NATURAL DISASTER?:

Pretty soon you will be able to walk beyond the edge of Arizona's Grand Canyon on a glass skywalk jutting 70 feet into thin air. The view will be spectacular. It will also be surreal, an affront to nature, rather than an enhancement. Even worse, I'm pretty sure it will be wildly successful, thereby inaugurating another round of leapfrogging degradation in what used to be a magical landscape.

Leapfrogging degradation is what Indian casinos have done to southeastern Connecticut. Skywalk, a development of the Hualapai tribe on its reservation lands, will do something similar to the western Grand Canyon. The tribe's glass-enclosed architectural and engineering marvel will come with an entertainment complex consisting of bars, restaurants, VIP lounges, movie theaters, a museum and a historical village, probably with gunslingers and pony rides for the kids.

Twenty-nine dollars will get you into the gate and allow you to overlook the canyon rim. An additional $25 will get you the chance to walk out onto the horseshoe-shaped glass platform and to look 4,000 feet straight down. That first step will be a special challenge for many. But at least it will be a quiet one. Every visitor will be required to wear special cloth galoshes to prevent scratching the view. Bare feet and the squishy things that go with them won't be allowed either. All this from a tribe that only a century ago lived in huts made of mud and tree branches and was sustained by the austere beauty of the Colorado Plateau.

In a typical sprawl, cities on flat land simply bloat outward the way a pancake grows in a frying pan. In typical leapfrogging sprawl, real estate developers jump beyond the edges of previously developed areas because the extra-low land prices offset the higher costs of creating infrastructure and utilities from scratch, instead of extending them outward from developed areas. On tribal lands, however, the incentive to leapfrog is particularly strong because the land is already a reservation and need not be purchased. Additionally, the tax structure is highly advantageous. With a short-term infusion of big money, developers can create a destination exciting enough to bring people in from far away. Now comes the degradation, usually in two stages. First, tribal and non-tribal employees require services that weren't there before, placing demands on the local cultural and natural settings. The second stage happens when the support population becomes big enough to be a destination unto itself.

One hundred years ago, Las Vegas was something to do when passing time in Los Angeles. Skywalk will soon be something to do when passing time in Las Vegas, 120 miles to the west. Within a decade or two, smaller communities will likely spring up on the edge of Skywalk, as they do around national parks at each access point.

Hop, hop, hop go the leaping frogs of blight.

They will be thirsty frogs too. Las Vegas, the nation's fastest-growing city, also has what is arguably the country's most serious water supply problem. Ironically, Las Vegas translates as "the wetlands" or las vegas, historic patches of spring-fed grass that were long since smothered over by gambling glitz and the city of what the writer Ellen Meloy calls "honest fraud."

The Hualapai tribe has every right to develop its 1,000 acres of otherwise parched reservation, where unemployment hovers near 50 percent. I have no right to pass judgment on any of the tribes in America who were enslaved in the fur trade; infected with biological weapons; inebriated with whiskey; tricked out of their lands; decimated by genocide; and deprived of their languages and traditions. After three centuries of such cultural hegemony, mainstream America appropriately recognized the sovereignty of tribes.
Skywalk has both the physical and moral high ground over Pequot or Mohegan casino gambling. But it has a greater chance to degrade the natural environment in a place with too little water, too much air pollution and not enough energy to transport thrill-seeking mobs to the canyon rim. Perhaps because Las Vegas is so full of fakery now, it only makes sense to bring the fakery to the nearby canyon experience as well.