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1998

6-8-1998

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Citation Information

Knight, Richard L., "Outdoor Recreation and Natural Lands: The Gradual Unfolding of Policy" (1998).
Outdoor Recreation: Promise and Peril in the New West (Summer Conference, June 8-10).
<https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/outdoor-recreation-promise-and-peril-in-new-west/3>

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Richard L. Knight, *Outdoor Recreation and Natural Lands: The Gradual Unfolding of Policy*, in *OUTDOOR RECREATION: PROMISE AND PERIL IN THE NEW WEST* (Natural Res. Law Ctr., Univ. of Colo. Sch. of Law 1998).

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**OUTDOOR RECREATION AND
NATURAL LANDS: THE GRADUAL
UNFOLDING OF POLICY**

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Outdoor Recreation:
Promise And Peril in The New West

June 8-10, 1998

Natural Resources Law Center
University of Colorado
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Boulder, Colorado

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OUTDOOR RECREATION AND NATURAL LANDS: THE GRADUAL UNFOLDING OF POLICY

By Richard L. Knight

I. Summary

Outdoor recreation is the latest highest and best use of our natural lands (Christensen 1996). By natural lands I mean public lands under the jurisdiction of local, state, and federal government entities, and also protected areas as managed by organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society. All trends project that outdoor recreation on public lands is on the increase and commodity uses are in decline. Consider just Forest Service lands. Last year 830 million visitors were tallied in the national forests. This is the equivalent of every American spending at least 3 days during the past year on forest service lands (Mitchell 1997).

These numbers reflect a boom in recreation that is pervasive and ubiquitous. The anticipated trends in the number of people participating in wildlife-oriented recreation are projected to increase 63% to 142% over the next 50 years (Flather and Cordell 1995). Recreational activities not dependent on wildlife are also expected to grow rapidly and include such activities as day hiking, bicycling, camping, mountain climbing, rafting and tubing, off-road driving, motor boating, and snowmobiling.

Thus, whether on foot, by horse, motorcycle, mountain bike, ski, or snowmobile, people will increasingly enter our public lands to seek spiritual elevation, aesthetic enjoyment, the companionship of family and friends, exercise, or just to escape from our urbanized environments. That is the present and more of it will be in our futures.

Isn't this O.K.? Hasn't this been the struggle that has defined the environmental movement for almost a century in this country (Knight and Bates 1995)? Out with the damaging extractive uses of logging, mining, and livestock grazing and in with the more environmentally friendly and benign pursuits of outdoor recreation. Haven't we been told that livestock grazing destroys riparian areas, and has sent dozens of species to extinction? That logging levels old-growth

forests, increases siltation in our streams and rivers, and clogs the gills of fish on the brink of extinction? And haven't we been successful in our endeavors of decreasing commodity uses? In 1988 we harvested 12 billion board feet on forest service lands. This year we will harvest less than 4 billion board feet. Livestock numbers across the West are down from 20 million a century ago to 2 million animals today. And every forest service plan revision calls for fewer livestock grazing leases and reductions in AUMs on the remaining leases.

From where I stand, there appears to be a certain degree of duplicity in our discussions to substitute amenity uses for commodity uses. Listen to these two quotes by Steve Hinchman who is the executive director of the Western Slope Environmental Resource Council, based in Paonia, Colorado.

Most existing environmental problems have been caused not by recreationists, but by loggers, utilities, miners, ranchers and motorized vehicle users.

Another quote:

Charging fees to use public lands will generate money, and therefore power, to influence federal land management in favor of recreation and the environment.

What these quotes suggest regarding outdoor recreation in the New West is that the environment will be better served when the public lands are devoted to recreation rather than logging, mining, and livestock grazing. But that assumes that either: 1) that outdoor recreation is benign, or 2) if it is not, that we can better manage recreation than we managed logging, grazing, water-development, or mining.

We do stand at a watershed signaling change in the uses of our public lands. These issues require serious discussion and the involvement of all Americans who care about the natural heritage of our public lands. For, whether we like it or not, America's natural lands will experience ever-increasing levels of outdoor recreation. And, importantly, just as historically we overgrazed, overlogged, overmined, and overdamned our public lands, today we are gathering together the forces that may overrecreate these lands in the future.

How did this come to pass? I believe it can be attributed to three factors, one rooted in demographics, one in economics, and one in innocence.

First, the demographics. Americans are urban, suburban, or recently exurban and their happiness is derived from enjoying the amenities of the land, its sublime beauty, its sense of hope and opportunity. The time they spend on the public domain is time spent escaping the tensions associated with making a living in our urban worlds. We express these sentiments when asked. For example, Rudzitis and Johansen (1989a, 1989b) polled more than 11,000 randomly selected migrants and residents in 15 counties in the American West that had one or more federally designated wilderness areas. The most important reasons given for their locating in these wilderness counties were environmental and physical amenities, such as scenery, outdoor recreation, and pace of life. In short, we are a nation quite different from even the mid-half of this century. We no longer depend upon public lands for our livelihoods, we covet them for their amenities.

Second, this transition of public lands viewed as sources of recreation rather than commodities has an important economic aspect. Let Secretary of Agriculture Glickman (1996) do the talking:

I'd like to start by taking a brief account of our national forests. By the year 2000, our national forests will generate more than \$130 billion for America's gross domestic product: \$3.5 billion will come from timber, \$10.1 billion will come from mining, \$12.9 billion will come from fish and wildlife, and \$97.8 billion dollars will come from recreation.

Translation: The public lands are worth more when valued on their recreational potential. The economic argument has strong support. With the publication of Thomas Michael Power's (1996) Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies the true economic potential of our public lands has been unlocked. Powers sees public lands as being vast vaults of untapped economic potential for nearby communities, and that this promise lies in underappreciated amenity values. Viewing public lands for their amenity and life-style merits, Powers argues, will be both more lucrative to local economies and will avoid the boom and bust cycles which have characterized resource-dependent

communities of the past.

A third motivation for the enthusiastic reception of an amenity-based vision of natural lands is premised on innocence, the belief by people that outdoor recreation is benign. And, when you think of it, outdoor recreation does seem benign. After all, how much harm could someone mountain biking through a national forest do during a day? The land looks unchanged, particularly when compared to how it would look after a person with a chainsaw had been there an equal amount of time. Recreation does not visibly alter the land, extractive uses such as mining and logging certainly do. Therefore one use is harmless, the other damaging.

The answer, however, to the question "Is outdoor recreation benign?" suggests otherwise. In a recent survey of causes for the decline of threatened species, outdoor recreation was second only to water development as the primary culprit (Losos et al. 1995). Nearly one-fourth of all federally listed threatened and endangered species in America owed their decline to recreation. Other summaries of the evidence reinforce this opinion. In a review of scientific studies that examined "nonconsumptive" effects of recreation on wildlife, 81% reported negative effects (Boyle and Samson 1985).

In short, outdoor recreation is not benign. We were naive to think it was. Indeed, is there anything humans do in excess that does not alter our environment, whether it be logging, grazing, mining, or recreating? The picture that is beginning to emerge regarding its environmental effects is this: recreation simplifies communities of plants and animals. It results in increased numbers of human-adapted species and reduced numbers of species whose evolutionary history and ecological requirements puts them at odds with people (Knight and Gutzwiller 1995). Regretfully, this new American West with its robust tourism-dependent economy will result in an altered natural heritage. Rather than seeing more species that have figured prominently in our imagination of the West, we will see fewer.

There will also be increasing confrontations between those who argue for the land and its natural heritage and those who wish unrestricted use of the land. This is because, in addition to there being more recreationists, there are increasing numbers of conflicts among them. Ask cross-country skiers if they enjoy sharing a trail with snowmobilers, ask bird watchers if they prefer to watch falcons along clifflines or climbers bouncing up and down on brightly colored ropes.

The upshot of these observations is that comprehensive policies regarding outdoor recreation and natural lands will be essential to minimize conflicts, both among different recreational users and to minimize the erosive effects of over-recreation on biodiversity. Regretfully, policy and legislation often follow overuse of a resource rather than predate it (Nelson 1995). The National Forest Management Act occurred only after there was a widespread perception that the nation's forests were being overlogged. The policy of ecosystem management came about only after land-management agencies were perceived as having abandoned their stewardship responsibilities (Kessler and Salwasser 1995). Will organizations and agencies avoid this seemingly inevitable delay in policy development and implementation or will, once more, they have to play catchup after this latest highest and best use of public lands is shown to have harmful effects on our natural heritage?

To address this question I examine how three different natural-lands organizations have responded to outdoor recreation. These groups include a federal land-management agency (U.S. Forest Service), a state wildlife management department (Colorado Division of Wildlife), and a non-governmental organization (The Natural Conservancy). My findings suggest that outdoor recreation has caught each of these organizations unawares of its potential for overuse. Each group, however, is dealing with recreation in a different fashion. One encouraging generalization is that each of these three entities is evolving appropriate responses to the potential for landscape degradation from outdoor recreation. The speed at which they develop and implement policies ahead of the oncoming wave of increased recreation will determine how effective will be their institutional response.

Wallace Stegner (1987) anticipated the challenges associated with contemporary public land management. In a paragraph that not only captured these difficulties but also predated the concept of ecosystem management he wrote:

All Americans, but especially Westerners whose backyard is at stake, need to ask themselves whose bureaus these should be. Half of the West is in their hands. Do they exist to provide bargain-basement grass to favored stockmen whose grazing privileges have become all but hereditary, assumed and bought and sold along with the title to the home spread? Are they hired exterminators of wildlife? Is it their function to negotiate coal leases with energy companies, and to sell timber below cost to Louisiana Pacific? Or should they be serving the much larger public whose outdoor recreations of backpacking, camping, fishing, hunting, river running, mountain climbing, and, God help us, dirt biking are incompatible with clear-cut forests, overgrazed, poison-baited, and strip-mined grasslands? Or is there a still higher duty--to maintain the health and beauty of the lands they manage, protecting from everybody--the watershed and spawning streams, forests and grasslands, geological and scenic splendors, historical and archaeological remains, air and water and serene space, that once led me, in a reckless moment, to call the western public lands part of the geography of hope?

Will land management in the future find all of us (organizations and individuals alike) acting in a responsible way and accepting the inescapable obligations of cooperation and collective action based on what is best for the land, not our individual desires? The time is past to beat the land-management agencies over the head and fault them for what they fail to do. These agencies are now practicing a different approach to land-management, one that finds them serving more often as either catalysts or cooperators rather than exercising command and control (Knight and Meffe 1997). The traditional approach to natural resource management, captured in the phrase "command-and-control," may have worked well during a simpler, less confrontational era. With the emergence of new and involved, and more, stakeholders on natural lands, agencies and organizations can no longer hope to accomplish their missions following the traditional approach. Policies are needed that include more open, participatory practices that emphasize partnerships,

shared visions of the land, and decentralized agencies; in this model agencies promote risk-taking, shared initiatives, and adaptive management (Knight and Clark 1998).

So, will we confront these issues honestly or from a position of self-absorption? Will we willingly acknowledge that proper stewardship of our public lands requires each of us to accept responsibilities for ensuring that the latest "highest and best use" of our public lands is not a repeat of the past? For as we overgrazed, overmined, and overlogged our public domain in the past based on demographics, economics, and innocence, will we commit the same mistake under the rubric of "outdoor recreation"? It has the same power to hurt the land, albeit in different ways.

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