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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



End Welfare Subsidies

While it is often thought that there is no socialist strength in America and that “welfare as we know it” is dead, a mighty block of U.S. senators, representatives, and state governors shove a lineup of socialism, welfare handouts, and entitlement rights. They fly below the radar screen of folk and news-business awareness because they cowl their Big Mother scam with high-flying ballyhooing of the free market, individual rights, and no governmental butting-in. I am not talking about an undercover cell of Maoists, but about pork-barrel “conservatives.” Mike Smith, an assistant secretary of the Department of Energy in the Bush Junior administration, laid out their goal in one talk, “The biggest challenge is going to be how to best utilize tax dollars to the benefit of industry.”[\[1\]](#)

Anticonservation attorney Karen Budd-Falen stamps her foot down that federal land agencies must “protect the economic or community stability of those communities and localities surrounding national forests and BLM-managed lands.”[\[2\]](#) Then-Senator Frank Murkowski of Alaska (later governor), at a Senate Energy and Natural Resources subcommittee hearing on the Forest Service, January 25, 1996, said, “These people [loggers in southeast Alaska] are great Americans. Blue collar Americans. They work hard and look to us for help. We should be able to help them....I have constituents out there who are real people, and they are entitled to a job....These people rely on the government to provide them with a sustainable livelihood.”[\[3\]](#) It might be fair for Murkowski to call on the federal government to underwrite jobs for his folks. However, he should not call himself a conservative Republican and should come clean that he is a welfare socialist.[\[4\]](#) (Alaska is by far the most socialistic state in the union, its make-believe rugged individualism notwithstanding.) And, by the way, who is not a “real person?” I wonder if those who fling the line about have been watching too many vampire and zombie shows on television. I would

say that corporations are not real persons, even though they have been blessed with personhood by twisted law.

Here's what philosophers call a "thought experiment." Daydream that these lines from Smith, Budd-Falen, and Murkowski came instead from a Democratic member of Congress, say a black woman from East St. Louis. Why, the Republicans would be all over themselves calling her a socialist, even a communist. Some might have heart attacks, their wrath boiling enough to pop arteries. But, when said by other Republicans, it's good, old, all-American conservatism and free-marketism. Their rugged individualism is a toddler's rugged individualism. You don't have to be a world-weary political scientist with a Ph.D. to be clever enough to understand that all this job talk by right-wingers is a two-fold scam. One, it's raw meat to toss to gullible voters, who, if they were smart enough to vote for what's good for them, would never vote for such Republicans. Two, forsooth, it's meant to get government handouts to big business under the hoax of helping them make jobs for "great Americans, blue-collar Americans."

Not only do these so-called conservatives back government job-making and handouts for resource extraction businesses, the subsidies they back help the worst players stay in business. Without government help, the ecologically most harmful ranchers and loggers on public lands would not make it. At the heart of a free market is business wipeout.

Jared Diamond, a wide-roaming scientist who lays out eye-burning bright insights in his books, enlightens us on this tangle when he writes that in Australia and the United States, "rural people are considered honest, and city-dwellers are considered dishonest. If a farmer goes bankrupt, it's assumed to be the misfortune of a virtuous person overcome by forces beyond his control..."^[5] This Myth of Rural Moral Superiority has been used like a never-dying gunslinger to uphold the wants of the old-timey economic elite in the West (and elsewhere).

One of the best and boldest public servants of our time was the late Mike Synar, a rancher and congressman from Oklahoma. Synar led the fight in Congress to straighten out and make fair public lands grazing. He told David Helvarg,

These are a bunch of whining welfare cowboys and the next sound you hear is the nipple coming out of their lips....These are the same people who come into their congressman's office and say, "I want the government to run like a business." So I say, "Okay, we're going to give you a dose of free enterprise. We're going to make you pay the fair market value of the assets you're using up on our federal lands, whether it's timber or grazing or minerals."^[6]

A 2005 study by the Government Accountability Office shows that the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management together "lose at least \$123 million a year keeping public lands open to livestock grazing."^[7] And this is without the costs of long-time wracking of watersheds, water quality, and wildlife being reckoned into the tally. Even the pro-business British news magazine, *The Economist*, says the U.S. public land economic system "tempered rugged individualism with socialist infrastructure."^[8]

Karl Hess Jr., who was fired from the Cato Institute for being a truthful and righteous libertarian and not a biostitute for landscapers, writes that resource extraction industries and Western boomers have "been for over a century...the standard bearer of more, *not less*, government."^[9] They "have been nurtured on a cornucopia of federal subsidies" and "are the nation's lingering link to socialism."^[10] "Basically, whatever the West needed and wanted it got from big government."^[11] "By every measure, the American West was built on federal dollars....hundreds of rural communities across the West would be nothing but ghost towns today were it not for the free flow of government dollars from the Forest Service, the BLM, the Post Office, and dozens of federally run or financed welfare programs."^[12] Federal payments "bail out the worst of stockmen and they keep the most marginal—and commonly the most environmentally destructive—of ranches in operation, frustrating the efforts of the best and most dedicated federal-land managers."^[13]

But Caren Cowan, head of the New Mexico Cattle Growers, said of federal grazing permittees, "We are almost in a life-and-death situation here. It's getting tough to be a cowboy."^[14] There is no gainsaying that it's getting tough to be a cowboy. The land has been scalped for over one hundred years and the economics of the range livestock industry have gone south. Cowan seems to say, though, that the taxpayers owe a handful of folks the folkloric cowboy lifeway, that ranchers have an entitlement to herd cattle while sucking away bucks from other Americans thanks to their being a quaint reminder of America's days of yore, even though they are the ones answerable for the downfall of the range livestock industry through their lousy and greedy stewardship.

It's tough running other businesses, too. Owners and staff of small, offbeat bookstores are a bunch of Americans with a quaint lifeway who truly give America something worthwhile. Why have they not asked for taxpayer subsidies? My sister, Roxanne Pacheco, and I had a mail-order bookstore for five or six years. Thanks to market seesawing, our lack of working capital, and our own weaknesses running a business, we found ourselves in a "life-and-death situation." However, we did not dream of taxpayers propping us up so we could have the lifeway of owning our own business and letting her, a single mother, work at home and raise her family. We shut down Books of the Big Outside and found other ways to make our livings.

Other ranchers east of the public-lands states huff about the unfair edge public-lands cowboys get. Scott Dewald of the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association says of the low federal grazing fees, "We consider it to be an unfair subsidy. The fee should be based on public auctions, high bidder takes it." [\[15\]](#)

Cutting subsidies to resource extraction industries is a big way the free market can better steward our land and wildlife.

Green Scissors

Beginning in 1995, the Green Scissors Campaign brought together groups as far-flung as Friends of the Earth and the National Taxpayers' Union to fight federal spending programs "that damage the environment and waste taxpayer dollars." So often it is pork-barrel politics and subsidies to extractive industry that scalp public lands, wetlands, and homes for Endangered Species. Now that the ballooning federal budget has become the trumpeting, crazed bull elephant in musth in the room, it is time for wildlovers to rally 'round the Green Scissors Campaign. The 2011 offering from Green Scissors was written by staffers from Taxpayers for Common Sense, The Heartland Institute, Friends of the Earth, and Public Citizen. Yes, The Heartland Institute, a hardcore, rightwing, global-warming-denying outfit.

The "Introduction" to *Green Scissors 2011* says:

Green Scissors strives to make environmental and fiscal responsibility a priority in Washington. For more than 16 years, Green Scissors has exposed subsidies and programs that both harm the environment and waste taxpayer dollars. The campaign has built a strong case that the federal government can protect our natural resources, reduce the growth of government spending, and make a significant dent in the national debt. Building on last year's detailed cut lists, Green Scissors 2011 identifies more than \$380 billion in wasteful government subsidies that are damaging to the environment and harming taxpayers.

Wasteful government spending comes in many different forms. The most obvious are direct spending on discretionary programs and mandatory programs such as commodity crop payments. Slightly less transparent are tax expenditures, privileges written into the tax code, or below market giveaways of government resources like timber and hardrock minerals. Even more opaque is preferential government financing for harmful projects through bonding loans, long term contracting authority and loan guarantees, and risk reduction through government insurance and liability caps. [\[16\]](#)

Let me bring out the bottom line here again: "Green Scissors 2011 identifies more than \$380 billion in wasteful government subsidies that are damaging to the environment and harming taxpayers." When you need to take some ax swings at a \$1 trillion deficit, \$380 billion in one fell swoop is a darn good start. Among the fields with thoughtful, prudent cuts in wasteful federal spending and subsidies offered by Green Scissors are energy, agriculture, livestock, transportation, hardrock mining, National Forest logging, public lands grazing, flood insurance, and Army Corps of Engineers boondoggles. [\[17\]](#) The way Green Scissors has brought together outfits from far-flung political roots shows the worth of conservationists tackling government waste and subsidies for the good of wild things.

Conservation groups, big and little, should look at the Green Scissors report and promote it in their websites and newsletters.

[Note: This is only a taste of how in my new book, *Take Back Conservation*, I lay out some "free" market steps to cut wasteful government spending, quit propping up landscalping business, and gain sure funding for conservation. From time to time in 2013, I'll lay out other steps while we sit around the campfire. The main thrust of *Take Back Conservation* is how to

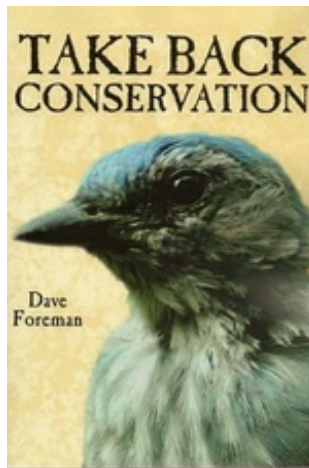
stop corporate conservation and bring our movement back to grassroots conservation unafraid to talk about and stand up for how wild things are good-in-themselves.]

--Dave Foreman



©Nancy Morton, taken on the Noatak

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- [1] Carl Pope and Paul Rauber, *Strategic Ignorance: Why the Bush Administration Is Recklessly Destroying a Century of Environmental Progress* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 2004), 25-26. Notwithstanding how I have often been at odds with Pope, this was a darned good and helpful book. Someone needs to do a like job on the Obama Administration's reckless undercutting and overthrowing of our bipartisan birthright of conservation and environmental bulwarks and caretaking.
- [2] Karen Budd-Falen, "Protecting Community Stability and Local Economies," in Philip D. Brick and R. McGreggor Cawley, eds., *A Wolf in The Garden: The Land Rights Movement and The New Environmental Debate* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 1996), 73-74.
- [3] "Senate Hearing on GAO Report on Forest Service," email from Bruce Hamilton, Sierra Club, January 28, 1996.
- [4] Murkowski was defeated for reelection as governor by a Republican primary challenge from a little-known housewife and small-town mayor by the name of Sarah Palin. Murkowski's daughter, Lisa, is one of Alaska's senators and thought of as a "moderate" Republican.
- [5] Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Viking, New York, 2005), 394. Diamond is dead-on here, but can be amazingly naïve when it comes to extractive industry.
- [6] David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1994), 33.
- [7] Jennifer Talhelm, Associated Press, "Grazing Costs Feds Money," *Albuquerque Journal*, November 2, 2005.
- [8] "Last Round-Up for the Old West," *The Economist*, March 6, 1993, quoted in Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens*, 63.
- [9] Karl Hess Jr., "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," in *A Wolf in The Garden*, 161. Karl's daddy is the Karl Hess who wrote Barry Goldwater's acceptance speech at the 1964 Republican Convention—the one that goes "Extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice...." Karl Jr. is a true conservationist who cares about wild things. He has more faith in the goodness and wisdom of communities and the common man than I do, though. Nonetheless, we are friends and I've done my best (not good enough, I fear) to get other conservationists to give him more heed.
- [10] Hess, "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," 162.
- [11] Hess, "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," 164.
- [12] Hess, "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," 166.
- [13] Hess, "Wising Up to the Wise Use Movement," 176.
- [14] Paul Rogers and Jennifer LaFleur, "The Giveaway Of The West," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 7, 1999.
- [15] Rogers and LaFleur, "The Giveaway Of The West."
- [16] Autumn Hanna, Eli Lehrer, Benjamin Schreiber, and Tyson Slocum, *Green Scissors 2011* (Friends of the Earth, Washington, DC, 2011). Online at www.greenscissors.com
- [17] Hanna, et al., *Green Scissors 2011*.
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