to see how moral dimensions of nature rooted in emotion, aesthetics, expressive symbolism, or spirituality might seem out of touch to environmental sociologists, especially those working closely with natural sciences that find little professional value in these domains of experience, and may view morality as distracting from the material problems we face.

This has hindered the larger impact of environmental sociology. In a recent reflection on the state of environmental sociology, Gould and Lewis (2009, p. 295) conclude that "environmental sociology has largely remained a subdiscipline unto itself" and call for a renewed emphasis to integrate and "extend it into all aspects of sociology as a whole." I argue here that one important way that we might extend it into the larger discipline of sociology is to link the environment to the concerns of the founders of the discipline, who themselves were deeply committed to the "science of morality" (e.g., Durkheim, Weber) and paid particular attention to culture and the ways moral orders have political and material repercussions.

But the irony is that all projects—even modern academic projects like environmental sociology—are, finally, propelled by deeper moral beliefs and commitments, such as equality, justice, empathy, and concern for worsening environmental disruption. Thus, to recover a moral imagination in the discipline we do not have to look far beyond ourselves and our work, for it is fundamentally built into much of what we strive for through our research. Along these lines, Gould and Lewis (2009, p.295) again conclude that to solve environmental problems—which for many environmental sociologists is the ultimate end—we must "question our goals. What do we want? What's the desired end?...how we proceed will depend on what we value. We ask our students to define 'the

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therefore restrict respondents to a set of answers that are biased from the outset. Kempton et al. (1996, p. 88) argue that the influence of religion on environmental concern has been neglected for this very reason—namely, the environmental literature has largely ignored the topic and thus researchers have not included measures of religion on their survey questionnaires, and this only reinforces the original assumption that it doesn't matter. Second, that individual attitudes are relatively stable. Third, that attitudes measured outside a real-life social context are meaningful. Fourth, that attitudes, as indicated on a survey, actually determine subsequent behavior.

good life.'" These are the deeper questions of moral worth and value that I argue are critical for sociological analysis. Thus, one contribution of the present project is to bring these questions to the surface of the discipline. We must link these meanings to the material environmental consequences we care so much about. We must bring morality into the center of our analyses because it is an inescapable part of human culture to begin with, and our theories will suffer until we rigorously account for it. This project is but one small attempt to contribute to the field of environmental sociology a concrete and systematic analysis of morality that takes into account the complexity of moral orders, situates them in the historical development of institutions and social structures, and shows how they actively influence an important, and long-lasting, environmental conflict.

A SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF "SPIRITUALITY" IN "SECULAR" CONTEXTS

Throughout this introduction I have invoked the concept of "spirituality" in service of my argument about the cultural dimensions of conflict. I have resisted defining the concept because definitions of "spirituality," or the "spiritual," tend to confound more than they illuminate.[10] Spirituality is a fuzzy notion that eschews any box or pigeonhole in which researchers have have sought to place it. I sidestep these unnecessary lacunae, and instead favor something more akin to Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity—we tend to know it when we see it. Admittedly, we can say that "spirituality" conveys meaning, in a broad sense, about that which cultures experience as sacred, mystical, other, or set apart from everyday life. Hardly an all-encompassing definition, this general understanding can help us examine how spirituality shapes environmental issues in the GYE.

Like morality, the concept of spirituality (and religion more generally) has largely been left out of sociological conversations about the environment. We therefore know relatively little about the social and political influence of spirituality on environmental conflict. This can be partially attributed to the critiques noted above about the neglect of morality, but something larger is also going on here with respect to spirituality and religion. In most fields of research, and in social life more generally, popular understandings of spirituality have conceptualized it as an *individual* phenomenon. This is akin to Bellah and colleagues' (2008) appraisal in *Habits of the Heart* of "Sheila-ism," a now-famous term used as shorthand to describe religious individualism in American life, denoting how Sheila created her own individualized spirituality using self-determination, and relying on her own personal experiences. For me, then, it became clear that much of the popular and scholarly work about spirituality and environment understood spirituality to be something confined to the individual,

10 For more, see Bender (2010).

not something socially produced through larger narratives and structures of social life. For example, a popular representation of spirituality in nature is the romantic soul-seeking of "patron saints" of environmentalism, such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. Spirituality is produced (and reproduced) through highly individualized experiences of divine beauty and splendor out in the natural world. Moral principles about how one ought to relate to nature flowed from self-directed individuals and their highly personalized experiences with nature. The problem with such popular stereotypes—and the subsequent modeling of these conceptions in what has largely been individual-level research—is that they often obscure the larger historical, cultural, political, and economic structures in which people like Thoreau, or Sheila, are embedded, ultimately coming to shape their spiritual feelings and commitments.

In addition to the view of spirituality as something that separate individuals do, is another, and perhaps more important, reason why it has been ignored in sociological analyses of the environment. This has to do with the *perceived* fate of spirituality and religion in contexts deemed to be "secular." Such contexts can be all-encompassing—as big as Weber's claims about *Entzauberung* (disenchantment) of Western civilization, but they can also be smaller bounded "secular" contexts, such as the GYE, dominated by science and technorationality. The post-Enlightenment differentiation of the sacred from the secular in Western society, along with the rise of an industrialized society, led most social critics (e.g., Weber, Marx, Spencer, Comte, Freud, Mills) to assume that the spiritual was being stamped out by post-Enlightenment forces of bureaucratization, modern science, industrialization, rationalization, and urbanization. Indeed, C. Wright Mills represents well these widespread beliefs about the fate of the sacred in this new world:

> Once the world was filled with the sacred—in thought, practice, and in-stitutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm. (Mills, 1959, pp. 32–33)

In recent decades this strong version of the secularization thesis has come under serious question, given the vitality and growth of religion around the world. But one thing is still clear: in our modern situation in the West, the spiritual and sacred dimensions of life have undergone considerable change with the rise of modernity, scientific rationality, humanistic education, technology, capitalism, bureaucratic life, and so on. This has, in large part, to do with institutional differentiation—namely, the modern separation of church, state, education, science, health, and law from one another. What does this mean for the study of spirituality, especially within these distinct "secular" institutions that make up social contexts like the GYE?

Within a context like the GYE, this might lead us to believe that we will not find spirituality and religion within its institutions that are, by all accounts, highly bureaucratic and rationalizing. Or we might expect the sacred to be confined to traditional institutions, such as religious congregations. *But I claim here, and demonstrate throughout this book, that spirituality in the GYE has not been dealt a death blow by such rationalizing forces, but that it has become deeply entwined within scientific and rational institutions that we take to be "secular."* In other words, spirituality and religion are still inescapably present in modern life, even though they have become more difficult to observe. With this in mind, Courtney Bender's (2010, p. 286) recent sociological analysis of spirituality contends that researchers have two choices: "We can continue to be surprised and perplexed at the irruptions of the sacred into daily life" or, alternatively, we can accept this reality and resign ourselves to "investigate how those irruptions take place and work to locate the institutions and practices that contribute both to their occlusion and to their continuation." This makes it all the more important to approach the fuzzy concept of "spirituality" not as something individualistic or confined only to religious institutions, but as something deeply intertwined with, and expressed through different collective histories, practices, and social structures.

Thus, one of the underlying arguments of this book is that we should search for spirituality in secular contexts, rather than the typical locations scholars have sought out. With the contemporary shift away from identifying with organized religion (e.g., "I'm spiritual, but not religious"), we will do well to move our focus away from traditional institutional locales (e.g., mosques, churches, synagogues) and toward more "institutionally diverse" aspects of the sacred (Luckmann, 1967). This does not mean that we will find "religion" everywhere we look. Nor does it mean that spiritual and sacred factors, when present, will always trump secular factors like science, law, or economics. In most cases they won't. But sometimes the surprising eruptions of the sacred can have unexpected and profound consequences. Thus, as I demonstrate throughout this book, we should not assume a false dichotomy of the sacred *or* the technoscientific, and this need not be an inherently conflictual relationship. Instead, it is a complex configuration that is part and parcel of the entanglement of the sacred in modern life. And finding explosions of spiritual fervor in (secular) contexts that we tend to not view as religious challenges simplistic linkages between the secular and the spiritual, between secularization and modernity, between the mystical and the scientific, and between the religious and the political

These sacred elements of social life have clear political repercussions that are rarely acknowledged in environmental research. This is true of observers and participants in the GYE conflict, and equally true of the research in environmental sociology. Stretching our definitions of the "spiritual" beyond popular and scholarly perceptions of self-determining individualists like John Muir or Sheila-ism, and away from traditional religious institutions, might open up new doors

for social scientists to engage sacred realities and narratives that have real-world material consequences for the natural environment.

RETURNING TO SOME COUNTERARGUMENTS: CULTURE, RATIONALITY, SELF-INTEREST, AND VALUATION

In one sense it is not entirely surprising that a region like the GYE, full of rational bureaucracies (government agencies, environmental organizations, and businesses) rooted in political and legal procedure, natural science, and cost-benefit analysis, would favor what Weber called formal-procedural rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), and either fail to notice or overtly ignore substantive-value rationality (*Wertrationalität*). But work in cultural and economic sociology has shown that social life is much more complex, and there is more to the modern narrative that moral, spiritual, and other deeply meaningful aspects of social life are simply crowded out by rationality. In fact, this is where the story begins, and where things start to get interesting. To end here would be to accept a model of rationality that is oversimplified and disconnected from the ways in which environmental conflict is hardly "rational" in the classical sense of the word, but is deeply influenced by identity and culture.

We must therefore attend to the different ways rationality is practiced, resisted, and institutionalized. We should move beyond conventional approaches to rationality that assume actors pursue universalized and transparent self-interests, somehow putting culture and identity aside to make political decisions.[11] Frank Dobbin (1999, p. 237) notes that this model of rationality has unfortunately become "conventional wisdom about political conflict." It is a model that wrongly assumes rational actors pursue these interests, "calculating their expenditures of political capital using a universal arithmetic of cost and benefit." Thus, a more accurate model proposed in this book focuses on how cultural experiences and identities shape for people what is both rational *and* moral.

But this means decision making is more complicated. How are we to adjudicate between different groups' opposing visions of what is rational and moral? How do we attribute a commensurable metric of worth to these cultural practices and identities? Economists answer this question using the market—that is, measuring value through consumer behavior, for example, how much people are willing to pay to tolerate wolves on GYE public and private lands, or the determination of costs and benefits of drilling for natural gas near the border of Yellowstone. But economic strategies, while useful for determining the value of most tangible commodities, pose limits for goods and exchanges that people may view as morally objectionable, such as endangered species or sacred land—or more intangible goods such as love, emotions, personhood, cultural heritage, or aesthetic beauty.

11 See Espeland (1998) for an in-depth analysis of rationality and identity.

One way forward is to link different valuations of nature to the human variety of "sociohistorical experiences with particular natural sites, landscapes, or wildlife" (Fourcade, 2011, p. 1725). Over the past century, sociohistorical developments in the GYE have led to different moral visions of nature, especially the "cultural tension between the 'useful' and the 'beautiful'" (Fourcade, 2011, p. 1737). These different cultural formations of nature—and in my case what it is "good for"—are more than just descriptive, but exert real causal power in the social, political, and legal process. These causal mechanisms are often masked by material influences that prevail in bureaucratic processes (e.g., the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)), economic valuation, and other rational and "commensurable" techniques.

Thus, the metric of money is only one axis by which we can assess what things are "worth" and other justifications, or "economies of worth," are also relevant.[12] These other justifications for valuing the natural environment have come under some sociological consideration, but we have much, much more to learn. Some have explored more biologically based values inherent to humankind that shape different values of nature (Kellert, 1996), but these fail to capture the cultural contingencies that shape this process. Whatever our approach, it is clear that individuals and institutions—from the most "technical" and "rational" to the most "unskilled" and "irrational"—rely on different interpretations of nature and its value to define their relationship to it. For thinkers like Muir and Thoreau it was rooted in aesthetic beauty and immanentist spirituality; for many conservation biologists, values exist in evolutionary processes and biodiversity; and for many ethicists and philosophers, it is about nonhuman rights, the moral value of biodiversity, and the health of the biological community for future generations.

How moral meanings of nature *change over time* is also important. One approach to this question, which I take in the first section of this book, is to examine the historical and institutional processes by which nature acquires moral and spiritual value. We can observe the "cultural process of sacralization" to understand how utilitarian aspects of social life become "invested with moral and religious meaning" (Zelizer, 2010, p. 41). Like the organization of cultural meaning around life insurance, children, blood, or organs,[13] I uncover the institutional process leading to the moralization and sacralization of nature (and Yellowstone). And, as I have argued, these processes have, unfortunately, been neglected in prior attempts to explain environmental conflict in the region. Of course, these sorts of moral dimensions are difficult to detect amid the procedural rationality of NEPA, legal formalism, commensurability techniques, scientific analysis of nature, and bureaucratic administration. But with this cultural approach in mind, we have a roadmap to probe more deeply beneath

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12 See Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) for more on the economies of worth perspective.
13 Zelizer (1979, 1985); Healy (2006).

the surface, pointing us toward the thick webs of meaning that structure our lives and propel our behavior.

ENTANGLING THE MORAL WITH CONFLICT OVER ECONOMICS, POLITICS, AND STATUS

I have said a lot about the importance of moral orders, but under what circumstances are people's deeply held commitments more likely to come into overt conflict? With this question, we return to where we began the chapter, focusing on the conditions that result in conflict. Like the study of morality, the study of social conflict is perhaps as old as sociology itself. Conflict, or competition between groups, continues to be of central importance to topics at the heart of the discipline—race, gender, class, social movements, religion, politics, and so on. Sociologists, especially those shaped by Karl Marx, have investigated social conflict from the perspective of material and economic competition. For Marx, moral meanings and other cultural values were a mask used strategically to hide material pursuits. This approach has taught us a great deal about social conflict, yet it is incomplete. I agree with Nicola Beisel (1997) that moral conflict— competition between groups about "right" and "wrong"—itself has consequences for class reproduction. Moreover, like Beisel, and others who have studied moral politics,[14] I believe that conflict can bring to the surface new insights about how morality actually matters in social life, and how seemingly benign symbolic competition over moral meanings can have real consequences for economic well-being, political power, and status hierarchies.

As I have argued, a full account of social conflict in the GYE must simultaneously address how moral-symbolic concerns influence—and are influenced by— struggles for political and economic power. It is not my aim to explain in depth every dimension of this conflict, as I have instead chosen to focus on its deeper root causes—namely, moral and spiritual commitments and the struggle to enact and sustain incommensurable moral orders. Nevertheless, our moral orders sit beneath excruciatingly complex political, economic, and status-based systems. Rory McVeigh's (2009) "power devaluation" theory is especially useful here to explain when conflict might be more likely because he focuses on how structural change can result in "power devaluation" in some groups, providing incentive for conflict. Drawing on microeconomic logic, McVeigh argues that three distinct social "markets" of exchange are particularly important: *economic*, *political*, and *status-based*. Macro-level structural changes can alter these exchange markets in ways that devalue some groups and award advantages to others. McVeigh applies his theory to explain why the 1920s Ku Klux Klan grew in some areas, but not others, and how the moral politics of the Klan was motivated by broader economic, political, and status devaluation in American society. But at the same

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14 Gusfield (1963); Hunter (1991); Luker (1984); Tepper (2011).

time McVeigh carefully avoids "economic reductionism" and takes seriously the ways "economic grievances articulated by the movement were intertwined with cultural identities" (McVeigh, 2009, p. 50).

Structural, rather than individual-level, change is integral to the power devaluation model, and I build on this approach here to gain insight into the structure of moral order, arguing that economic, political, and status-based shifts from old-west to new-west created the necessary conditions for a struggle between opposing moral visions of nature. In recent decades this dramatic political, economic, and status-market change has challenged the sacred rights, privileges, and practices long enjoyed by old-westerners. There are new people, new economic markets, new ideas about nature, and, most important for our purposes, new moral boundaries around what is sacred and profane. Old-western towns filled with rugged farmers and ranchers transformed into premier destinations for outdoor enthusiasts, environmentalists, and America's mega-elite. While I argue that these changes were motivated by new beliefs about what land was "good" for (e.g., preservation/amenities vs. extraction), it is useful here to understand how *economic*, *political*, and *status-based* devaluation interacted with the prevailing moral order, to provide incentives for conflict. I consider each of these in turn, focusing on a few examples that illustrate how moral culture is deeply intertwined with these factors—as both a cause and consequence of these structural changes.

In terms of *economic devaluation*, between 1970 and 2010 the once dominant traditional economic industries declined, dwarfed by the explosion of new-west nonlabor (e.g., dividends from investments, rent, transfer payments), services (e.g., tourism related), and government industries. A new economy emerged that emphasized the enjoyment of natural and cultural amenities. Many old-westerners experienced devaluation in the economic exchange market because of the decline in demand for family ranching and farming in the GYE during the 20th century, combined with the increase in the supply of new industries. The increase in the supply of new-west jobs originated from the belief that traditional practices were objectively harmful to the ecosystem and that a new economy should be built that reconnects humans in nonconsumptive ways with the beauty of natural amenities in the GYE. These new jobs not only required new skills, but they required a new worldview and the rejection of the utilitarian moral vision and its practices as no longer viable and morally wrong. Old-westerners have been able to sustain and even reassert their moral and cultural identity by participating in the natural amenities economy in ways that are consistent with their utilitarian moral vision, for example, in tourism industries as outfitters for hunting, fishing, or motorized recreation. Thus, debates about economic livelihood have largely shifted away from the appropriateness of ranching and farming to what constitutes morally appropriate recreation—namely, how should the land be enjoyed?

Political devaluation occurred in the wake of the most significant political change in the region since the establishment of YNP in 1872. This was the

realization—based on the moral commitment to the intrinsic value of intact ecosystems—that to protect Yellowstone, managers would need to expand the bounds of protection to include private lands far beyond the park's border. With the urging of environmentalists and scientists, federal land managers gradually recognized by the mid-1980s that they needed to expand the zone of protection from 4 million acres to about 20 million acres, which now makes up the invisible boundaries of what is referred to as the "Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem." This large-scale implementation of new moral beliefs onto 20 million acres of public and private land led to a significant devaluation of political purchasing power among private landowners living within these new bounds. Perhaps even worse, Americans living outside the GYE, from New York City to California, began to gain more political power over the area. In the minds of many old-westerners, this—symbolic and literal—expansion of the federal government into their lives through the inscription of new moral value onto their private lands provided incentive for conflict in the struggle to regain political control—a type of control firmly rooted in their deep commitment to private property rights and local autonomy.

Last, old-westerners experienced *status devaluation* as all of this structural change reconfigured social hierarchies in the GYE. Within a status market, individuals and groups offer certain practices and cultural knowledge in exchange for prestige and esteem from others. In the old-west the display of hard work, practical knowledge, and the successful transformation of land for resource acquisition was exchanged for admiration and respect from others. The demand for these traits declined in the late 20th century, and new practices were now valued: new-west elites engaged in conspicuous leisure in the GYE and supported "green" policies as a way to distinguish themselves from the immoral utilitarian practices upon which old-west culture was founded. Ironically, many elites in the new-west transcend the old-west cultural markers of hard work, while at the same time reappropriating dominant symbols of the cowboy into their life of leisure, whether that is wearing expensive cowboy hats and boots, enjoying dude ranches and guided hunting, or spending millions to fashion their second home into a luxurious log cabin of yesteryear. They begin to acquire a stake in the health of the local land and believe more and more that they know what is good for the future health of the area. By supporting these more restrictive environmental policies they attempt to stop further growth in the GYE, thus ensuring that new-west status markers remain relatively scarce. A second prominent group contributing to new status-based relationships are GYE environmentalists. Old-west markers of esteem were linked to practical knowledge gained through experience working with the land, and through various family traditions, such as hunting and fishing. With the expansion of ecological science into all areas of GYE life, practical markers of prestige have been devalued in favor of traits and behaviors that display political, legal, and scientific expertise.

A Roadmap

As I have argued, only when we shift our attention to investigating what it is about nature that people find meaningful, that they find sacred, that they put their faith in and believe worthy of defending, will we start to understand what all the fighting over the environment is really about. Indeed, a host of interrelated and important economic, legal, and technoscientific factors are at work, but at bottom, the origins of the GYE conflict are about meaning. Such differences of meaning are especially difficult to resolve because there exists no external objective standard upon which to adjudicate between claims that are only "True" within larger narratives and moral orders that cultures use to make sense of the world and define their reality. Here I will provide a quick roadmap outlining how this argument unfolds throughout the rest of the book.

APPROACH TO RESEARCH

My analytical approach in this book is broad in that I seek to reconstruct the cultural context—in sociohistorical detail and institutional complexity—within which different moral and spiritual ideas about Yellowstone emerged. But my approach is also in-depth, in that it uses detailed case-study examinations of specific contemporary conflicts to demonstrate how deeply held moral commitments influence, in different ways, the ongoing political struggles. Because our human moral orders come largely from socialization into life-defining narratives, I pay particular attention to the historical development and influence of the following narrative elements that are relevant for explaining my case: manifest destiny, rugged individualism, human dominionism, old-western heritage, wildness and wilderness, the rise of ecological science, indigenous tribal religion, place attachment to physical settings, American imperialism, and environmentalists' redemption of the natural world.

To accomplish this, I rely on three different sources of data: (1) *Quantitative indicators of broader social and moral change in the region*. These longitudinal data, culled from various sources (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, Internal Revenue Service, Bureau of Economic Analysis) describe socioeconomic shifts, marking significant institutional change in the region from "old-west" to "new-west." These data provide the necessary historical and cultural scaffolding for understanding more recent moral change in the region. (2) *A profusion of discourse texts*, including "big data" corpora. These text corpora are both historical and current; examples include material discourse like scientific reports, social media, public letters written to the National Park Service, culturally important images, written histories of communities, meeting transcripts, protest-event transcripts, social movement newsletters, documentary films, news articles, and legal materials such as laws, lawsuits, and court opinions. By "big data" I refer to the hundreds of thousands of public comments letters I collected and organized for computational

content analysis. I make use of emerging computational methods in sociology adapted from the computer sciences, made possible by the growing availability of digital texts. On the whole, this large collection of discourse (e.g., spoken, written, produced with media), from multiple arenas of social life, complements my quantitative data and provides great insight into social practices. (3) *Two years of ethnographic participant observation and interviews in the GYE.* These rich data come from living full-time with communal activist groups, routinely attending public meetings, observing environmental protests, taking part in the bureaucratic activities of the National Park Service, participating with both old-westerners and new-westerners in practices that are culturally meaningful in this area (e.g., recreation, labor, environmental service trips), conducting over 100 formal and informal interviews, observing ranchers, farmers, environmentalists, park managers, and the myriad routines of day-to-day life in the GYE.

The concurrent focus on these three sources of data allows me to uncover the historical, narratological, and structural patterns of meaning and morality, as well as to get at—as best one can—moral meanings through more grounded techniques of participant observation and micro-interaction. Following the recent explosion of interest in morality in psychology, law, philosophy, and neuroscience, Hitlin and Vaisey (2010, p. 11) argue that sociologists' "main contribution in this vein is the determination to investigate moral phenomena 'in the wild' as far as possible." My case of GYE conflict provides an excellent social laboratory to do just that—namely, to examine in concrete ways how moral commitments emerge and are put to use in a specific context, through particular identities, and in the midst of major social-structural change. Thus, not only does this conflict elicit an abundance of competing claims to investigate, but because Yellowstone is such a symbolically important and even sacred place for so many Americans, it serves as an emotional lightning rod that reveals in stark terms our nation's moral boundaries around nature.

THE LANDSCAPE OF WHAT FOLLOWS

This book unfolds in two symbiotic parts. The first is largely sociohistorical. I focus on the development of cultural contexts and social structures in which stakeholders now find themselves. The goal here is to present, in historical detail, how through various institutional currents and channels, competing moral orders and spiritual narratives took hold in the GYE. Chapters 1 and 2 are essential for understanding the case studies of modern-day conflict presented in later chapters.

Beginning with Chapter 1, I show how materially instrumental or utilitarian aspects of social life can acquire moral and religious meanings. I argue that the use of natural resources in Yellowstone underwent a process of "moralization" that had important institutional effects on the area (e.g., more government attention, scientific research, censuring, public sentiment, emotional disgust). As a sort of scaffolding for explaining this process of moralization, I document

the emergence and interaction of three "moral visions" (utilitarian, spiritual, biocentric) in Yellowstone in the 19th and 20th centuries. To demonstrate the effects of this process, and how the meaning of Yellowstone changed from its early years, the chapter ends with an analysis of how new moral visions were institutionalized into new laws and policies, both nationally and locally, culminating in the creation of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem—thus creating the social conditions for eventual intractable contemporary conflict that would soon follow.

Chapter 2 keeps with this macro-level focus on GYE institutions, picking up where Chapter 1 leaves off, and examines how dramatic social change in the GYE after 1970 ramped up competing moral commitments. I draw on a wealth of longitudinal data about demographic, economic, and cultural rearrangement to show how the area transitioned, in striking fashion, from old-west to new-west. I make two arguments: First, that this large-scale social change has important *moral* causes and consequences, as competing groups erect and protect new moral boundaries in the fight for nature. Second, that this new social and moral arrangement fostered protracted environmental conflict. I present the cast of characters involved in GYE conflicts, and then document the rise of conflict using a host of original time-series indicators, across a variety of institutional fields (e.g., lawsuits, voting segregation, congressional attention, scientific disputes, public responses, interest group conflict, carrying capacity conflict).

In the remaining chapters I build on this sociohistorical approach, descending from the birds-eye-view level down into the inner workings of some of the most contentious and intractable conflicts in the GYE. In doing so, I am able to show specifically and concretely how morality and spirituality actually influence the day-to-day practices of environmental conflict. Each fine-grained case study shows the *different* ways in which these cultural elements are tangled up in—and come to influence—disputes that, on the face of it, appear to be purely rational, secular, scientific, legal, or economic.

Chapter 3 goes inside a bitter, long-lasting, and sometimes violent dispute over the Yellowstone bison herd—America's only remaining genetically pure and free-roaming herd, which once numbered more than 30 million but was exterminated down to a mere 23 single animals. This intractable issue hinges on current scientific disagreements about the biology and ecology of the disease brucellosis (*Brucella abortus*). But in recent years, a more radical, grassroots, and direct-action activist group called the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC) has found success by shifting the focus of the debate away from science, toward the deeper religious dimensions of the issue. Drawing on full-time ethnographic participation, as well as computational content analysis of all organizational literature, I show how the infusion of the conflict with moral and spiritual feeling has brought to the fore deeper questions that ultimately needed to be answered, thus making this a public religious conflict as much as a scientific one, sidestepping rabbit holes of intractability. I focus particular attention on meanings related to genetic purity,

species "wildness," and native spirituality. In making this argument, I observe the ways in which BFC activists engaged in a phenomenon I call moral and religious "muting." This has theoretical implications for understanding how certain elements of culture (e.g., individualism and moral relativism) can organize and pattern others—especially in post hoc explanations of religiously motivated activism.

Chapter 4 examines perhaps the most well-known, and most controversial, conflict in the history of Yellowstone: the reintroduction of wolves in 1995, after they had been exterminated from the Rocky Mountains just six decades earlier. Hundreds of popular and scholarly books and articles have been written about the reintroduction, nearly all of which focus on the biology, ecology, and economic impact of the wolf's return. But the eventual restoration of wolves brought little resolution, even despite such scientific and economic certainty. This is because, as I argue, the ongoing war over the wolf is not ultimately about wolf science, about ecosystem dynamics, or about economic costs and benefits. Instead, I show that deeper cultural commitments are knowingly, and unknowingly, pushed beneath the surface of rational policy debate, and the failure to acknowledge them hinders opportunities for conflict resolution. My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate this point and to empirically uncover, and rigorously examine, the competing moral orders that motivate this ongoing war over the wolf in Yellowstone. In my research I found that two polarized sides rely on contrasting narratives to draw moral boundaries around the animal, and they bring these boundaries to bear in sustaining the conflict. This analysis draws on a wide variety of data to make this case, including discourse analysis, in-person interviews, observation, and computational content analysis of thousands of public letters written to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This chapter not only demonstrates the importance of deeply held moral and spiritual commitments in the conflict, but more specifically shows how different moral arguments tend to cluster together, and how geographical proximity influences the types of moral and spiritual arguments people make.

Chapter 5 investigates an "outlier" case of environmental conflict, where things did not follow the same social patterns I observed elsewhere in the GYE. I view this counterexample case as an important analytical alternative to what has been presented thus far, in hopes of learning something new and unexpected about my larger argument. The case study involves conflict over a plan to drill 136 natural gas wells just to the south of Yellowstone, in Sublette County, WY. This plan is not unusual, given that this county includes two of the largest gas fields in the United States and that most residents of this county and state support this economically beneficial activity. But in a radical reversal, a large group of miners, outfitters, ranchers, and other old-westerners acted against their own economic and cultural traditions, starting an environmental movement to oppose drilling in this particular area. But why oppose drilling here, and virtually nowhere else? In other words, why are some parts of nature treated as more special than

others, more deserving of strong moral boundaries and protection? And what leads old-westerners, who tend to have a deep-seated hatred for environmental regulation and to rely on mineral extraction for their economic well-being, to become environmental activists? Common theories about economic self-interest, resource mobilization, and NIMBY movements fail to adequately explain this ironic turn of events. Instead, I find that the intense negative reaction to drilling in this area, as opposed to other areas, is caused by a violation of strong moral boundaries linked to old-west place attachment. These deep emotional, and sometimes spiritual, bonds, which shape one's sense of self, community, and connectedness with the natural world, sparked an unlikely movement to shut down drilling. I conclude the analysis with a reflection on how old-west activists make sense of this new identity as environmental activists, and the perceived moral baggage that comes along with it. I show how they engage in moral "boundary work" to assert their old-west identity over and against "tree-hugger" groups, who do not share "Wyoming values" and are thus regarded as less virtuous.