

On Track to Lose Our Public Lands

by Bill Willers / May 27th, 2011

The political right and its economists now [recommend](#) selling federal assets to pay down the nation's debt. That a federal government "of, by and for the people", means "us", so what is being planned in the seemingly endless array of right wing think tanks is for "us" to sell "our" assets. To the rich, of course.

What assets? Forget for the moment things like buildings and highways, and consider the most cherished of our public lands in the form of national forests, BLM lands, national parks and wildlife refuges. A third of the nation, ours in common, is a gift beyond price to pass to our descendants. It is a public treasure we must protect. It is firmly in the crosshairs of moneyed interests intent on "privatizing". Who is capable of buying such assets? Think of corporate "persons" in petroleum, insurance, industrial recreation, pharmaceuticals, agribusiness, banking and the like. And don't forget their 37,000 K Street lobbyists who lavish unlimited money on lawmakers, or of the billionaire faction of "Haves and Have Mores" George W. Bush called his "base".

On May 18, when asked what he thinks about the idea of selling Utah land to help pay down the federal debt, Utah Governor Gary Herbert [responded](#), "It's an idea that's not new. It's been talked about for the last 30 years. If we want to reduce the deficit and balance the budget at the federal level, why don't we sell some of the federal assets, and of course we have a lot of federal land that they can liquidate and help balance the budget. It's certainly worth exploring."

The Governor is correct in that the idea isn't new. The anti-government "Sagebrush Rebellion" of the 1970s and the "Wise Use Movement" of the 1980s that fought against federal authority in public domain has transitioned into what is called "free-market environmentalism", a web of corporations and right wing think tanks and foundations promoting property rights and the cold-hearted pricing of the so-called "free market" as the best way to manage nature and the environment. Free marketeers want Federal Government, with its annoying regulation picture. Major players in this movement include [PERC](#), [FREE](#), and the [Cato Institute](#). It was thirty years ago that James Beckwith, writing for the Cato Institute, and with reference to public parks, crystallized [a plan](#) for "ascending radicalism from reform through volunteerism and privatization of services to the outright sale of public lands to private ownership and the transfer of parks to private parties."

We the people, now "owners", would be transformed into "customers" paying market demand. And now a trillion dollar debt is providing the needed argument for selling our national treasure. Generated and increased by the Bush Administration's "off the books" war expenditures, and kicked down the road for the next Administration, the debt was suddenly "discovered" as a problem by the political right.

For anyone who has followed the issue for years, it appears carefully planned. In 2003, a report by the Congressional Budget Office showed the U.S. facing a future of debts amounting to \$44 trillion, and that preventing it would require massive tax increases. Increases! Bush did not release the report. Paul Krugman of the *New York Times* [reported](#) at the time that "the people now running America aren't conservatives: they're radicals who v

away with the social and economic system we have, and the *fiscal crisis they are concocting* (emphasi give them the excuse they need.”

Scott Silver [wrote](#) in 2006: “The private sector will snatch up all the assets it wants when the price is r economy tanks, the price for even the finest public jewels will be pennies on the dollar. Let’s not forget Forest Service is already handing over operational control of most of their developed recreational facil anyone willing to maintain them.”

It is understood that the privatization of public domain has to be done by degrees to avoid unwanted r Beckwith made this clear with his reference to “the contracting out of support services to private firms for profit” to be accomplished in “tentative steps”. Such contracting is increasingly common in the for private partnerships” and “competitive outsourcing”. And as those standing to benefit from privatizati considerable political and economic might to achieve their goals, it is passing “under the radar” of the mind.

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