

The Public Lands of the United States— An Endangered Species

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This conference is largely about federal public lands—national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. It is about their role and purpose; what they are; what they should be; and, more importantly, what they will become if current trends continue for another three or four decades.

My observations concerning the overall management of the public lands are rather strongly negative because it is my view that current management policies are contributing significantly to the degradation of those special qualities which distinguish our unique public lands system. The responsibility for these policies is spread around among the Congress, the president, the land managers, special interest groups, an indolent press, and an ill-informed public.

One missing factor needs to be added to this failed policy mix. That missing factor is the unheard voices of the career professionals within the agencies. Instead of a free and open debate, an exchange of viewpoints aimed at getting the best answer, the tight management of the agencies permits little dissent or creativity. Under the

new administration in 1981, Department of the Interior secretary James Watt and Department of Agriculture assistant secretary John Crowell quickly made it clear that the dominant policy would be maximum exploitation and commercialization of all resources available on the public lands. Any other values on those lands, such as wildlife habitats, recreation, scenic beauty, etc., were simply of secondary consideration. Even in the parks, Watt made it clear that the interests of the concessionaires came first, as he made explicit in his first few months.

During the past twelve years, the ideologues have changed but the basic management policies have not. The abrupt removal of the National Park Service's regional chief in Denver, Lorraine Mintzmyer, and the Forest Service's regional forester in its Northern Region, John Mumma, from their respective positions a few months ago is a dramatic case in point. They had jointly prepared the so-called Vision Document for the Yellowstone ecosystem. Presidential chief of staff John Sununu became emotionally outraged over the idea that two professionals in the public service had the temerity to make a proposal for the region that was not completely compatible with the private interests of those who believe it is their divine right to exploit the public lands for their own private profit.

Mumma committed an additional offense. He called for a reduction of the timber cut across the Northern Region on the ground that the directed level of cut could not be met without damaging the environment and violating the law. I doubt that any lawyer or scientist would challenge his reasons on their merits, and, incidentally, neither did Forest Service chief F. Dale Robertson.

Both Mumma and Mintzmyer were demoted to jobs they didn't want. A new job without any real

duties was created for Mumma in Washington, D.C. Mumma declined the offer and resigned instead. Incidentally, this new position remains empty—waiting to be filled, no doubt, by some other employee who feeds into the system an honest professional judgment that is politically incorrect. Several well-established knee-jerk policy issues were at stake in this case, plus the powerful political interference of members of Congress from Montana and Idaho.

It is, sadly, another blow to the integrity of the public service system that neither Robertson nor Park Service director Jim Ridenour had the courage to stand behind the sound, reasoned judgment of their own professional staff, and, worse, that they couldn't even contrive a plausible explanation for their failure to do so.

Any close reading of the past twelve years forces us to the tragic conclusion that politics within the natural resources agencies has, for all practical purposes, driven science out of the decision-making process whenever science comes into conflict with any opportunity for private profit from the public lands. Until there is a much better public understanding of the major public lands issues and conflicts, we will continue stumbling blindly along the same destructive course.

To achieve the goal of better understanding, agency professionals must be able to participate much more freely in the education process. You have a responsibility to come up with some proposals to achieve this goal. No one knows the problems or issues as well as you do.

I will make a couple of modest suggestions at the conclusion of my remarks—but your input is critical.

At this point it is appropriate, or at least timely, to observe that on election day the incumbent elite anti-government ideologues received

an invitation from the voters they couldn't refuse. It will be a relief to have an administration that doesn't believe the government is an enemy of the people, and that recognizes that public service is an honorable vocation of the highest order. It is time to re-learn the lesson that the central role of government is to serve the general welfare, not the special interests of a favored few. As Colorado governor Richard Lamm put it, "The private sector can no more assure protection of the public interest than government can 'make' the market place function efficiently."

My remarks are addressed in general to the status of our federal public lands system and to those forces that influence the management of that system.

The multiple forces that influence management policies is an incredibly complicated social, economic, and political mix. Very often it isn't clear what factors went into the decision-making process resulting in a bad land-management decision. What is clear is that there are many bad management decisions resulting in serious, adverse impacts on our parks, forests, refuges, and BLM lands. It is also clear that we must reverse the current downward trend if we are to save this rare heritage.

The Congress, at best, might be dimly aware that something bad is happening to our public lands. What is needed is a forum that will both inform and arouse the Congress, the public, and the media to demand action that will protect the uniqueness, the special character, of the public lands system.

It should be noted that special economic interests and user groups supported by members of Congress from the region and local politicians frequently have more influence over the management policies of our parks, forests, refuges, and BLM lands than Congress as a body or the general public.

This is all by way of saying there is an urgent need for a comprehensive evaluation of the multiple threats that endanger our whole public lands system. To develop a clear picture of what is happening to these lands, they must be approached and evaluated in their totality as a public lands system, rather than a divisible bunch of parts and pieces—separate, independent, unrelated to each other, and uncoordinated in their policies and activities and, as a consequence, frequently working at cross purposes.

The federal public lands are a rare national treasure, whether found in the parks, forests, refuges, or in BLM areas. It is important to recognize that these lands are part of an interrelated mosaic and to understand that any degradation of natural areas on these lands is in fact an attack on the whole system. Tragically, this priceless heritage is being compromised and degraded bit by bit and is, in fact, approaching the threshold of a precipitous decline. The whole system is endangered by threats, pressures, and intrusions which need to be addressed before it is too late.

While we all are mightily concerned about endangered species, we tend to forget that among the most important endangered species of all is America's unique heritage of wildlands, wilderness, and natural landscapes. At stake is 610 million acres—almost a million square miles—25% of America's total land base. This remarkable inheritance is found in our national parks, wildlife refuges, forests, and BLM lands. No other country has preserved such a vast estate for public use and enjoyment; for wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, watershed protection; for education and scientific study; for varied and endless opportunities for recreation in a natural setting remote from the intrusions of modern society. Here are some of the last untouched remnants of nature's

work, a million years of evolving landscapes unaltered by human activity.

Only on the public lands have we preserved such vast areas, representing every land form from deserts to grasslands to forests to mountain peaks and valleys. If a significant portion of natural America is to be preserved for this and future generations, it must be here on these lands.

Though we tend, complacently, to assume that the laws, the public land managers, and congressional oversight assure the protection of these areas, the fact is that tremendous pressures for expanded use and more exploitation are changing the character of these lands. Under this constant pressure, the land managers tend to yield here and there, little by little, year by year. The changes are gradual, subtle, and little-noticed from one year to the next, but the cumulative impact over the past three or four decades is transforming the face of these landscapes in significant ways. The fact is most of this degradation could be avoided or minimized if the spirit of the law were faithfully implemented, as Congress intended, by those responsible for managing our public lands.

In short, the national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and BLM lands, and the wilderness areas within their borders, are all at least prospective candidates for the endangered species list. All are being compromised and degraded in manifold ways—by soil erosion, air pollution, water pollution, aircraft noise pollution, overcrowding, excessive road-building, excessive timbering, excessive grazing, stream siltation, over-development, habitat destruction, scenic degradation, and the disappearance of biological diversity.

Ideally, congressional oversight would, on some regular schedule, review and evaluate the impact of all threats to the public land system as a

whole. Irregular, periodic oversight by several congressional committees, each with jurisdiction over part of the public land system, is inadequate to monitor and evaluate the cumulative impact of hundreds of decisions and legal interpretations made by these individual agencies each year. Further complicating matters, each agency tends to interpret the letter of the law and congressional intent to suit its own institutional desires and biases. By the time Congress catches up, it is too late!

The U.S. Forest Service is a classic case in point. For example, as one reviews the provisions of the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 and the National Forest Management Act of 1976, one is struck by the brazen effrontery with which the Forest Service evades, misinterprets, or ignores provisions of the law that do not suit its own bureaucratic purposes.

The Multiple-Use Act of 1960 mandates that the forests shall be "administered for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes." Balanced multiple use is the objective of the statute. However, in practice the Forest Service considers its timber program as the dominant purpose of the forest with all others of secondary importance. Whenever there is a conflict, timbering almost always prevails. Repeatedly, the Forest Service has destroyed wildlife habitats, watersheds, and trout and salmon streams in order to subsidize the sale of timber that should have been left alone.

The reality is that the Forest Service pays only minimal lip service to the concept of balanced multiple use as intended by Congress. Arbitrarily selected timber goals drive the planning process. Once the goals are selected whatever is left is considered by the Forest Service to qualify as balanced multiple use.

Probably the Forest Service's most flagrant abuse most flagrant abuse of common sense and the law is its policy of massive below-cost timber sales. The intent of the law is clear. Section 6(K) of the National Forest Management Act provides that the secretary of agriculture "shall identify lands" which are not economically suited for timber production and "no timber harvesting shall occur on such lands for a period of ten years." It further provides that such lands shall be reviewed every ten years and shall not be returned to production until it is determined that they have become suitable for it.

What is meant by economic suitability is subject to interpretation and the Forest Service contrives to interpret this law and the concept of multiple use in such a way as to justify massive sales of below-cost timber.

Half of the national forests lose money every year because of below-cost timber sales. In the past five years, below-cost timber sales have cost the taxpayer well in excess of a billion dollars—averaging between \$200 million and \$300 million a year.

Another provision of the National Forest Management Act specifies that "timber will be harvested from National Forest System lands only where soil, slope, or other watershed conditions will not be irreversibly damaged." Despite the clear language of the law, the Forest Service regularly cuts timber on steep slopes with highly erosive soil, causing severe and permanent damage to watersheds, salmon spawning grounds, and trout streams.

These are but a few examples of a Forest Service timber program which is out of control.

Another case in point is the National Park System. If we are going to save our national parks, then we must more faithfully comply with the clear and specific mandate of the

1916 congressional act that created the National Park Service. That law provides that the parks shall be managed "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and provide for the enjoyment of same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Slowly but surely that mission is being compromised. Significant impairment of the parks is currently underway. Internal and external threats to the parks have been widely documented by the Park Service itself.

Indeed, the state of the parks report to Congress, prepared by the Park Service in 1980, concluded:

It is clear that events are taking place that are causing demonstrable and severe damage to the natural and cultural resources of the nation's national parks, monuments, historic sites and other units. Although some impacts are subtle and not immediately obvious, long-term consequences can be disastrous.

We must begin soon to address these threats, or the next generation will see the end of the parks as Congress conceived of them. A few recent headlines and news stories are revealing: "Everglades' slow death blamed on cane growers" (Orlando, Florida, *Sentinel*); "New coalition declares open season on public lands" (Missoula, Montana, *Examiner*); "Yosemite concessioner fighting conservation plan" (San Luis Obispo, California, *Telegram-Tribune*). The Yosemite Park and Curry Company is using its guest list to contact 93,000 people and ask them to lobby the National Park Service to abandon its 1980 plan to ease crowding.

Here's another example: an excerpt from an article by John Lancaster in *The Washington Post* titled "Two visions blur Yellowstone's future":

One is the Yellowstone that nature built. . . . The other is the recreational Yellowstone, where . . . the visitor can rent a motorboat or snowmobile, rough it in a \$95-a-night hotel. . . . One proposal involves a planned 350-mile snowmobile trail linking Lander, Wyoming, and West Yellowstone, Montana. The trail would traverse Yellowstone for 37 miles. Heavily backed by the Wyoming congressional delegation, the project is considered key to state efforts to boost winter tourism in the area. . . . Park authorities in the 1970s agreed to remove stores and campgrounds from the area known as Fishing Bridge, which is heavily used by grizzlies, in order to compensate for the building of a new village elsewhere. But the Park Service backed down—only part of the development was removed—after bitter opposition from the Wyoming congressional delegation, the local tourist industry, and motor home owners.

If the public lands are to be managed to carry out their statutory responsibilities with minimum depreciation of their natural values and characteristics, then Congress must actively re-assert its leadership. The letter and the spirit of the law are not self-enforcing. The only effective counterweight to pressures for more exploitation of our public lands is Congress itself.

It is time now for a comprehensive re-evaluation of our public land uses and a clear and unequivocal restatement of their purposes.

What kind of questions should we ask? What kind of answers do we want? The issues are complicated because the public lands are vast, varied, and complicated, and because each of the four categories of public lands have different missions. The role of the national parks and wildlife refuges is relatively clear and uncomplicated compared with those of the national forests and BLM lands.

Administration of forests and BLM lands is complicated by the fact that they have both a conservation-environment responsibility and a commodity-supply responsibility, and frequently they are in conflict. Managing that conflict to minimize environmental damage was clearly the intent of Congress but it has failed to work because the agencies have strongly tended to give first priority to commercial exploitation of the resources over any other multiple use.

In re-examining the role of the public lands, it is vital to recognize from the start that these lands provide a wide range of unique experiences, services, amenities, opportunities, and special environments which cannot be supplied by the private sector from private lands because they no longer exist there.

Preserving the uniqueness of this huge estate of natural landscapes should be a first priority of our society. If we continue to permit overuse, overdevelopment, excessive and unnecessary commercialization, then, finally, these lands will lose their special character. Once lost, it can never be recovered and there will be nothing left to replace it.

"Carrying capacity" is the appropriate general standard of measurement for activities to be permitted on these lands. Those activities that do not degrade the natural quality of the resource base are generally acceptable, and those that do are not.

Ironically, current law would generally be adequate to protect this resource base if the land managers consistently resolved conflicts in favor of preserving the integrity of the resource base instead of yielding to pressure for uses that degrade it.

Both the Park Service and the Forest Service seem to be more interested in attracting more visitors and providing more facilities and accommodations for the public than preserving those unique qualities

which provide the public with an experience that cannot be duplicated on private lands.

The uniqueness of the public lands will be destroyed if we are going to duplicate on public lands the goods and services provided by the private sector on private lands. The law did not intend that these lands would be used as tree farms or modified theme parks, but that is the direction they are headed. Like the current problem of air tour flights over the Grand Canyon, twenty years from now Congress, too late, will wonder how we got into the theme-park business and how to get out of it.

Listen to the words of Harold Ickes, the secretary of the interior under Franklin Roosevelt, as he spoke to park superintendents over a half-century ago:

I suspect that my general attitude on what our national parks ought to be is fairly well known. I do not want any Coney Island. I want as much . . . nature preserved and maintained as possible. . . . I am afraid we are getting gradually alienated from that ideal. We are becoming a little highbrow; we have too many roads. We lie awake nights wondering whether we are giving the customers all of the entertainment and all the modern improvements that they think they ought to have. But let's keep away from that, because if once we get started, there will be no end.

The lesson to be learned is that once an activity is permitted within any category of public lands it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to control or stop it, even though that activity is seriously degrading the basic resource itself. In 1987, Congress belatedly attempted to deal with such a situation in the Grand Canyon with the adoption of some mild palliatives that left the problem unsolved. The problem: intrusive noise from air tour flights over the Grand Canyon.

In the five years since the 1987 amendments to the law, flights have nearly doubled. During peak periods, at some places park workers counted a helicopter or airplane overhead every two minutes. This is another park that will not be left "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" as mandated by the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act.

Sixty years ago, Ickes warned against permitting airplane flights over the parks, saying, "If we encourage the airplane business, we will see Glacier, Yellowstone, and Yosemite from the air at a hundred miles an hour. . . . I don't see any sense in catering to that sort of thing."

In 1985, Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt testified that noise in Grand Canyon is "equivalent to being downtown in Phoenix at rush hour or listening to an alarm clock go off, and that's not what a national park is for." That's a far cry from the novelist Zane Grey's description of the Grand Canyon in 1906 when he wrote: "One feature of this ever-changing spectacle never changes—its eternal silence."

With a little bit of foresight and a little bit of leadership, it could all have been prevented by not permitting the activity to start in the first place.

The Grand Canyon debacle is not just an isolated accident of history. Rather, it is a quite typical example of an ongoing process that is depreciating the unique quality of our whole public land system.

National parks are being overpressured by visitation that has risen tenfold in the past forty years. Wildlife refuges are being deprived of water and poisoned by selenium and dieldrin from agricultural runoff. BLM lands continue to be degraded by overgrazing subsidized by the taxpayer.

It is not my purpose here to compile a compendium of those ac-

tivities that are changing the character of our public land system in undesirable ways, and are doing so without changing the laws, without public discussion, and without congressional debate. Comprehensive, carefully designed congressional hearings are urgently needed to identify the major threats to the public lands systems as a whole and provide the Congress and the public with a picture of what is happening to these lands.

In my view, it would require a series of hearings extending over a period of at least two years to explore the issues involved. Joint House-Senate hearings would focus attention on the issue and involve the committees of jurisdiction in both bodies.

The end objective is to secure enough information and stir up enough interest and enough understanding and support to move the Congress and the land managers to design and implement a long-range, environmentally sustainable management plan for the public lands. The current combined multiple activities on the public lands in the lower forty-eight states already exceed the carrying capacity of those lands. That level of activity is not sustainable without destroying the essence, the heart, the soul of this magnificent gift of nature.

Without such a plan, this remarkable heritage will be gone in another four or five decades—leaving just a mishmash of modified theme parks, outdoor zoos for tame wild animals, clear-cut forests converted to tree farms, destroyed watersheds, traffic jams, concessionaire stands and boutiques to satisfy every whim, full-service trailer parks and more—all of this on the public lands.

If this sounds like a bit of hyperbole, don't be fooled. The only exaggeration here is my suggestion that it might take four or five decades to get there. All of the above is happening right now.

Incidentally, you get some idea of what these subtle, hardly noticeable incremental degradations of the system can do by just considering Yosemite for a moment. I first visited there fifty-seven years ago when I was an impressionable college freshman. I was awestruck by the grandeur and beauty of it and still am. However, I am also awestruck by what has happened to the beautiful Yosemite Valley since then. Sadly, it has been turned into an overcrowded, traffic-jammed, commercialized tourist trap with some 7,000 overnight visitors and campers. As someone aptly described the scene, "after the sun goes down, the valley looks like downtown Los Angeles at night." What a tragedy! What incredible mismanagement! And what a shame if we sit idly by while the system continues to deteriorate—which we are doing. Twelve years have passed since the 1980 Yosemite management plan was adopted and the Park Service is still hedging and waffling over its implementation. If they cannot put in place their own plan prepared by their own staff, what does this tell us about leadership?

It doesn't require any special insights to recognize the destructive course we are pursuing. Listen to the words of James Bryce, British ambassador to the United States, speaking in 1912:

What Europe is now, is that toward which you are in America are tending. Presently steam cars stop some 12 miles away from the entrance of Yosemite. . . . Surely development should come no closer. . . . If you were to realize what the result of the automobile will be in that wonderful, that incomparable valley, you will keep it out.

In 1953, the author Bernard DeVoto, a resolute defender of the public lands, had become so exercised by what was happening to the parks that he proposed in an article

in *Harpers* that the largest park "be closed and sealed, held in trust for a more enlightened future." If Mr. DeVoto were still around, I doubt if he would be prepared to unseal that park. The enlightened future he was thinking about has yet to arrive.

These are but a few of the advisories and warnings we have gotten from many wise observers and ignored over a period of many decades. What happened? Why? What can we do about it?

As previously mentioned, I think the core of the problem is the failure of Congress and the public to fully appreciate what is happening to our public lands. Extensive congressional hearings, publicity, and public debate would begin the necessary education process. Without public and congressional understanding, the issue simply will continue to be ignored. No one seeks an answer to a problem they don't realize even exists.

Though I don't have a simple all-purpose answer to the political problems that plague the public land agencies, it strikes me that there are three obvious things that employees can do to initiate the process of publicly exploring the status of our vast heritage of public lands.

First, prepare a petition to the congressional committees with jurisdiction over public lands requesting hearings on the status of the public lands system, their future under increasing public pressures, and what measures need to be taken to preserve this remarkable heritage.

Second, employees should be afforded the opportunity to express their views on important management and policy issues on some regularized basis through the use of a comprehensive questionnaire once every two years. Half of the questions for the questionnaire to be selected by employees; the other half by management. Answers to the questionnaire to be distributed to the appropriate congressional committees and the press.

Third, request a meeting with the vice president to discuss public land management and personnel issues. Such meetings should be scheduled twice a year.

These proposals present the opportunity to begin a national public dialogue on the status of our public lands. In conclusion, I'm sure you can think of other approaches to further this enterprise.