



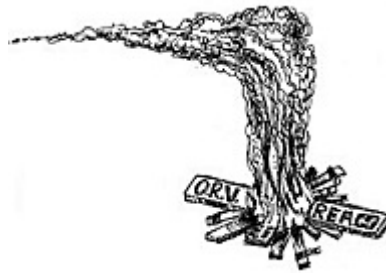
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Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Public Lands

One Third of the Nation's Land was the title of the report of the congressionally set-up Public Land Law Review Commission in 1970, and one-third of the nation's land is yours and mine. Not the timber companies'. Not the land and cattle companies'. Not the mining companies'. Not the rich folks'. Not the land speculators'. Ours. One-third of the acreage of the United States of America is yet owned by her citizens and overseen by the federal government—740 million acres in all. These are the National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, National Forests, and Bureau of Land Management lands. Moreover, the sundry states own on behalf of their citizens another 197 million acres, such as grazing and oil leasing lands in the West, timber lands in the East, and state parks, state forests, and state hunting areas in all of them.^[1] All of this came out of a long history of public domain allocations and decisions like Yellowstone National Park, Adirondack Forest Preserve, and President Harrison's forest reserves.

These lands are why the United States has a conservation legacy unmatched elsewhere in the world. Underline that last sentence. As I have learned more about international conservation, I've wondered why the whole game of protecting land seems easier in the United States (not that it's easy here, but alongside other countries we are better off). Our public lands are the answer. I know of no other country that has such a set-up with its citizens owning and having a strong say in the running of one-third of the country's land acreage. Two federal laws above all give citizens and their clubs sturdy handles to help guide stewardship of the public lands: the Wilderness Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Canada has something like our public lands—Crown Lands—but they are not like National Forests or even BLM lands. For one thing, they are not even under multiple-use management, but are wide-open to be leased long-term to logging or mining companies. For another,

although Crown Lands are owned by the nation of Canada, the provinces, not the feds, run them. The mighty woe of this is that if acreage is to be set aside, it is generally the province alone who can do it (however, the federal government can set up National Parks, which they run). There are Provincial Parks throughout Canada but they are nothing like our National Parks; they are much more like National Forests. Australia has a set-up like Canada's. Moreover, willingness to set aside land as parks or such hangs on the political party running the province or state in their parliamentary set-ups. Neither country has the kind of federal laws the US has, such as the Wilderness Act, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act, and others for the whole country that give citizens a mighty hand in helping to shape policy. Mexico is even worse in having almost no public land. Nearly all lands in our neighbor to the south are privately owned or held by *ejidos*, communal lands for underwriting a village. Mexico's National Parks are often on private or ejido land and mean little. Only a few such as Pinacate in Sonora south of Arizona are truly federal lands.

In no other nation do citizens have as many handles on the gears of public conservation as do those of the United States and none have anything like our federal public lands. The United States is a stand-alone nation for conservation most of all because of the public lands and a steadily more open door for citizen input on their stewardship. Our matchless system of US public lands is the key for our gains in conservation notwithstanding the economic, political, and philosophical might of those fighting protection of public lands in the United States: resource agencies, corporations, politicians, landscapers, and conspiracy nuts. Indeed, though the slaughter of wild things goes on, in the United States at least, conservationists have done one heck of a job against the mighty landscapers of dollar-fat businesses ransacking the land with political help from their good-ol'-boy friends and agency managers who love the sound of chainsaws and drill rigs. Public lands have not been given the acknowledgment for this that they are owed, although much of conservation has been and will go on being about how to steward public lands.^[2] When I think about it, I have to chortle that the set-up to pay off the war debt of the American Revolution had the unforeseen witchery to bring about our unmatched conservation heritage.^[3] Death tales from the Killing Decades and the awfulness of landscaping in the US notwithstanding, we have a gift of great worth in our public lands. Without them, wild things would be in far worse shape than they are in the US. We conservationists should never brook mistaken catcalls from "new conservationists" that our hoary conservation path has failed owing to the weight we give to set-aside public lands.

Mind you, I am not saying that America's public lands are flawless or the best they can be. They are far from that. But we have them! And that is wonderful and worth more than we often think.

The Public Land Systems

Public lands are not of one kind. The rather jumbled line-up of managing agencies is another way the United States stands out in conservation—since the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) in 1976, which was the "organic act" for the Bureau of Land Management, once and for all did away with disposal. Public lands are now all stacked into one of the *systems* of public lands. Many state lands are also dealt out into two or more state systems, such as state parks and hunting areas.

Most federal land is overseen by one of four government agencies, each part of a cabinet-level department:

1) U.S. Forest Service (USFS or FS)—Department of Agriculture: National Forests (NFs), National Grasslands, some National Recreation Areas (NRAs), and a few National Monuments.



Dave Foreman with old-growth Tulip Poplar, Sipsey Wilderness Area, Bankhead National Forest, Alabama
© Dave Foreman

193 million acres in forty-three states and Puerto Rico. These are “multiple-use” lands—unless designated Wilderness Areas—mostly open to commercial timber cutting, livestock grazing (about 96 million acres), mining, energy drilling and digging, dams, power-line and pipeline rights-of-way, road-building (the USFS is the world’s biggest road-managing agency with over 400,000 miles, from two-tracks to paved), off-road vehicle (ORV) play, firewood gathering, other fastbuck

ransacking, built campgrounds, outfitter camps, privately owned cabins on leased NF land, and hunting and fishing. National Forest lands can also be leased by businesses for ski areas and other resorts, though the Forest Service must, with our input, okay how such are to be run. Ranchers graze livestock in many NF Wilderness Areas—a needed compromise for getting the Wilderness Act through Congress.

2) National Park Service (NPS)—Department of the Interior: National Parks (NPs), National Monuments (NMs), National Seashores and Lakeshores, National Recreation Areas (NRAs), National Preserves, and other areas.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina-Tennessee
© Dave Foreman

About 80 million acres in forty-seven states. NPS lands are on the whole not open to hunting, livestock grazing, logging, mining, or energy gobbling, and vehicles must stay on roads or designated routes, but there are glaring exceptions. Parks are not shielded from development, however. Industrial tourism can have a big and often nasty footprint in Parks: paved highways, hotels, stores, cruise ships, overflights, helicopter tours,

snowmobiles, even ski areas, and other plush (sometimes tawdry) or thrilling merriments can leave wild things tattered.

3) U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS or FWS)—Department of the Interior: National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs).



150 million acres in every state and in many island possessions of the US. Although NWRs are for wildlife “production” and habitat stewardship, some are open to logging, mining, energy extraction, livestock grazing, speedboats, and ORVs. Many NWRs also have public hunting areas. Moreover, few are taken care of mainly for threatened or rare species; nearly all were set up to make sure there would be plenty of ducks and geese and big game for hunting.

John Davis and Denise Wilson canoe around auefs on Canning River, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska
© Dave Foreman

However, refuge managers were on the whole more for Wilderness Area designation on their refuges than were managers in other agencies. Not only are some of the wildest and best-cared-for Wilderness Areas on National Wildlife Refuges but also some of the best Wilderness boundaries are on NWRs thanks to the way refuge managers backed Wilderness. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska may be the best-stewarded Wilderness Area in the US. Alas, the biggest and wildest refuge in the lower 48 states, Cabeza Prieta in western Arizona on the Mexican border, has had its once-untracked Sonoran Desert flats shredded by unlawful immigrants, drug smugglers, and U.S. Border Patrol vehicles running amuck in designated Wilderness.

4) Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—Department of the Interior: National Conservation Areas (NCAs), newly set-up National Monuments (since the late-1990s), and undesignated public lands.



268.5 million acres in twenty-eight states (thirteen of these states outside the West have rather piddling acreages). These are multiple-use lands, like the National Forests, but often with even less oversight from the agency. Strong steps were taken by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and President Bill Clinton at the end of Clinton’s administration by wielding the Antiquities Act to withdraw large areas for National Monuments in many western states. These new Monuments were kept under the BLM and not shuffled over to the National Park Service. A good fallout from this is that it gave BLM a big acreage of semi-protected land to care for and called for more BLM staff given to land caring instead of resource exploitation. BLM then set up the National Landscape Conservation System for these National Monuments, along with Wilderness Areas, Wild & Scenic Rivers, and such under BLM jurisdiction.

Grosvenor Arch in BLM’s Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah National Landscape Conservation System © Dave Foreman

Other Federal Land

Millions of acres of other federal lands are under the Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps of the Department of Defense: reservations, ranges, test sites, forts, ports, and bases. These lands are almost always not open to the public, but some have outstanding natural areas and homes for Endangered and Threatened Species. Sometimes these lands and wildlife are well sheltered and cared for under good stewardship plans. Make no mistake, however, the "mission" of the base always comes first. Military lands are most often not thought of as public lands. Some other federal agencies such as the Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers have recreational lands in small bits, and the Department of Energy and some others manage land but not for public use.

These systems did not leap from Uncle Sam's forehead fully made, nor did they grow in a thoughtful way, but came about in a willy-nilly tumble, with business keeping as much sway over them as it could for as long as it could, while conservationists and some agency folks tried to run them for the good of all the people and even for the good of the land. The endless tug of war between dollar-driven businesses and thrill-driven motorheads, federal resourcists, and wild-loving citizen conservationists shaped and made the public lands what they are today.

The only way America's public lands will stay public and become better cared for is for all of us who love wild things and the freedom of the big outside to work tirelessly as did the conservationists who came before us. Brock Evans, who has mentored me and hundreds of younger conservationists, puts it this way:

Endless pressure, endlessly applied.

As much as the Bill of Rights, our public lands define who we are as Americans and have been key to what gains wildlovers have made in the United States.

Dave Foreman



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Adapted from my forthcoming book, Conservation vs. Conservation. I would appreciate any helpful comments about my understanding of public lands in Canada and other nations.

[1] There are over 6,600 state parks with 14 million acres of land.

[2] The key books for understanding the public lands as a whole are Bernard Shanks, *This Land Is Your Land* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1984); Dyan Zaslowsky and T. H. Watkins, *These American Lands* (The Wilderness Society and Island Press, Washington, 1994); and William K. Wyant, *Westward In Eden: The Public Lands and the Conservation Movement* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982). There are also guidebooks to the National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, and Wilderness Areas, as well as the websites for the sundry agencies.

[3] See *Around the Campfire* #53, August 5, 2013, for the tale of how the public lands began and evolved.



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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

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