

Bush Waging a War on Parks, Wilderness

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A war is raging.

It involves lands essential to our nation, and will dramatically affect future generations. No, I am not speaking of Iraq or Afghanistan. This war is right here: the Bush administration's radical, all-out attack on America's wilderness and public lands.

What is at stake? These are the lands whose scenery inspired the song America the Beautiful. But they are much more than that.

Our national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and other public lands total 623 million acres-14 times the size of all six New England states, or almost 6 times the size of California. They constitute a natural engine that cleans our drinking water, purifies the air we breathe, produces medicines, provides resources, and enhances our quality of life in countless other ways. Most important of all, these lands connect Americans directly with the miracle of God's creation.

Moreover, these natural treasures are an important part of our heritage. The very idea of a national park was born in America: Yellowstone became the world's first in 1872. However we define Homeland Security, our wilderness and public lands must be at the core of what we seek to defend.

Not for President Bush and his team, however. Fueled by zealous anti-environmentalism and corporate special interests, they have launched what amounts to a sustained and systematic attack on America's public lands. Instead of honoring the public trust that requires protecting these national assets for our children and grandchildren, they have aggressively pushed exploitation by the mining, timber, oil and gas, and snowmobile industries. Well aware of the public outcry that such radical policy changes would provoke, they have pursued this war with stealth and deception.

While Americans are looking the other way, at more visible conflicts, this ground war advances. A few examples:

Right after the 2002 election, the Bush administration decided to allow a significant increase in the number of snowmobiles roaring through Yellowstone, despite overwhelming public opposition and serious pollution. The Bush team is also trying to rip giant holes in a policy that prohibits road building and commercial logging across 58.5 million acres of roadless lands in our national forests. Recently, Interior Secretary Gale Norton summarily removed any portion of 262 million acres from possible wilderness protection, thereby paving the way-literally-for extractive industries. By renouncing all federal authority to study or protect wilderness values in these

lands, this action removed even the possibility that future generations might ever choose to conserve them.

These are merely a few of the frontal assaults. Behind the scenes, Bush and company have forced sweeping changes in public lands management policies, abandoning decades-old bipartisan approaches in favor of immediate exploitation. They have encouraged Alaska, Utah, and other states to recognize abandoned trails, burro paths, and even dry washes as public rights of way across federal lands—thereby opening up the possibility that trucks could lay down pavement through national parks, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas.

They have removed protections from America's wetlands and small waterways. They outright revoked the longstanding Wilderness Inventory handbook, which guides land managers in assessing appropriate uses of potential wilderness.

Aware of the radical extent of these changes, the Bush team has worked hard to hide them from public view. Norton's action affecting 262 million acres, for example, came after no public hearings, no open debate, and no Congressional oversight. It was not even announced on the Interior Department's web site. It was simply revealed in a legal settlement with Utah and released on a Friday night, after reporters' 5 o'clock deadlines, just after Congress had left for spring recess.

Such stealth attacks have enabled Bush and company to radically alter environmental policies without changing the laws or risking negative public outcry. Their methods include inviting lawsuits that could weaken protections, then settling them out of court; simply burying potentially embarrassing information such as the files on Vice President Dick Cheney's energy commission; and quietly dropping enforcement of key environmental policies.

And with a flair for public relations, they have cynically named new policies: the Healthy Forests initiative aggressively promotes logging in the national forests, and the Clear Skies program is really a major rollback of Clean Air Act protections.

As a nation, we are what we save. The value of America's public lands cannot be measured in board feet, tons of coal, or sales of all-terrain vehicles. Once wilderness is lost, it is lost forever. And the biggest losers will be generations of Americans yet unborn.

Bush's war on our public lands is unwise, unjustified, and unprecedented. It is tantamount to an assault on the national treasury. But defending our public lands does more than protect valuable physical assets: It protects our Homeland Security of the soul.