

The World Comes To Jackson Hole

Work performed locally is felt across the globe

By Todd Wilkinson



Michael Lessac works with a group of young people in Northern Ireland. Lessac dreams of seeing Jackson Hole become to research in human potential what Davos, Switzerland, is to economic research.

WHAT KIND OF *factory town* is Jackson Hole? Seriously, what does the valley make—what *commodity* does it possess in abundance that commands valuable currency in the modern world?

In the rawhide days of yore, one could have pointed to grass-fed beef grown on the range, or maybe family vacations spent on a dude ranch. During the second half of the twentieth century, the list expanded to downhill skiing and mountaineering holidays, backcountry trekking, world-class flyfishing, nature safaris, and real estate with a Teton view.

But evermore, observers say, it's not just physical objects that are the most coveted goods generated at the foot of the Tetons. Rather, it's big ideas—and human visionaries carrying them out— that hold cachet, affecting the lives of people around the globe.

“Thinking about Jackson Hole the way you might conceptualize an old Rust Belt city—that prospered by manufacturing stuff in a factory with smokestacks and then exported it to market—is such a backward way of contemplating this valley’s role in the twenty-first century,” says Jonathan Schechter, a socio-economic analyst who makes his living identifying mega-trends in the Rockies.

Yes, Jackson Hole is a dale for lifestyle pilgrims, some with Learjets and palatial trophy homes. In terms of amenities, Schechter notes, the valley also enjoys “an embarrassment of riches” made possible by civic-minded benefactors drawn to the setting. But what’s more intriguing, he says, is observing how the

environment here inspires people to try to do better elsewhere. Intellectual capital is the valley's most enduring raw material.

"People talk about the 'the power of place' here," says Lisa Samford, director of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival. A documentary filmmaker herself, she has been involved with projects focusing on Wallace Stegner, the Dalai Lama, and Jackson Hole conservationist Mardy Murie. In fact, it was Mardy's husband, Olaus Murie, the pioneering elk biologist, who first wrote about Jackson Hole's power of place from the couple's log home in Moose.

"It is much more than a snappy promo line," Samford says. "This is a place of profound transformation—there is nothing about it that can allow indifference. Everything is extreme: the transcendent beauty, the unforgiving temperatures, the wildlife, the personalities. Jackson Hole is a place where you become part of the landscape—where nature truly becomes part of how you define who you are in the world. You realize you have a choice to make."

Whether it's the Kansas City branch of the Federal Reserve and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke choosing to hold their annual economic conference on the shore of Jackson Lake—an event which causes global financial markets to collectively hold their breaths with the decisions being contemplated—or the biennial film festival that brings together the most heralded nature cinematographers on the planet, the backdrop is both a catalyst and launch pad, Samford adds.

Jackson Hole Magazine visited with a handful of innovative thinkers whose work is global in scope and bringing the valley worldwide prestige.

EVERY DAY THAT Chris and Scott Coats drive across the Snake River Bridge, they think about how all the water—clear, fresh, and swimming with trout—is taken for granted. Where they work, in the poorest jungle communities of Cambodia, the availability of clean drinking water is not only scarce, it's an essential building block for ending generations of misery.

The Coatses have proved that you don't need to be a tycoon or trust funder to set off profoundly positive ripple effects. When they moved to Jackson in 1990 after living for twelve years in Cheyenne, they brought a modest spirit of volunteerism with them. As foster parents, Sunday school teachers, and camp counselors, they wanted to do even more when their daughter graduated from Jackson Hole High School and they found themselves confronted with empty nest syndrome.

Their curiosity led them to travel. Beginning in 2001, the couple visited Fiji, Samoa, New Zealand, Kosovo, Estonia, and the ancient temples in Cambodia. They reached one village, Sras, in Siem Reap Province, and were told that of its six hundred young people, only eighteen were going to school.

Illiteracy, they learned, was rampant. Why? Economics and lack of infrastructure, coupled with public health issues stemming from lack of potable water and the prevalence of crude sewage systems. Residents suffered from acute outbreaks of malaria, dysentery, and dengue fever. The Coatses vowed to return and help.

On a shoestring budget of just \$8,000 the first year, they launched the Trailblazer Foundation. Although a relatively insignificant amount by Jackson standards, they quickly discovered it could alter the trajectories of hundreds of individuals.

They didn't go back to the village and tell people what they were willing to provide, Chris notes; rather, they asked what local denizens thought they needed and worked through the government to implement change on the ground. Water was at the top of necessities. "If people are sick and dying from bad water, how can they think of doing anything else?" Chris asks rhetorically. "You can't dream if you're feeling ill all the time."

In Cambodia, water wells cost \$120 to drill, and water filters cost nearly as much. Leveraging investment and making progress self-sustainable is the Coatses' paramount objective. Every family that receives a well must contribute three dollars to a community fund that is used as a pool for micro-lending and reinvestment.

The program has delivered huge dividends. In one case, a young seamstress who made school uniforms for students attending a new school purchased a simple sewing machine (with a donation of funds from the Jackson Hole Rotary Club). Her profits, coupled with improvements in lifestyle brought by having clean water, have enabled her family to visualize other bigger possibilities in their lives.

It's a story that's been repeated many times over.

After a fourteen-month trip to Cambodia, getting by themselves on bare necessities, the couple remembers returning to Jackson Hole and finding it difficult to readjust, stunned by the level of material excess, from heated driveways to mega-mansions occupied only part of the year. Yet they don't judge; Chris Coats just believes that people aren't aware of the things they can do with their money.

Here, too, is an interesting twist for the Trailblazer Foundation, which happens to be located in one of the richest per capita towns in America: Because the focus of its humanitarian work is outside of Jackson Hole, it doesn't qualify for funding raised through the Old Bill's Fun Run charity effort.

"Jackson Hole is full of bighearted people, but you also have hundreds of nonprofits and the same givers are getting hit on again and again," Chris says. "There are limits to what they can contribute. A significant percentage of our money comes from people in other countries—China, Sweden, Australia, among them—who see the merit of what we're doing. Many Jackson Hole residents have never heard of us, but philanthropists on the other side of the world have."

ANYONE WHO HAS interacted with Candra Day over the last quarter century knows her to be a charismatic dynamo—a tireless booster of the arts and a multimedia cross pollinator. With Vista 360, Day endeavors to deepen the sense of affinity with nature that thrives in mountain environments wherever they exist—be they the Andes, Alps, Himalaya, or that outpost in America situated at roughly 43.4 degrees latitude north, 110.7 degrees longitude west.

The mission of Vista 360 is panoramic—to connect diverse communities through international cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and sharing of knowledge. Locally, Day says, it's an extension of the Jackson Hole art community's desire to be both a cosmopolitan crossroads and a gathering place.

"In general, mountain people tend to be very insular, focused on life in their own little valley—and we're like that," she says. "But for a mountain place, we're pretty good about looking beyond our borders. Jackson Hole attracts curious people. This characteristic encourages an open-minded attitude and interest in the world."

Historically, mountain communities have been defined as being physically and psychically set apart from the mainstream of society, Day says. The good thing is that their heritage has remained intact; the downside is that it has sometimes meant lack of appreciation for how the rest of the world works.

"Like it or not, this isolation is vanishing worldwide," Day says. "Our initial idea was to build a creative network of mountain people to help protect our fragile ecosystems, unique cultures, and traditional values—and encourage full participation in the global society of the twenty-first century. We hoped to replace protection by isolation with protection by cooperation."

Vista 360, as just one example, has been instrumental in bringing the work of artisans from Kyrgyzstan to North America. It is the largest importer of Kyrgyz handicrafts in the United States. By purchasing such

products, American consumers can help preserve the cultural traditions of rural shepherd families. “If we’re able to buy just three large rugs from a family in the course of a year, it doubles their annual income, helps them stay on the land, and often helps to avoid the outmigration of men to other countries for labor,” Day explains. It also breeds a kind of goodwill stronger than any government aid program can.

Vista 360 is the only global mountain organization with a primary focus on cultural development and culturally based activism, Day adds. When pressed to identify the impetus for her work, she says it goes well beyond the cliché of magnanimity. “I’m not really motivated by a sense of obligation,” she says. “The idea of ‘obligation’ is too somber to describe the great sense of adventure. I want to travel and learn about other people, I want to use the skills I’ve acquired over a lifetime in the arts world. I really enjoy exploring new ideas.”

The more she and her colleagues have interacted with other mountain cultures, the more Day has come to appreciate Jackson Hole and the greater Yellowstone ecosystem—particularly with their symbolic role in the national park and conservation movements.

She offers one more insight she’s garnered: “Small mountain communities, Jackson included, tend to be a bit nostalgic in how they look at themselves. The past is often remembered as a golden age of adventure, fun, strong community, and wildness—while the future is viewed, with a kind of ironic humor, as a long process of losing what we value the most.” Day says she rejects such fatalism.

“ALL THE WORLD’S a stage and all the men and women merely players,” William Shakespeare famously wrote in *As You Like It*. But if one wants real human drama, talk to Michael Lessac. He does not accept the notion that people are destined for bit parts only.

Lessac settled in Jackson Hole, in part, to gain a clearer-headed vantage for pondering the problems of the world—away from the razzle-dazzle of Hollywood. As the critically acclaimed producer of *Truth In Translation*, a play about the riveting Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, he is the driving force in a new initiative, headquartered in Jackson Hole, that promotes peace and forgiveness in war-torn regions.

When Jackson Hole Magazine finally caught up with Lessac, he was traveling from Belfast to Paris and Brussels, and then to Kosovo. He was building on the energy of a homegrown concept, the Center for Perpetual Change, nested at the Jackson Hole Center for the Arts and formally launched in a symposium during the summer of 2011. More than 120 people attended, including individuals who had viewed one another as sworn enemies in their native cultures.

World leaders have praised Lessac’s methods, one of which involves inviting rivals to make art together. “Live theatre creates dialogue on the ground, with audiences from different sides of traditional divides,” he says. “The filming of this dialogue creates a virtual platform where we can see each other across cultural borders. We’re not trying to report or deliver messages or preach or fit a political point of view. What we are trying to do is get people to empathize and understand each other.”

It’s all about the transformative magic of forgiveness and reconciliation, which in turn lead to empowerment and liberation. Jackson Hole is a neutral venue that disarms hostility.

“I believe that by bringing scientists and artists together with young people—and engaged, concerned soldiers, victims, perpetrators, journalists, anthropologists, neurologists, and others—we can begin to [understand] what education can become again in a new renaissance,” Lessac says.

So, if South Africa, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Gaza, Pakistan/India, and the divided Koreas can serve as mirrors, what should Americans be recognizing in the reflection?

“We have to see that we are in denial in believing we can and should live lives isolated from problems,” Lessac says. “Very simply ... we need to see the truth of the soul of our country.”

The ability to help alleviate another person’s suffering is perhaps the most powerful lever a human can wield, but it requires humanizing other humans and breaking down stereotypes. “We need to recapture what is true and good about people,” Lessac says. “I believe we have been tricked into accepting that we can always choose between two evils. As my father said a few months before he died, ‘When we do that, we are then left only with evil.’”

Theatre represents truth, Lessac says, not as a pathway to greed and safety, but as a resting place for humor and music and lost human nature. For him, he adds, the word Ubuntu comes to mind, a South African saying that means I am because you are. “I believe that when we work in the theatre and we poke this work into the world, we do it with that premise as our basic belief. It opens doors and it opens our eyes to see through other people’s eyes.”

Lessac has a dream: “What Davos [Switzerland] is to economic research, I’d like to see Jackson Hole become for research into human potential, perhaps cultivating sister city relationships” in different parts of the world.

SUCH THINKING IS bold, but not unprecedented. In 1989, in the months leading up to the end of the Cold War, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze met at Jackson Lake Lodge, causing pundits to predict the serene location could become known as the “Geneva of North America.”

For David and Olivia Wendt, Jackson Hole is like an oracle that bespeaks not the liabilities of environmental protection, but its dividends. The Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, under the Wendts’ direction, has given this valley a front-row seat for one of the most contentious policy debates in human history: what to do about global warming.

Shanxi Province is one of the cradles of ancient Chinese civilization; it’s also, in this millennium, the largest coal-producing region in the most populous nation on Earth. As such, it shares a unique geologic affinity with the Equality State. The center’s connections with China provide an opportunity for people here to better understand this emerging superpower, and how it is exploding with social and economic development.

As part of the cultural exchanges arranged, Chinese policymakers also interact with American counterparts in state and federal government. One of them is John Turner, who grew up on the Triangle X Ranch in Grand Teton National Park. He went on to become an eagle biologist, a high-level official in the U.S. State Department, and today sits on the board of one of the largest producers of coal in the world, Peabody Energy. Turner is an industrial trustee fluent in what it means to balance economic progress and environmental protection. He has been part of delegations sponsored by the Jackson Hole Center for Global Affairs, and he also has hosted dignitaries.

“Our guests from China are invariably astonished by our clean environment,” Olivia Wendt says, “and [by] the example of natural resource preservation we have set here in Jackson Hole and in Yellowstone National Park.

These examples give them something they can work toward themselves, and share when they return to China. ... When we gather in Jackson Hole to discuss energy and environmental issues, the Chinese are aware of the commitment of the people here in the valley who have helped to make this possible, and who continue to pursue this ideal.”

So, another priceless commodity Jackson Hole offers is this: demonstrating how environmental stewardship can equate with economic and cultural richness. “Our ‘product’ is the opportunity we create for [local residents] to be involved in our process, including to ‘think locally’ about how these issues affect us, and to ‘act globally’ through international partnerships,” David Wendt says. “What’s worth heeding about that approach, for other communities, is the idea that we must find ways to go beyond our backyard if we are to seek and find solutions to problems that affect us all.”

“I LOVE THE notion of the power of ideas—the profound impact and on-the-ground change that simple ideas can inspire in the world,” says the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival’s Samford. During her tenure, she has succeeded in positioning the event as a major touchstone for nature cinematography in the world. A veritable who’s who of filmmakers and broadcasters, from dozens of countries, consider their weeklong stopover here essential.

“This is a busy group of people who rarely get together,” Samford says. Their gathering here “is grounded on a shared sense of urgency. The planet is facing unprecedented environmental challenges, and we inhabit a window of time where decisions and actions can still have radical impact. We are well beyond that point where the role of media is to entertain and inform. Now, virtually all media really is personal—and if we don’t use that ... as an opportunity to directly connect people with action, we are wasting a lot of time.”

It’s hard to argue with the choice of venue. In 2011, as renowned big-cat biologist Alan Rabinowitz was speaking on stage about the promise of rewilding parts of the world, some festival attendees at Jackson Lake Lodge stood outside on the patio, rapt as wild grizzly bears stalked elk literally a stone’s throw away.

What recent transplants to the Tetons may not realize is that, for many decades, Jackson Hole was a magnet for early wildlife documentarians. Among them: Wolfgang Bayer, Franz Camenzind, Peter Pilafian, Jeff Foote, Thomas Mangelsen, the late Kenneth “Chip” Houseman, Peter Henning, Shane Moore, and pioneering grizzly bear researchers John and Frank Craighead, stars of National Geographic television specials.

Samford has sought to incorporate a reverence for the former grand era by featuring such notables as primatologist Jane Goodall, the descendents of Jacques-Yves Cousteau, and the Craigheads—while also confronting the rapidly changing landscape of the film medium.

“Media and technology have made us all so inextricably interconnected,” Samford says; “it is no longer possible to ignore the impact of war, the devastating power of poverty and disease, the spiraling effects of climate change.

“Even in this remote corner of Wyoming, the festival searches [for] ways to enhance personal capacity to make a difference—large or small.”