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OUR VIEW



Staff photo by Tim Trainor
A campfire at a riverside camp site in Idaho's St. Joe National Forest.

Open land and public parks

In 1983, the great western writer Wallace Stegner labeled national parks as "the best idea (America) ever had." Nothing has dethroned them since. As the public lands debate continues unabated, and has flared up with renewed vigor in Oregon and Utah and throughout the West, it's worth noting what an unrivaled success the national park system is.

I know this, in part, because I parlayed the Fourth of July holiday into a week-long road trip through Idaho and Montana, driving through some of the most inviting public lands this country has to offer.

One stop on the journey was Yellowstone, the world's first national park, established in 1872. It welcomed 4 million visitors last year — a new record — and has proven remarkably adept at expanding the regional economy and protecting the natural wonders within its boundaries.

The old cow town and ski bum mecca of Bozeman, Montana, has become a wealthy suburb of the Yellowstone Area, enthralling people to not just visit but live in one of the most remarkable ecosystems on the planet.

At the same time, we saw hundreds upon hundreds of bison calves and mothers living healthy and happy in the Lamar Valley — the Serengeti of America. The relative safety of the huge herd attracted pronghorn and deer to gather near and graze absentmindedly. From deep in the surrounding forests, both grizzly bears and wolves were surely waiting for an opportunity. It was nature at its most natural.

It's not perfect, of course — we saw elk gathered on the unnaturally watered lawns near park headquarters, almost posing for pictures as tourists snapped away. It's no wonder visitors can sometimes forget these are wild animals, as Yellowstone at the height of the season and in its busiest places can seem more like a zoo.

But if the "idea" of national parks was to protect places so Americans can experience them, no park does it better than Yellowstone. No matter your fitness level or mobility, you can experience oodles of nature from the paved roads that crisscross the park and drop you at the foot of Old Faithful and geyser basin boardwalks, at the immense park lodges or at one of the hundreds of campsites capable of accommodating the largest of RVs. Americans and foreign visitors take advantage of the ease of access and arrive by the millions.

But they don't visit and recreate on other public lands with the same



TIM TRAINOR
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passions and in the same volume.

We started our trip with a stop in Idaho's St. Joe National Forest, camping for free on the banks of the St. Joe River and catching cutthroat trout until our arms got sore. The rocky canyons, crystal-clear water and dense pine forests were visually spectacular and wilder than Yellowstone, the surrounding hills teeming with elk, moose, bear and even lynx — and few people.

The upper stretches of the river were mostly empty. Selfishly, that made me most pleased. Most of the best holes were unfished and the best campsites clear of neighbors. But the rural towns farthest down the line now depend mostly on anglers and rafters and recreationalists. It's not a good sign that prime campsites remain unfilled on what should have been the busiest weekend of the year.

Certainly recreationalists can be damaging. Where roads and campfire rings and boat ramps are built, degradation and damage are sure to follow. Animals and ecosystems will be impacted, and more so when road-building, infrastructure and continued maintenance is required.

But many rural areas are not pristine, and have not been for a long time. They can handle increased human traffic, especially the responsible kind.

The forests and creeks surrounding the old mining town of Wallace, Idaho, are recovering much faster than the local economy. Yet in a place like Butte, Montana, where humans have been continuously mining precious metals for more than a century, the damage is far greater than can be mediated. Residents describe their local ecosystem as "post-natural."

Recreation will not be an economic boon for much of the rural West. And recreation itself does not benefit the plants and animals that are impacted at recreation sites and those downstream.

But recreating on public lands is good for the human soul and it upholds the American ideal. It's democratic, it's free in most places, it tests mettle and reconnects us with the rhythms and values of our land.

If you live in the West and don't take advantage of the remarkable possibilities of public lands recreation, you are missing out on America's greatest idea. And you are missing the opportunity to do a small part to help keep rural America alive.

Tim Trainor is opinion page editor of the East Oregonian.



Staff photo by Tim Trainor
Bison pepper the landscape in the Lamar River Valley in Yellowstone National Park.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

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COMMON GROUND...

OTHER VIEWS

Is the U.S. on the path to ruin?

SAN ANTONIO — I never really understood how fascism could have come to Europe, but I think I understand better now. You start with some fundamental historical transformation, like the Great Depression or the shift to an information economy. A certain number of people are dispossessed. They lose identity, self-respect and hope.

They begin to base their sense of self-worth on their tribe, not their behavior. They become mired in their resentments, spiraling deeper into the addiction of their own victimology. They fall for politicians who lie about the source of their problems and about how they can surmount them. Facts lose their meaning. Entertainment replaces reality.

Once facts are unmoored, everything else is unmoored, too. People who value humility and kindness in private life abandon those traits when they select leaders in the common sphere. Hardened by a corrosive cynicism, they fall for morally deranged little showmen.

And then perhaps there's a catalyzing event. Societies in this condition are culturally tense and socially isolated. That means there are a lot of lonely, alienated young men seeking self-worth through violence. Some wear police badges; some sit in their rooms fantasizing of mass murder. When they act, the results can be convulsive.

Normally, nations pull together after tragedy, but a society plagued by dislocation and slipped off the rails of reality can go the other way. Rallies become gripped by an exaltation of tribal fervor. Before you know it, political life has spun out of control, dragging the country itself into a place both bizarre and unrecognizable.

This happened in Europe in the 1930s. We're not close to that kind of descent in America today, but we're closer than we've been. Let's be honest: The crack of some abyss opened up for a moment by the end of last week.

Blood was in the streets last week — victims of police violence in two cities and slain cops in another. America's leadership crisis looked dire. The FBI director's statements reminded us that Hillary Clinton is willing to blatantly lie to preserve her career. Donald Trump, of course, lies continually and without compunction. It's very easy to see this country on a nightmare trajectory.

How can America answer a set of generational challenges when the leadership class is dysfunctional, political conversation has entered a post-facial era and the political parties are divided on racial lines — set to blow at a moment's notice?

On the other hand ... I never really understood how a nation could

arise as one and completely turn itself around, but I think I'm beginning to understand now. Back in the 1880s and 1890s, America faced crises as deep as the ones we face today. The economy was going through an epochal transition, then to industrialization. The political system was worse and more corrupt than ours is today.

Culturally things were bad, too. Racism and anti-immigrant feelings were at plague-like levels. Urban poverty was indescribable.

And yet America responded. A new leadership class emerged, separately at first, but finally congealing into a national movement. In

1889, Jane Addams created settlement houses to serve urban poor. In 1892, Francis Bellamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance to give the diversifying country a sense of common loyalty. In 1902, Owen Wister published "The Virginian," a novel that created the cowboy mythology and galvanized the American imagination.

New sorts of political leaders emerged. In city after city, progressive reformers cleaned up politics and

professionalized the civil service. Theodore Roosevelt went into elective politics at a time when few Ivy League types thought it was decent to do so. He bound the country around a New Nationalism and helped pass legislation that ensured capitalism would remain open, fair and competitive.

This was a clear example of a society facing a generational challenge and surmounting it. The Progressives were far from perfect, but they inherited rotting leadership institutions, reformed them and heralded in a new era of national greatness.

So which path will we take, the horrific path of 1930s Europe or the renewal path of 1890s America? The future of the world hangs on that question.

One way to think about it is this: America still has great resources at the local and social level. Here in San Antonio, there are cops who know how to de-escalate conflicts by showing dignity and respect. Everywhere I go there are mayors thinking practically and non-dogmatically. Can these local leaders move upward and redeem the national system, or will the national politics become so deranged that it will outweigh and corrupt all the good that is done block by block?

I'm betting the local is more powerful, that the healthy growth on the forest floor is more important than the rot in the canopy. But last week was a confidence shaker. There's a cavity beneath what we thought was the floor of national life, and there are demons there.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

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YOUR VIEWS

Whisky Fest organizers should have worked with Shriners

A good cowboy kick in the pants to the two guys who are promoting the Zac Brown Band concert and music fest. The music fest is a great idea and should become a regular attraction to Pendleton.

However, as a Pendleton Shriner, I am disappointed these two guys have not been willing to work with the Shriners on the parking for this event.

As most people know, the Shriners are some of the most generous and giving people on the planet. They support the Shriners Hospital for Children in Portland — 100 percent. No child who enters this hospital ever pays a cent for the high-level care they receive

from some of the best doctors in the country. The Shriners don't take one cent of the money they bring in, and traditionally their main income producer has been the parking for Round-Up at the old Albertson's parking lot.

The music fest would have been another wonderful opportunity for the Shriners to pass on the parking proceeds to the children's hospital in Portland and help some needy kids receive life-changing care for orthopedic or traumatic injuries, severe burns and other serious conditions — regardless of their family's ability to pay.

My grandfather, father and now myself have all been very proud to be members of this philanthropic organization.

David Burns
Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

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