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Insular viewpoints often become self- serving

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My first trip down the Owyhee River in southeast Oregon was in 1975. I floated it again last month and talked with people throughout the region. What I heard reminded me about how social isolation, combined with some of today's dominant cultural myths, affect people locally and nationwide.

A few years after my initial trip, I became a commercial river outfitter. Over the next decade my guides and I often spent four to six weeks each spring running the Owyhee. Between trips we hung out in Rome or Jordan Valley and got to know some of the locals. We also spent time at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Steens Mountain and the Alvord desert.

It's a vast and isolated land. Unless you live in one of the hamlets scattered miles apart in the high desert, the only people you see regularly are those in your immediate

household. Many residents say they like it that way. But research has found that, through a process known as social categorization, social isolation can cause people to divide the world into “us” vs. “them.” When this happens, one set of people can discriminate against others perceived to be different, and thus inferior.

We experienced this firsthand. One time a rancher invited us to watch an NBA playoff game at his house. The Boston Celtics coach, K.C. Jones, was black. We were shocked to hear the rancher continually make racist remarks about the coach. We never spent time with him again. Most of the locals we knew were not prejudiced. But we heard such sentiments often enough to know they were not limited to one rancher. The social isolation that contributes to us vs. them thinking can also promote extremism, such as the vehement anti-government sentiments held by the Bundy crowd that occupied the Malheur refuge last winter. They likely chose it in part because they thought most people in the secluded area hated government as much as they did.

They were wrong. But numerous people in the region do support the Bundys, such as a woman I met last month at a cafe near the refuge who told me, “Things were good when the Bundys took over. They only got bad when the feds came in.”

The problems resulting from social isolation are not limited to southeast Oregon. Many people nationwide today separate themselves from others by communicating only with those who reinforce their views.

The belief in freedom to do what one wants, unimpeded by government, is one outcome of this type of social isolation. This creed is shaped by the prevailing cultural narratives of our day. Many people we spoke with at least implicitly espoused it.

But it is a myth. Most people in southeast Oregon are completely dependent on others. Much of the economy is oriented around ranching. It is a harsh environment where grass only grows for three or four months. In some places it requires up to 100 acres to feed a single steer. In the summer, cattle must graze on public lands to allow ranchers to grow hay on their private land to provide winter feed. Most ranchers could not survive otherwise. Private parties in the region are thus wholly dependent on public resources.

Further, we saw cow manure everywhere we stopped on our recent river trip. Overgrazing has degraded waterways, streamside vegetation and wildlife habitat on large portions of the area's public lands. The federal government gets stuck with the costs of restoration, meaning the ranchers have socialized their costs to us — yet few acknowledge it. The idea that the pursuit of private self-interest, unimpeded by government, is the answer to all human needs is a fantasy. In reality, from the roads we all use to the Internet that was created by government, public resources make private well-being possible.

Most importantly, the myth ignores the reality that all life on Earth, including human, is possible only because of the planet's climate system. A massive investment of public resources is needed to reduce the climate crisis to levels that

will allow any private individual to thrive. Yet the illusions that dominate our society stymie solutions.

I'm not suggesting that the culture of southeast Oregon is much different from other areas of Oregon or the nation. But my trip certainly illuminated many of the challenges we all face today.

Bob Doppelt, executive director of The Resource Innovation Group, writes a monthly column for the Register Guard on issues related to climate change. His latest book is "Transformational Resilience: How Building Human Resilience for Climate Disruption Can Safeguard Society and Increase Wellbeing."