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Making Sense out of Initial Local Hostility to New or Expanded Parks and Wilderness

The establishment or expansion of National Parks and Wilderness Areas, or a variety of other ways in which parts of our natural landscapes get protection from ordinary commercial development, have always been controversial. We tend to forget that the National Parks that are now treated as jewels in our national landscape, including Yellowstone-Grand Teton, Yosemite and Grand Canyon National Parks, were initially fought by local interests because such huge areas were being transferred to a much more strictly regulated use regime that sought to permanently protect certain landscape and wildlife values. That stricter regulation of access and use was objected to by local developers who felt their future and that of adjacent local communities was tied to developing the commercially profitable opportunities these local entrepreneurs saw in these wildlands, *if* they could be kept open for private development.

One can see this in the nearly hysterical reaction of many Western leaders when they learned of the directive issued by the Bureau of Land Management to its local regional offices to evaluate the lands they managed to identify unique natural landscapes that remain pristine despite a heavy BLM commitment to multiple use for over a century. The idea was to put together a list of those lands and their qualities that might justify more careful regulation of use to protect those qualities.

Just as when almost every National Park, Wilderness Area, or Monument was announced, objections were immediately raised about a federal land grab whose restrictions would choke off the local economy. It was all, we have regularly been told,

part of the federal governments “war on Western economies.” The perceived negative causal economic chain, here, is pretty straight forward: If the government imposes additional limits on how those landscapes can be used by locals, some of the economic potential of those natural resources will no longer be available to support the local economy. This loss of access to valuable land-based resources has got to impoverish local families and communities because they will have less with which to work..

Of course, over time, that is not what has happened. Counties containing National Parks and Wilderness Area have been among the most economically vital in the nation. Rather than being pitched into ongoing depression, Park and Wilderness counties significantly out-performed other rural economies no matter how you measure economic vitality, in terms of jobs, real income, or population growth. The National Parks or Wilderness Areas became an integral and positive part of the local economy and almost everyone comes to recognize these protected landscapes as an economic asset, not a liability.

That has been the recent pattern in California’s desert lands. Back in 1994, despite fierce local opposition, congress passed the largest national parks and wilderness bill ever, the California Desert Protection Act that protected 8.5 million acres in Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve. At the time that these huge sprawling desert areas came under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, locals complained bitterly about the urban environmental “radicals” who were trying to create an “environmental utopia” at the expense of local residents’ way of life. Now, a decade and a half later, there is broad local support for *expanding* those protected California desert lands to include another 1.2 million acres.

What local residents discovered after the parks were created was that without the federal government protecting these lands, huge swaths of them would get converted into massive farms of solar collectors, effectively closing broad areas to public use. In addition the Marine Corps wanted to expand its military training facilities, closing off additional chunks of those desert landscapes to public use. Local residents had also discovered the “announcement effect” associated with National Park designation that has brought more and more visitors who want to engage in the same desert-based recreational activities the locals do. This has led to a shift in local attitudes away from bumper sticker slogans about federal land grabs towards understanding that federal protection can assure public access to these lands indefinitely into the future, something that the status quo of “multiple use” cannot do.

These park lands are now seen as part of the local economic base that both protects local quality of life, including outdoor recreational resources, for permanent residents while also drawing a steady stream of visitors whose expenditures stimulate the local economy.

The way public perceptions about National Park and Wilderness changes over time makes it difficult to evaluate how much attention should be given to local opinions about protecting unique natural landscapes. If we give local residents an effective veto over such landscape protection, we may protect very little additional land and it may be degraded by commercial use or closed off for effectively private use. These parks and wilderness areas are, after all, valuable to people across the nation and around the world. Someone has to speak for the land from that broader public perspective too.

We need to understand local economic and public access concerns. Locals need to understand the larger benefits of permanent landscape protection to them and their communities. The history of how local attitudes move systematically from opposition to a whole-hearted embrace of those protected landscapes also needs to be kept in mind. There is the potential here for an ongoing productive dialogue that moves beyond the “war on the West” rhetoric into a more complete understanding of the long run benefits and costs associated with preserving natural landscapes for all of us to enjoy for many generations into the future.