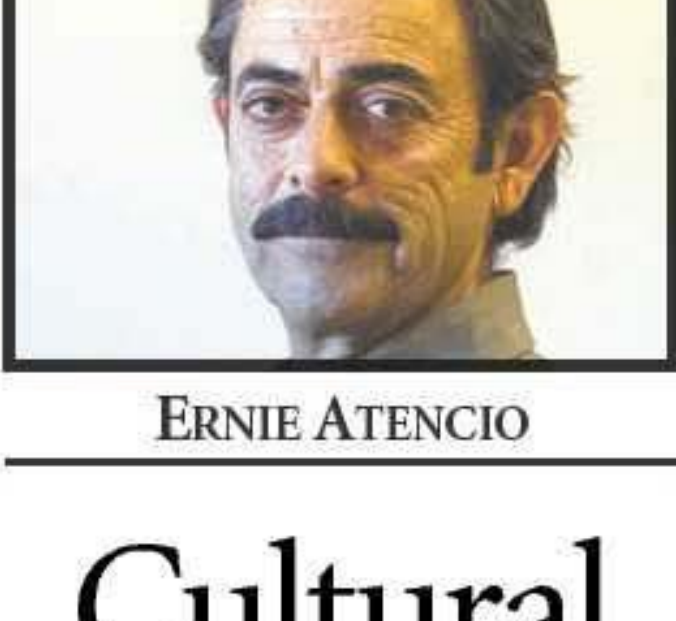


FOR THE LAND



ERNIE ATENCIO

Cultural landscape

"We have lived upon this land from days beyond history's records, far past any living memory, deep into the time of legend. The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story. No man can think of us without thinking of this place. We are always joined together." —Taos Pueblo man

We often talk about the "cultural landscape" of Northern New Mexico as part of the unique land heritage that Taos Land Trust works to protect. The well-known quote above describes the concept of cultural landscape better than any academic definition.

This is a landscape imprinted by centuries of human settlement and an intimate relationship between land and culture. The Pueblo people and their ancestors have been living and hunting and farming on this land for thousands of years.

Indo-Hispano settlers — sometimes of more Mexican Indian blood than Spanish — adapted and learned to survive here for over 400 years. More recent immigrants are creating their own unique relationships with ski areas and mountain bike trails and funky off-grid communities and all the rest.

The imprinting of culture on the land takes many forms. One of the most obvious physical features of the cultural landscape is the acequia — those canals dug by hand centuries ago, flowing harmoniously along the contours of the land with the gentle force of gravity.

Some of the roots of our acequias reach around the world to the Indus Valley of India and Pakistan. An ideal adaptation to irrigating in dry climates, this innovation made its way across Persia to North Africa to Spain then to the New World. Here acequias merged with irrigation methods that the Pueblos were already using, blending these far-flung traditions into one to fit this region.

Acequias have been around so long now they just are part of the landscape. As well as watering agricultural fields and orchards to grow our food, they create riparian habitat for medicinal plants, birds and wildlife. And they are an inseparable part of cultural identity for Indo-Hispano villages.

Other cultural landscape features are more subtle, or maybe even hidden to most of us.

Taos Pueblo's profound connection to Blue Lake is a good example. Taos Land Trust has also been working with the Pueblo to establish a permanent easement corridor for their annual Red Clay Pilgrimage. We are using some modern GIS and mapping tools, but the pilgrimage route and sacred sites along the way are part of a landscape imbued with age-old cultural meaning.

This is not something outsiders will ever know much about, but it is an integral part of life and ceremonial practice at Taos Pueblo, and I imagine a person on such a pilgrimage sees the landscape differently.

Landscape is important to everyone, whether your ancestors have been here forever or you just arrived. But for those with a long, cultural connection, it runs deep in the blood.

Social work professionals see a strong correlation between mental health and maintaining traditional lands and livelihoods and cultural identity. Remove that connection to the land and tradition, and you end up with a long list of social maladies that I won't get into here.

But the point is: protecting the land and staying connected to it are important for our community health. For all of us. So go out there and connect.

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