Oh faith rewarded! Now no idle dream,  
The long-sought Canaan before him lies;  
He floods the desert with the mountain stream,  
And lo! it leaps transformed to paradise.

— Mormon hymn  
(traditional)

DRAINING THE NORTHWESTERN Rockies and carrying more than twice the volume of the Colorado, the Snake is the nation’s 10th-longest river, the Nile of Idaho, the lifeline of the desert. Its volcanic terrain — fragile, fertile — is an odd plateau of extremes. Lewis and Clark avoided the Snake River country. The French said the river was “mad.” The British discovered a sterile landscape, a barrier to civilization that might block the American claim to the disputed Northwest. So strange was the cracked plateau that Oregon-bound pioneers often dismissed southern Idaho as the barren edge of civilization, an impossible desert.

While the very strangeness of the place helped preserve its natural state, the arid steppe of the Snake, the volcanic crescent, has unleashed great expectations. What Yale historian Howard Lamar once said of the American West rings especially true on the lava
frontier. It has always been a West of the imagination, “a place to project wishes and dreams."

Thus the desert has been many landscapes. For Mormon pioneers the land was a province of Zion. For the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation the plain with its water rushing in vertical canyons was ideal for hydro projects. For modern-day conservationists the same terrain is a future dust bowl, an ecosystem under fire. Miners, ranchers, farmers, dam builders and their financiers — each wave of civilization redefined the Snake River country, each drawn by an inner compass to discover what it needed to find.

As the image of the landscape evolved, settlers held fast to a grossly inaccurate vision — the myth of southern Idaho as an empty basin, a denial of the fact that the desert had long supported a complex civilization. From the native perspective the plain was not discovered, it was invaded, and the winning of the West was much more than the “social process” that tore the nation away from Europe. The frontier was home, an actual place. Although writers often portray the Native Americans as a doomed population, the tribes have survived, and there are about as many Indians in Idaho today, about 12,000, as there were before the time of the fur trade. Clinging to a vestige of their ancestral homeland, a territory that stretched from the Tetons to the Owyhee desert in the days of the Oregon Trail, the Snake Sho-Bans retain about 1 percent of Idaho’s land, including about 15 miles of riverfront property on the Fort Hall Reservation.

Indian claims to water and salmon keep frontier contests alive. In 1985, while pollution and dams seriously endangered chinook migration, the Sho-Bans, standing on treaty rights, went to federal court. “It is painful,” said then-Sho-Ban attorney Larry EchoHawk; “there are so few [wild fish], our elders cannot pass on the fishing tradition.” Today the wild chinook population, plunging fast, is down to a run of less than 2,000 fish.
Bitter debate over the salmon shows the new, more militant face of the Snake River environmental movement — candlelight vigils, high-stakes lawsuits, a rising intolerance for logging, farming, ranching, and the other "extractive" industries that harvest the public domain. Science is a weapon of this sometimes angry campaign, but the battles are also fought over deeply historical issues. Critics say a century or more of ditch irrigation and grazing has been a sad history of decline. Scott Grunder, a biologist with Idaho Fish and Game, points to a 1989 state water quality study that found 4,622 miles of streams damaged and polluted by cattle grazing practices. Important fish and wildlife habitats along riparian corridors have suffered, the biologist claims. An advocate of tough new reforms — better fencing, rewards for responsible ranchers, stiff penalties for those who abuse public lands — Grunder understands that old ways die hard in the Snake River country. Still he wants pro-cattle politicians to face simple facts. "Politicians tell the ranchers that everything is okay, but it's not."

Whether or not things are mostly "okay" depends on what people believe the condition of the region was like before the Oregon Trail. "It was never a land of milk and honey," says Bert Brackett of Owyhee County, a fourth-generation rancher. Brackett tells a historical story about the range improvements that spread a thick carpet of forage across Idaho's arid plateau. Fighting science with science, the cattleman quotes from a 1989 report by the Society of Range Management, an investigation that found 79 percent of the BLM land "stable" or even "improving" in the presence of livestock grazing. "Maybe some critic's definition of good range condition is absence of domestic livestock, but," Brackett insists, "I can tell you from my experience that the range is currently in the best condition it's been in this century." Neighbors mostly agree. "Without grazing and irrigation this country would be sagebrush blackened
by fire," says rancher George H. Swan, a veteran of 29 years at Horse Creek Ranch south of Twin Falls.

Desert. Garden. Grassy plateau. It is easy to see how rival historical viewpoints can pose difficult questions for the future of the Snake River Plain. Will the stream vegetation recover? What about the erosion and soil depletion that scientists call desertification? Will Idaho go the way of Egypt, Iraq, arid Peru or, closer to home, the San Joaquin Valley of California — once fertile frontiers for ditch irrigation, now badly eroded, their soils poisoned by salts?

If past is prologue, as the historians say, then the relative purity of the Snake River snowmelt may spare Idaho dire effects of the toxic or briny water that plague desert farming in other parts of the globe. But Idaho agriculture has problems nevertheless. As ditch water returns to the rivers, topsoil washes into the canyons. Much of it ends up in reservoirs as silt. "Erosion from irrigation is a serious threat," says David Carter, the senior scientist at the U.S. Agricultural Research Service in Kimberly. Flying over the rich Snake River farm belt from Burley to Buhl, Carter can easily see the grey tracts of subsoil where some of North America's most fertile soil has been flushed from the fields. Carter's statistics show a direct relationship between the loss of topsoil and the loss of crops. "It takes about 15 inches of good topsoil to grow healthy crops," the scientist explains. Wheat, corn and dry beans are the crops most severely affected. Sugar beets less so. Erosion, says Carter, has hurt about 75 percent of the plain's best farmland, cutting crop production by about 25 percent.

Scientists like Carter are quick to point out that erosion and stream degradation are not just agricultural problems. Logging, mining, road building, housing construction — even camping and boating — all bleed the land into the rivers, spoiling trout habitat and clogging the water supply. The water that flushes the soil also carries a foamy soup of chemical runoff. In 1988 a report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service called American Falls Reservoir "a sump of many toxins" such as pesticides and PCBs. Downstream near Thousand Springs the Snake is a tangled swamp of rope-like filament algae. Some blame eight years of crippling drought, but river planners at the Idaho Department of Water Resources say fertilizers rich in phosphates are a major problem. Phosphates feed the aquatic plants that rob oxygen from the water and disrupt the Snake River food chain. "More rainfall alone will not fix the problem," say Ruth Schellbach, an author of the state's middle Snake management plan. Shellbach predicts that farmers in the Hagerman Valley will soon join city voters in pressing for a moratorium on river development below Milner Dam.

The farm communities that depend on these water projects take small comfort from the realization that the environmental threat to the region is an urban headache as well. Boise, for example, is booming. Its metropolitan area, 200,000 and rapidly rising, is expected to top 333,000 by the year 2010. Each year the county's three school districts need two new elementary schools just to keep pace. As the city sprawls in all directions, groundwater shrinks — not only because of more consumers, but also because houses and streets are closing the irrigation canals that seep river water into the ground. Meanwhile the rush to develop the Boise River crowds out eagles and herons. Air quality also suffers. Frightening wintertime levels of carbon monoxide, a carcinogen, have prompted wood burning bans. In 1991 an air quality group proposed a more stringent measure: "no drive" smog-alarm days for older, dirtier cars.
Once it was easy for a sparse population to shrug off urban congestion as somebody else's concern. No longer. As the census records the inevitable shift from rural to urban, a trend in Idaho since the 1950s, farmland is cut into subdivisions and people pine for a lost way of life. You can feel the pressure of growth in a regional hub like Twin Falls, where the commercial strip crawls with five lanes of traffic and the house rental market reports a zero percent vacancy rate. You feel it in Meridian, where the city recently placed a moratorium on housing construction; in Pocatello, where the taxpayers, under legal pressure, have doubled their prison capacity with a $10.3 million jail; in Victor near the Wyoming border, where half-acre lots that recently sold for $2,000 now quickly sell for 10 times that amount; in Idaho Falls, where the Salvation Army reports a sharp rise in the homeless and a seven-bed Baptist mission is the only shelter for single men. And you can feel the pinch of the future in quiet places like Kuna with its four new subdivisions. “We’re not Boise yet,” says Ann Danes of Kuna, a city clerk who reports “mixed feelings” toward growth. “You still don’t have to look at the sidewalk when you pass people, and you can still come into city hall to talk about grandchildren and quilt-making.” With regret in her voice she adds: “We’re going to lose all that.”

While urban sprawl may be the future of the Snake River country, there are still free-flowing rivers and open range that, when compared to the rest of the nation, give Idahoans great reason for hope. Idaho’s largest cities are still remarkably clean. There are still brilliant skies and magnificent vistas. And on the eastern edge of the plain, where the South Fork of the Snake moves west from the Yellowstone country, a hiker can still scale the cracks of Dry Canyon where the plain once oozed with basalt.

Shade your eyes against the glare of the sun and take in the blank expanse of the mysterious landscape. Squinting toward Idaho Falls, you can almost picture the plain as the Shoshone once saw it — pine and cottonwood streams cutting through amber grasses, a sea of shimmering prairie swept by ecological change.