

MY OPINION FROM BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

Public lands under siege

BY CHRIS BRATT

“This land is your land, this land is my land” is the first line of the chorus in this famous Woody Guthrie folk song. I’ve always taken it for granted whenever I sing this song that it’s referring to the hundreds of millions of priceless acres of land federally managed in our country (mostly in the west—see map). The majority of these lands were acquired through federal land purchases from France, Mexico and Russia between 1786 and 1867. Seizures of Native American territory were also made by the federal government. Those lands are now public lands that belong to and benefit every American citizen.

While federal agencies like the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (USFS) and National Park Service (NPS) are authorized to manage most of these public lands for us, as trustees, they are mandated to protect and improve the environment for succeeding generations. In

addition, more than 300 million citizens throughout our country have the right to express an opinion and comment on the use, management, protection and future of these vast invaluable lands and the natural resources they contain. Also, regarding these public lands, “each person has a responsibility to contribute to the preservation and enhancement of the environment” per 42 USC 4331 (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) signed into law on January 1, 1970, by Richard Nixon.

But it has become a crucial time for continuing public control over public land as outlined above. There is a growing number of defiant, aggressive individuals and groups in our country who don’t even recognize the legitimacy of the federal government or environmental laws. Neither do they acknowledge the authority of the public land management agencies. Many of these folks refuse to

abide by the laws of the land and insist that their rights to use public land for private purposes trumps federal control. Their intent is to eliminate the present public land ownership safeguards and weaken environmental laws. Among these people are freeloaders, lawbreakers and emboldened extremists carrying guns and itching for a fight. They are definitely not looking for compromise or concession on any of their beliefs.

During the next few years, we are going to see more and more anti-government, anti-environment attacks on public lands in the west (like the recent BLM mining dispute in Josephine County). On a larger scale, there are state representatives and members of Congress who are offering legislative proposals that will give states or local governments ownership authority to manage these public lands. Recently, Alaska’s Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski introduced a budget amendment to sell off our public lands and 51 senators (mostly Republican) voted in favor. The goal of these malcontents is to eventually privatize the natural resources available on these spectacular prairies, rivers, mountains, forests and national parks and collect all revenues for local or regional purposes only. The result is “The Ruin of the West,” which happens to be an excellent story on the subject in the February 2015 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Check it out.

A good example of what has already transpired regarding the transfer of public lands to state control took place in Utah in 2012, when the state’s legislature overwhelmingly passed Utah’s Transfer of Public Lands Act. The

wording of this state law demands the federal government turn over more than 30 million acres of public land to the state. The transfer of these public lands was slated to happen at the beginning of this year, but no further state action has been taken to enforce the law. These kinds of laws are gaining momentum in eight other western states, but it remains to be seen if any of these state laws will be valid when they reach the courts.

Hopefully, the movement to transfer our public lands to the states will be resolved by the courts before any congressional action is taken on the issue. In a Nevada case last year, a US District Court ruled that “the public lands in Nevada are property of the United States because the United States has held title to those lands since 1848 when Mexico ceded the land to the United States.”

What does the future hold for our public lands? I don’t have a definite answer to that question. But I do know that if we dispose of these lands that we all own by transferring control to unknown exploiters, we will lose all the environmental protections and citizen participation in decision making presently in place—forever.

I say, don’t throw away these rights for reactionary ideas that foster discord, greed and hate. Abide by the present laws, rely on the facts and best science, and make sure everyone hears you sing, “This land is your land, this land is my land.”

If you sing another tune, let me know.

Chris Bratt

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Chris Bratt



Where have all the salmon gone?

BY REX GAROUTTE

In late September 1998, you could stop at the Applegate Store, walk to the south side of the bridge, and see large numbers of spent salmon in the eddy below. Since then, the numbers of salmon have dwindled to near nothing. What happened?

The first thing we have to understand is that, unlike the Rogue River, the Applegate River is *not* stocked. The salmon that use the Applegate are native or “lost” hatchery fish.

We’ve been told that the decline in salmon has been caused by habitat destruction. This belief seems to fall apart if you consider that this past winter the steelhead run was one of the best seen in years with a large percentage being natives. Salmon and steelhead need the same environment, so why would one be doing well and the other declining?

The key is how and when the migration starts. When steelhead start their spawning cycle, they enter rivers randomly and bunch up once upriver. Salmon tend to school up at the river’s mouth. It is at this point that salmon are vulnerable to pinnipeds (seals and sea lions).

When pinnipeds are surrounded by plenty, they focus their energy on maximum nutrition with the least effort. That makes the salmon’s liver the prime target. This behavior means that they’re

not killing a few fish, but dozens a day. If you’ve fished for salmon in the ocean, you’ve probably had a fish stolen from you by a pinniped. They seem to target the middle of the belly to get the liver.

This behavior made the news several years ago when pinnipeds found the Dalles Dam fish ladder. When relocating the offending pinnipeds didn’t work, they had to be destroyed.

The reason this has become such a problem is the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act. Although the driving force of this law was to protect whales, all pinnipeds were added to the list.

A study begun in the 1990s found that pinnipeds were having an impact on salmon runs. The study estimated that there were approximately 85,000 pinnipeds on the West Coast in 1998. Current estimates have the population doubling every 10 years, which would mean that we now have around 300,000 hungry pinnipeds off our coast.

If you want to see this for yourself, take a drive to the mouth of the Smith River at the end of September to see the hundreds of pinnipeds lying on the banks of the river.

So with this problem getting worse every year, what can we do to mitigate it? There are three ways to control this problem: (1) increase the number of

salmon to what the habitat can support, (2) limit the human harvesting that is already taking place, and (3) control pinniped numbers. This would require changing the Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow harvesting of pinnipeds. If this can’t be accomplished, then perhaps a breeding program to increase orcas and great white sharks could be implemented to reduce pinniped numbers. Makes you want to go surfing.

On a local level, request the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to start a salmon-stocking program to bring the numbers up. And if you have a pond with

bass or sunfish, take steps to make sure that during a flood, those fish cannot get into the Applegate River. These fish are *not* indigenous to Oregon and, if introduced into the river, could have a negative impact on the salmon fry. The river is already at risk from the introduction of bass and sunfish to Applegate Lake.

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For more information, visit http://www.psmfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/expand_pinniped_report_2010.pdf and http://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/SeaLion/fact_sheet.asp.

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