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A Conspiracy of Optimism, Act II: Columbia River Salmon

The Clinton Administration's recent announcement that it will seek to protect most of the remaining National Forest roadless areas from roaded logging and mining represents a significant formal step back from the aggressive federal logging policies adopted after World War II. In the first half of the 20th century, the national forests were managed very conservatively for their watershed, wildlife, and other forest reserve values. In the second half of this century, these National Forests were committed to providing a massive flow of building materials that was expected to help make part of the American dream, namely home ownership, more affordable.

The post-war, post-depression optimism lead forest planners to believe that the same industrial efforts that produced the cornucopia of war materials that won the war and build our atomic arsenal, could also master our forest lands. With technological ingenuity and superior management, our federal forest planners believed that they did not really have to face tradeoffs between timber harvest and wildlife habitat, water quality, recreation, fisheries, scenic beauty, or anything else. With intensive management and scientific knowledge, we could have more of every thing. From this flowed the idea of the multiple-use clear cut: Clearcutting, besides allowing a larger flow of cheap lumber to mills, enhanced wildlife habitat, added biological diversity, increased water production, reduced fire risks, and allowed the planting of genetically superior and more valuable stands of trees. Massive harvest of trees enhanced most other forest values, we were told. The idea of having to face tradeoffs and difficult choices among objectives was dismissed as a static concept no longer relevant to a dynamic modern industrial world where we could have anything we dreamed of and put our minds to.

Of course, things did not turn out that way. We overcut our federal forests, creating a hole in the timber supply, drove wildlife species towards extinction, silted up our streams, destroyed our fisheries, scarred the mountainsides, rendered land useless for hunting and other recreation, and left an exhausted landscape. The proposed federal roadless area policy now seeks to say, enough is enough; we will protect the remnant areas we hadn't yet gotten around to destroying. Some will say, fine, but too little, too late.

This industrial age conspiracy of optimism did not just damage our forests. A similar mindset led to the destruction of the salmon fisheries in the upper Columbia River basin. As massive irrigation and hydroelectric development of the basin got

under way early in the 20th century, we again assumed that technology could keep us from having to make difficult choices between salmon and other economic interests. Instead of assuring the safe passage of fish up and downstream past the dams, we decided that we would build fish hatcheries that would compensate for the blocked passages and fish mortality. We would even produce superior strains of salmon and enhance the number of fish. When that did not appear to be succeeding, we turned to another technological fix: We began barging and trucking the fish around the dams and reservoirs. As one river manager once proudly proposed: We would have the salmon without the salmon having to have a river.

Our engineers and scientists, hypnotized by this technological optimism, confirmed what the river managers wanted to believe, that we could have all of the hydroelectric energy, irrigated agriculture, livestock grazing, timber harvest, mining, slack water barge transportation that could be wrung out of the river, its tributaries, and uplands, while not having to sacrifice the salmon. Of course, as with the forests, at century's end, we have had to face the awful truth. Almost every single stock of salmon on the upper Columbia and its major drainages is either extinct, on the verge of extinction, or listed as endangered.

As with the proposed ban on further roaded development of the remnant roadless areas, dramatic measures are being proposed to try to recover the endangered salmon on the upper Columbia. The US Army Corps of Engineers is just finishing an analysis of the breaching of the four dams on the lower Snake River between Lewiston, Idaho, and the Snake's confluence with the Columbia. This string of dams, which was only completed in the mid-1970s, blocks salmon access to the entire Salmon River basin, a river basin that once provided 40 percent of all of the Columbia's spring/summer Chinook salmon. Besides appropriately reopening the Salmon River to salmon, the breaching of the dams would also create a 220-mile free-flowing stretch on the Snake River between the Columbia and Hells Canyon.

To some, ending logging in national forest roadless areas and the proposed breaching of Columbia basin dams is a betrayal of the immensely successful industrial system that during the 20th century transformed America into the world's dominant economic power. To others it is a step away from an unnecessarily wasteful and destructive system that reflects raw hubris and unconscionable greed far more than ingenuity and productivity. As the century ends, an appropriate moral reckoning is beginning to take place. Just what environmental price is it appropriate to pay in the pursuit of still yet one more increment to our material standard of living?