

Privatization of the Public Domain

By Bill Willers

Focused on war and terrorism, Americans seem unaware that their most valuable physical gift to future generations is being stolen. Our public lands (national forests and parks, wildlife preserves and BLM land), roughly a third of the nation, are rapidly becoming privatized.

The anti-environmental "Wise Use Movement" has evolved into "free-market environmentalism" backed by a collective of right-wing foundations (e.g., Bradley, Olin, Scaife, McKenna, Earhart, Koch, etc.) and the vast fortunes of industries dedicated to privatizing society. Anything but "free," it is dedicated to transferring public lands to private ownership and management for maximum profit.

Architects of this strategy, focusing initially on parks, have been frank. In a 1981 landmark paper, James Beckwith described his plan for "...ascending radicalism (in the movement to privatize public lands) from reform through volunteerism and privatization of services to the outright abolition of public ownership and the transfer of the parks to private parties... Existing public parks could either be given away or sold to the highest bidder." We owners would thereby become "customers."

Beckwith understood the need to advance slowly with "the most tentative step" being recruitment of volunteers and only later "the contracting out of support services to private firms operating for profit." Bush appointees are now contracting to private firms under such terms as "public-private partnerships" and "competitive outsourcing." In 2003, for example, Interior Secretary Gale Norton advanced her plan to "outsource" 11,807 of the 16,470 positions in the U.S. Park Service—nearly 72%.

Two leaders in the effort to privatize public lands are John Baden of the Foundation for Research on Economics & the Environment (www.free-eco.org) and Terry Anderson of Property and Environment Research Center (www.perc.org). Baden, a past member of the National Petroleum Council, advocates a shift in the control of public lands from "green platonic despots in D.C." to "local interests." He proposes to make each national forest a "charter forest" to be managed by whatever industry would produce greatest profits. For years, his group has offered seminars in its philosophy to federal judges. By the late '90s, he boasted that nearly a third of the federal judiciary had attended or applied for his seminars.

But Terry Anderson's 1999 paper "How and Why to Privatize Federal Lands" is nightmarish.

His plan is to allocate each citizen public land "shares" that could be "freely transferred." Whatever the financial worth of a market share, poorer citizens would sell first. But even middle classes, with mortgages, tuition, medical needs, etc., would see reasons to divest. Within a generation or so (Anderson estimated 20-40 years) the priceless heritage of Americans in common would belong to the super wealthy (Bush's "base") and the corporate sector which, with their bottomless pockets, would quickly vacuum up marketed shares.

Wake up time! Consider that Terry Anderson was made President George W. Bush's advisor on public lands issues, that agencies in charge of "the Commons" are being defunded in the name of "streamlining" government, and that there is a growing use of "user fees" on public lands for activities once free.

Add to that the powerful American Recreation Coalition (ARC), which represents every conceivable mechanized, off-road vehicle, RV, jetski interest (whether user group, dealer or manufacturer), petroleum interests, Disney, etc. ARC is a monster dedicated to making "industrial recreation" the future of our public lands.

With market incentives king, we who are now owners will be transformed into "consumers" of any form of activity, however destructive or vulgar, that will generate greatest profit. Privatizing management would demolish anything remaining of public interest now preventing a total industrial takeover of our public domain.

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graphic: Anthony Rees

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