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THE LIMITATIONS OF A MARKET-BASED OUTDOOR RECREATION POLICY:
REASONS FOR CAUTION

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OUTDOOR RECREATION: PROMISE AND PERIL IN THE NEW WEST

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by Scott Silver

I. Introduction

Our nation's public lands have traditionally been managed so as to maximize the commodity value that could be extracted from them. Today, however, a major shift in federal land management policy is being developed and implemented. Instead of extracting commodities from nature, nature itself is being converted into a commodity that can be repackaged, marketed and sold in the form of value-added recreation products.

As we approach the year 2000, we find corporate financed Congressmen, cash-strapped land managers, and recreation industry leaders working cooperatively to create an entirely new management paradigm. Their efforts are being directed toward maximal "commercialization, privatization and motorization" of our natural heritage. The name that best describes their vision for the 21st century and beyond is 'Industrial Strength Recreation'.

II. Fee-Demo

The “Recreation Fee Demonstration Program”, now being introduced nation-wide, is a prime example of what can be expected from unholy partnerships involving big business and federal government. This particular program, requiring trail-users to pay a fee in order to access Wilderness areas and other public lands, represents the thin edge of a very thick wedge. Driving this wedge deep into national recreation legislation and policy are foreign and domestic recreation corporations and their wise-use supporters.

Perhaps the most important player in this arena is the American Recreation Coalition (ARC) [1]. This business consortium has literally taken control of America’s recreational policies. ARC
seeks to Motorize, Privatize and Commercialize America’s Public Lands for the benefit of its corporate and wise-use supporters. While you may not have heard of ARC, it has already established footholds everywhere: From the Chief Operating Officer of the Forest Service to the Advisory Board of the Congressionally created National Forest Foundation. The recreation Fee-Demo program itself is a Challenge Cost-Share Partnership (CCSP), involving ARC and various branches of the U.S. Government [2].

In recent years, federal recreational land managers have had to endure severe funding cuts. These cuts were not made in order to eliminate government waste or to reduce the federal deficit, as the public has been led to believe. These cuts are part of a carefully orchestrated strategy by sympathetic Congressmen working hand-in-glove [3] with the wise-use movement; a strategy calculated to co-opt public lands for corporate profit and to guarantee “motorized recreational access” without future restrictions. The American public will be seeing many more Challenge Cost-Share Partnerships as well as Public/Private Ventures in the future unless public funding can somehow be restored for maintenance of our national parks and public lands. While a few of these CCSP’s may address real needs, many will be nothing more than thinly disguised efforts to gain control of recreational and commercial development opportunities on federal lands. Monetary profit will be the sole motivation of many corporate sponsors of these programs.

The American Recreation Coalition does not represent the full spectrum of the American public but speaks on behalf of more than 110 industry organizations [4]. Included on its member list are dozens of Motor Boat, Jet-Ski, RV, Motorcycle, ORV and Snowmobile manufacturers and associations. The remainder of the coalition represents a diverse range of interests including: Ski Area Associations, Public Lands Concessionaires, Campground Associations, Sporting Equipment Manufacturers, Tour Associations, Petroleum Companies and the Walt Disney Company. Not one hiking, backpacking or environmental organization is included on this list (though there are some pretenders).

At last year’s Western States Coalition’s Summit, ARC participated on a panel moderated by People for the West [5] President, and wise-use leader, Bob Quick. The panel sought to answer
the question ‘Are Domestic Natural Resources Important Anymore?’ This panel concluded [6], “that although outright wins are unlikely, lobbying can define the issues favorably. The alternative, they said, is to let Vice President Al Gore and others set the agenda for the environment”.

ARC has positioned itself perfectly for the task of “defining issues”. Jack Harrison of National Forest Recreation Association said [7], “On the national level, NFRA’s partnership with the American Recreation Coalition provides our association with access to legislative and policy information which we could not afford to generate on our own.” Similarly, through its Recreation Roundtable, ARC, provides [8] “landmark research ... on recreation motivations, satisfactions and barriers which is now shaping federal agency decision-making and is likely to prompt new, cooperative research on public recreation wants between the public and private sectors...”. And, on Michael Dombeck’s first day as Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, he proudly declared “Francis Pandolfi will serve as my Chief of Staff. Mr. Pandolfi [9] comes with very broad experience ... including Chairman of the Recreation Roundtable...” On April 28, 1998, Mr. Pandolfi was promoted to the newly created position of Chief Operating Office of the Forest Service.

For those unfamiliar with the Recreation Roundtable, it is a political lobbying arm of the American Recreation Coalition. According to ARC’s own literature “The Recreation Roundtable was formed in 1989 to provide a key group of creative outdoor recreation industry CEO’s with a forum for discussions regarding public policies affecting recreation and to serve as a catalyst for partnership actions which enhance recreation opportunities in America...”.

The Recreation Roundtable has established what they call an “exciting annual program called Partners Outdoors [8], now in its sixth year, which unites carefully picked federal officials likely to rise to the highest ranks of their agencies with recreation industry officials to discuss trends and challenges and to craft action plans to serve our common customers.” Partners Outdoors is a prime example of how big corporations are going about the task of setting future recreation policy in America.
And, finally, the Recreation Roundtable website says [8], "Among its present priorities are responding forcefully to proposals for a federal tax on a wide range of recreation products to support state non-game wildlife proposals." In ARC's world view, government policy mustn't do anything to jeopardize the sale of RV's, jet skis, motorcycles, ATV's, motor boats or snowmobiles. Is this why, (at least in Central Oregon, where I live) the Fee Demonstration Program has targeted only hikers, picnickers, stream fishermen and similar non-motorized recreationists?

As stated previously, the Fee-Demo program Challenge is a Cost-Share Partnership with ARC. Quoting from the U.S. Forest Service literature that describes this program [10], "The Forest Service's Recreation Fee Demonstration Program was developed in partnership with leading national recreation interests. Its implementation is occurring through a Challenge Cost-Share partnership with the American Recreation Coalition (ARC). ARC's efforts will include explanation of the fee program to the recreation industry and recreation enthusiasts, as well as assistance in evaluation of the demonstration projects."

As always, ARC has positioned itself perfectly. In financing this demonstration fee program with a mere $68,500 contribution [11], ARC has bought the opportunity to shepherd this program from its inception to its termination with the final report to Congress.

Who cares what ARC tells Congress, you might ask? If you're a backcountry hiker, bird-watcher, fisherman or even just a picnicker who enjoys the unspoiled outdoors as a place in which to escape from the world of corporate driven commercialism and consumerism, then you had better take serious note of what ARC and participating federal land managers envision for the future of recreation on America's public lands.

So far I have only introduced the concept of Industrial Strength Recreation without revealing where this trend is leading. I have also, until now, provided no specific examples with which to demonstrate my point. This will be the focus of the remainder of this presentation.
III. The New Paradigm

It used to be that when we needed a nature fix, we’d jump in the car and head for the nearest mountain or desert. And once we finally pulled off the paved highway, what usually greeted us was a pretty natural outdoor experience just sitting there for us to discover, explore, interpret and enjoy. Unfortunately that type of free wheeling experience is about to go extinct, because the current goal of federal land-managers is to turn that kind of raw nature into a ‘product’ and then to repackage it, market it, and sell it in the form of differentiated ‘brands’ of value-added recreation.

Our public-lands managers are currently working from a list of basic tenets that are key to their new recreation paradigm. After presenting that list, I will provide specific examples of how these assumptions are now being translated into ‘on-the-ground’ projects.

1) **Public lands recreation must be self-supporting.** The Demonstration Recreation Fee Program recently implemented on many public lands, with the American Recreation Coalition as the program’s private partner, is expected to generate only $300 million over the next six years. In order for recreation to fully “pay its own way,” as many are saying it should, then access fees would need to be increased dramatically above these levels, or additional businesses must be operated upon public lands in order to make up the shortfall.

2) **The cost of public lands recreation must be increased to the point that privately provided recreation can compete.** Raising prices is being touted as the solution to over-crowding now being caused by tourism promotion. The theory is that private recreation providers will be able to absorb this increased customer demand, so long as there is little or no cost differential compared to the public alternative. Many of ARC’s members are providers of private recreation alternatives, Kampgrounds of America (KOA) being a prime example.
3) **Federal recreation dollars will be preferentially spent on facilities located near urban population centers.** It takes lots of paying customers to run a profitable recreation business. Urbanites tend to have greater disposable incomes and are generally quite willing to purchase recreation. Unprofitable federal facilities will be closed, disposed of, or allowed to fall into disrepair. Preservation, conservation and retaining opportunities for 'undeveloped recreation' do not figure in this equation.

4) **‘Under-utilized’ recreational resources should be developed to facilitate increased usage.** On the Dept. of Interior’s web site is an article written by Boat/US [13], an ARC member corporation. The article speaks of a terrifically over used motor-boat lake located near Boise Idaho, and explains how this crowding problem could be solved by developing paved access, and new marina facilities to service the absolutely “pristine” Owyhee Reservoir in nearby (yet remote) Eastern Oregon. The wanton sacrifice of such a magnificent lake is unconscionable.

5) **Partnerships with private corporations shall be encouraged.** In a document entitled “Recreation 2000 Update” the BLM states: “...the Federal government is taking a completely new look at the way we do business... In the past, we relied heavily on congressional appropriations as the traditional means for supporting recreation management efforts. We must now continue to look outward instead of upward for new sources of funding... In the future, we will strive to develop partnerships that assemble a wider range of potential partners who can share resources to help manage defined landscape units.” It is not until you read the last page of this document do you discover that the American Recreation Coalition and four ARC member corporations are listed as the “Stake Holders Team” who helped develop this recreation / management agenda.

6) **‘Interpretation’ through informational signage, guided nature tours and the like will be heavily emphasized.** This trend is being lead by two organizations, “The National Association for Interpretation” (a BLM Stake Holder) and the Walt Disney Corporation, an ARC sustaining member. In 1995 Disney signed a Memorandum of Understanding [14] with
the USFS, the BLM, the National Park Service and four other federal land-management agencies. That agreement defined a working partnership between Disney and the U.S. government and states: “focus areas will include joint environmental education/interpretation efforts...” I’m sorry, but Mickey Mouse knows no more about ecosystem management or biodiversity than Smokey Bear knows about the benefits of fire. This partnership has major implications regarding the type of self-serving, mind altering, corporate propaganda that Disney will be forcing upon future public-lands visitors. They do it at Disney World. They will soon be doing it in the real world as well, but by then we will hardly be able to tell the difference.

7) Scenic Byways and All-American Roads will be designated and actively promoted. ARC, along with its corporate members, Chevron, Exxon and the American Petroleum Institute, have been promoting ‘driving for pleasure’ as one of the centerpieces of their motorization agenda. ARC’s membership also includes a half dozen RV Manufacturers, a similar number of RV Campground Associations and a whole host of firms now providing wayside attractions and services. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, “‘All-American Roads’ are the crème de la crème of all scenic byways... These roads are destinations unto themselves.” And for those wishing to nominate a road to receive this great distinction, applicants are instructed to: “Describe how lodging and dining facilities, roadside rest areas, and other tourist necessities are in place or planned for the number of visitors persuaded to visit by the byway’s designation as an All-American Road”. The purpose of designating a road as a ‘scenic byway’ is to give people an excuse to burn gas and a chance to spend money along the way. Authorization for this program comes from the federal ISTEA program, another of ARC’s pet projects.

8) New and imaginative methods of doing business will be actively sought. Federal land-managers are quickly learning how to become successful businessmen. In fact, ARC’s Recreation Roundtable has created a special twelve-week private/public training program designed exclusively for high-ranking public employees. This program, called Partners Outdoors, is advertised as follows: “Participating corporations will benefit by opening lines
of communication with government, and by learning different ways of doing business. Federal managers assigned to corporate positions will provide insights into government procedures and practices.” Does this program benefit the American people, or is this just plain collusion?

9) **Land-swaps will be a preferred mechanism for acquiring desired lands.** Land swaps are one of the creative financing methods now being used and abused by federal land managers. Each year hundreds of land swaps are occurring whereby public lands are traded for other properties having supposedly equal value. In practice, this process has become a favored tool of private ski area operators seeking to acquire publicly owned mountains. And the more Congress continues to cut federal operating budgets, the better this scam works!

10) **Wherever practical or feasible, the management of recreation resources will be turned over to private concessionaires.** All around the country, recreation facilities are being put up for grabs. In Central Oregon, for example, the USFS recently sent out a prospectus offering concessions for seven public facilities. One local recreation planner recently stated, “I think we’re at the point where we’re going to have to either get concessionaires or we’re going to have to close campgrounds.” Earlier in the year, the same USFS office removed spring-fed water systems from these campgrounds because they could no longer afford to test the water for purity.

Whether we like it or not, federal land managers are operating under an entirely new set of principles. And while they may continue to pay lip service to the idea of biodiversity, conservation and natural resource protection, these agencies are quickly transforming themselves into profit-driven entrepreneurs, simply trying to stay in business and perhaps, make a buck from recreation. Foremost upon their minds are thoughts of downsizing, spinning-off unprofitable assets, brand-management, customer satisfaction and all the usual terms associated with running a profitable business. To these former bureaucrats, what were once recognized as our public lands are quickly becoming their “working capital.”
IV. Specific Examples
Having provided some feel for the current state of affairs, I'd like to offer a small sampling of projects to illustrate how these policies are actually being used to "commercialize, privatize and motorize" our public lands. Additional examples can be found at the Wild Wilderness Internet web site and readers are urged to contact us with word of new or proposed developments.

The "nature-based tourism marketing company", Egret Communications, has proposed construction of a mile long "spiderweb of elevated walkways" to be suspended within the canopy of a 1500 year old, publicly owned, giant redwood and Douglas fir grove near Brookings, Oregon. The developer has already received a $700,000 grant to evaluate this project and is currently seeking an additional $19 million in federal assistance to complete the project. The attraction is expected to draw 200,000 annual visitors.

In what has been called a "test case", the National Park Service has agreed to allow a private developer to run an IMAX movie theater and shops within Gettysburg National Military Park in exchange for erecting a new visitor center.

The Dodge Ridge Corporation has been granted a one-year special use permit by the Stanislaus National Forest to create a "pay-for-use" groomed ski trail system in an area historically used by backcountry wilderness skiers. This is being touted as an evaluation program designed to "stimulate public comment."

One of the last remaining old growth bottomlands in Central Alabama (Cooter's Pond) was recently clear-cut the day Army Corp of Engineers signed a 50 year lease agreement with a private golf club. ACE will receive $1 per year in this deal.

The USFS is currently negotiating a land swap, which would privatize 265 acres of public land at the base of Grand Targhee ski slope in Western Wyoming. Three years ago the USFS ruled against a similar swap saying "it would not be in the public interest."
Because the following example is so very special, I have chosen to quote it verbatim from its BLM source [12]. In this one short paragraph, you will see evidence of virtually all of the ten basic tenants: “Deputy Assistant Secretary Sylvia Baca is accepting an award on our behalf from the American Recreation Coalition for the brochure commemorating the Black Hills Back Country Byway here in the Safford District (AZ). Decreased funds and staffing have just made us more innovative, more creative and aggressive. Our good ideas and successful track record with partners has been rewarded with numerous grants: The Arizona State Park Off-Highway Vehicle Fund has been used for improvements here at Hot Wells and along the Black Hills Back Country Byway and the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area… Thank you for your help and support in putting ‘recreation’ in BLM’s vocabulary.”

V. Le Grand Mal

If what you’ve already heard hasn’t quite turned your stomach, here’s one final example and a glimpse into the future. Consider a future in which America’s National Parks serve as ‘anchor attractions’ for an enormous host of nearby commercial development. This is a vision of the grandest of all possible shopping malls. This is the truly la crème de la crème, Le Grand Mal.

Quoting from Las Vegas Review Journal [15], “There’s no disagreement that Grand Canyon National Park has big problems… [New Jersey developer] DePaolo’s answer is a $500 million development including 3,650 hotel rooms, 250 campsites and 425,000 square feet of retail space – roughly the equivalent of seven large department stores. It also would include employee housing and a park-and-ride center…” The proposed location of this development is on publicly owned, forest land just south of the park. DePaolo has recently purchased private lands elsewhere in Arizona and is currently discussing a land swap of these lands for the Grand Canyon Portal.

VI. Conclusions

These examples are only the tip of the iceberg for the future of public lands recreation. We will soon be seeing example after example of the ‘Disneyfication’ of Nature as the policies of collaborative stewardship and private/public ventures are allowed to run their natural course.
Don’t be surprised if a trip to the National Forest soon reminds you of spending the day at Disneyworld or camping at a KOA. The same companies will very likely be managing both sets of facilities. The Walt Disney Company and Kampgrounds of America are just two of the more than 110 American Recreation Coalition members currently greasing the way for the new ‘wreckreation’ agenda.

The next time you are asked to purchase a Fee-Demo permit, please recognize that you are really being asked to vote on the Pay-for-Play model. The election will be held this summer in forests, mountains and deserts all around the country. The user-fee permit will be your ballot. Purchase it, and you will be counted as a vote in favor of Industrial Strength Recreation. Take a hike without a permit, and you will be doing more than simply enjoying your public lands; you will be saving America’s natural heritage from falling prey to a hostile corporate takeover.

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1996... A QUIET, PUBLIC, FREE FOREST TRAIL.

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