Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act While Others Plan the Sale of Federal Lands to Private Businesses

Fifty years ago, as many have already noted, the Wilderness Act was signed into law with near unanimous bipartisan support. That widespread support continued into the 1980s as more and more of our remaining wild natural landscapes were provided with permanent protection from commercial development or human overuse. Over those fifty years, the National Wilderness System in the lower forty-eight states has increased six fold. Almost all of that expansion of Wilderness acreage received bipartisan support because that was the only way to pass a wilderness bill given an evenly divided congress and the rotation of Democrats and Republicans in the Whitehouse.

Rather than celebrating the golden anniversary of passage of the Wilderness Act and our success in granting permanent protection to some of the most spectacular natural landscapes that America has to offer, a small minority of our citizens have started yet another drive to try to seize control of all federal lands and natural resources in the Western states so that federal restrictions on the use of those lands can be replaced by state management or sale of those lands to private corporations for commercial use.

Typically an economic explanation is offered for why all of the residents of the West should get behind this movement to evict the federal government as a major land and natural resource manager in our states. The general idea is that the federal government places too many restrictions on the commercial use of
federal lands and the natural resources found on or under them. If we could just get rid of those federal restrictions, so we are told, commercial developers would swarm over those lands, harvesting, for instance, all of those trees that are just standing there waiting to burn, grazing cows and sheep more intensely on the federal range and forest lands and freely shooting the predatory varmints who might threaten that livestock. Our mountains, valleys, and plains are also bound to have mineral deposits that miners, unconstrained by federal red tape, could quickly develop. We could have mineral booms similar to those a century ago in Butte and Helena. Much of Montana might be able to enjoy a boom similar to the oil boom currently taking place in the Bakken today. All we have to do, we are told, is get the federal government off our backs and private corporations onto those federal lands and our economies will blossom.

This is the ultimate hallucinatory vision through the historical rearview mirror. Our future, apparently, should be like our past: one boom town after another; one environmental disaster after another; constant movement of population from one failing town to the next booming one. Social chaos, wide-open towns built around bars and brothels, high prices for everything and the accompanying high wages, and ultimately collapse and poverty: The Bakken phonmenon repeated over and over again in each of our communities. Let the good times roll.

That is not what most families are looking for although it may be what some young singles would find exciting for a while: A return to Hollywood’s version of the wild-wild West.
The Wilderness Act and the creation of National Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges as well as the creation by the states of similar protected landscapes were built around a different vision of how we might inhabit the spectacular natural landscapes that surround us. It was a conservative vision within which we agreed among ourselves that we wanted to settle here and permanently enjoy most of the natural wonders that surrounded us. We did not want to permanently foul our nest and simply move on to foul another location. This was to be our home and we intended to protect much of it as we went about making it habitable for ourselves.

Despite repeated claims that protecting parts of the surrounding natural landscapes where we wished to live would undermine economic opportunity and condemn us to poverty or having to move away, that has not been the consequence of establishing our National Parks, Wildernesses, Wildlife Refuges, or the ongoing management of our National Forests and Rangelands. Quite the contrary, these protected natural amenities now define our communities and increasingly our economies. The beauty and challenge of those natural landscapes have allowed us to continue to attract new residents and business as existing residents continue to enjoy that natural bounty and its wildness, in a West we are proud to call our home.

Most of us have no intention of giving that away in an environmentally destructive commercial free for all.