

Natural Resource Management: The Next 100 Years

Conservation accomplishments of the last century and issues for the 21st century.

By Eleanor Towns

Every now and then, we who care about the woods and rangelands should come together to talk about their management. Land is wealth, and how a nation treats land ownership is an indicator of how it governs. The notion of lands belonging to all of us and managed under the executive direction of an elected head of state is central to our brand of democracy and distinguishes us from nations and feudal societies in which land is owned and managed by “the King,” who retains the power to bestow it on a favored few.

The Forest Service now manages roughly 192 million acres, and I can say with great certainty that *somebody* cares about every single acre: If you do not believe it, just try to do something—anything—on any one acre. And here is the good news: The land base might be tweaked and adjusted, but its size will remain fairly constant because citizen-owners who value that scarce commodity use their collective interest, love, and vigilance to restrain politicians (and land management agencies) from frittering it away. So, I count retaining these lands in public ownership as a fundamental accomplishment of the last century.

Science and population and use figures indicate that what the current Forest Service Chief calls the four threats to public health and safety and to health of the ecosystem will continue for at least the next 25 years. The threats—*fire and fuels, invasive species, urbanization or loss of open space, and unmanaged recreation*—are long-term, simply stated, politically neutral, scientifically grounded, and easily understood.

To those four threats to public health and safety and the health of the ecosystem, I would add *drought*, the paucity of water, lifeblood of the West. Most settlers to the New West are moving to counties with large holdings of public lands in which people, critters, and resources compete for that precious commodity. Ninety-six percent of all watersheds originate on National Forest Systems lands, and some of those watersheds need *some* water to keep the quantity and quality of water to which we are accustomed and to address other environmental values. Recreation dominates the economies of states in the intermountain West, but rural interests, whose ancestors settled the Old West, still dominate Western state legislatures and control the water so vital to recreation. Unmanaged recreation is also a national threat to the safety and health of forest and rangeland ecosystems.

In the West there is strong bipartisan resistance when public land law conflicts with state water law. One political party now dominates the executive, judiciary, and both houses of Congress. The current Secretary of Interior was the Attorney General when we were involved in some high-profile water controversies here in Colorado, and her Assistant Secretary for Water and Science represented many of the opposing water interests. So now might not be the time for individual units to annoy the gods with questions that pit state water law against public land law, risking legislation or policy changes that limit the options of line officers throughout the Forest Service. Special-use authoriza-

tion conditions for water uses should be reasonable, scientifically supportable, and relevant to a specific situation on the ground.

Better Serving the Public While Protecting Our Forests and Rangelands?

Set Priorities but Leave Room for Unplanned Work

In the next century, demand for use of the national forests will continue to increase and dollars will continue to decrease, spiking only to meet crises. The agency will never be allocated the amount of money it thinks it needs to do all of what it wants to do. Therefore, when crisis (eg, wildfire) is followed by money that will only last until the next crisis, we will have to do what we promised to get that crisis money. Jerry Schmidt says, "Some of the most important work we do is unplanned." This truism, I add, applies if we are managing land, raising children, or training a puppy.

I remember when the Region watershed folks had what the lawyers thought was a good case for claiming a wilderness water right in northern New Mexico. I politely declined, pointing out that I already had a full plate with wildfire, tribal claims, internal Equal Employment Opportunity problems, and grazing and the related issues of endangered species and riparian health.

Integrate Our Focus on the Threats to Other Administration Initiatives

What staff and organization resources do we need to respond to the next century of challenges? Yes, we "can do," make do, could do, still wanna do. Every Administration thinks we are the captive of the other and consequently has no tolerance for bureaucratic dawdling or resistance. Each Administration, in its zeal to persuade its constituents that it is doing something new and enthusiastically "throwing the bums out," imposes natural resource and performance initiatives. As we respond to this one and that, as we expand and contract, as we centralize and decentralize, we are wearing out the troops. Under Gore, we created enterprise teams. Under Bush, we competitively sourced them to industry. Some of these initiatives require money off the top or kitchen sink data systems with short turnarounds for Service-wide data gathering. With most initiatives, as with Prego, "it" is in there—"it" being something you want and need to do that fortunately fits any Administration's agenda. Look for those links and celebrate them loudly.

Work With Congress to Develop Financial Incentives for Environmental Protection

Perhaps such incentives will be more acceptable to ranchers if they come from a Republican-dominated Congress. For 4 years, I personally worked on financial incentives to help ranchers comply with environmental protections associated with grazing. I had the commitment of three of four Senators and no objection from the fourth. I had cautious commitment of two statewide cattlemen's associations until



an environmental entity publicly demanded the incentives. The cattlemen backed off, not wanting to be seen as acceding to environmentalists' demands.

Take Western water law (please, some might say): After declaring the underlying principle of first-in-time, first-in-right, the rest of that body of law ticks off all the exceptions to that rule. A state legislature that was so inclined could declare that owners who leave water in streams for watershed enhancement (without reference to federally managed lands) would not be penalized for nonuse. And "payment," if "payment" there must be, could be federal tax incentives for environmental protections. When you change the way you look at things, things change.

Reward those who retrofit timber mill infrastructure for small-diameter timber. This nation is smart enough to *use* some land and resources and *save* some and still make money and still make jobs. The greatest nation on the planet allowed ungentried and unlanded people to get rich making lemonade out of the lemons they had, and making the rest of us crave lemonade. In some places, it might be possible and appropriate to produce timber in sufficient quantity so that idle mills can be revived. But we can also reward those who convert mills to handle smaller diameter timber and those who develop and market products fashioned from smaller diameter timber.

Science Should Play a Pivotal Role in Reducing the Threats to Public Health and Safety and Health of the Ecosystem

Research must be adequately funded if it is to tackle questions related to the threats. Researchers must be willing to shift to applied science and to set measurable milestones, remembering that indeed, all is well that ends. We no longer have the money, attention span, or patience for open-ended research projects, or at least those without identifiable achievement objectives against which to measure progress.

Jack Ward Thomas was the first Wildlife Biologist Chief of the Forest Service. "Ologists" across the Service *thought* that

finally natural resource management decisions would be based primarily on the findings of science; however, Jack Ward Thomas, scientist that he was, knew that at any given point in the evolution of man's knowledge of the natural world, we would today know only a fraction of what we would know tomorrow. In fact, Chief Thomas said that all of the complex natural resource controversies of the time were scientific, social, political, legal, and economic, and that the "answers" should not be compartmentalized but should be an amalgam of all of those components—a compromise if you will.

Sometimes as good as it gets is when everybody leaves a little unhappy—meaning everybody *gave up* something they cared about in order to *get* something else they cared about. So, when Jim Maxwell, then District Ranger, told *his* resource specialists to throw their scientific "peas" into his multiple use "stew," it did not mean he thought those scientists were lesser human beings who could not go to heaven.

When We Do Not Control the Parts, We Must Play Nice in the Sandbox

Three-year-olds know this. My brother Woody's grandson loves to spend the day with Grandpa, the gunsmith, learning "man" stuff. Our parents did not know the meaning of time-out, and so on a long drive from Florida this summer, Little Guy kept touching his brother; that is, until my sister found a switch at a rest stop. Little Guy became quite charming and delightful when he figured out he did not control the parts—most especially a switch applied strategically to his little bottom.

In truth, natural resource managers have never been "in charge"; others have always held jurisdiction over critical things that affect our management. We manage the watersheds—we rarely own the water; we manage the habitat—states manage the critters; we manage the surface—we rarely own the minerals; we manage lands, and we might not have legal access to it.

A public that wants fewer taxes will not tolerate interagency duplication and competition. If we are to survive, we will share decision space, staff, dollars, and equipment. We will respect one another's competence and jurisdiction. Those who advise decision makers, those charged with maintaining consistency, those who interpret rules and manuals—including attorneys—will need to look for flexibility in our rules and laws so those on the ground can work with other governments to *solve* mutual problems. Expanding the discussion table to include those who can affect the outcome of a controversy is indeed sharing power and decision space, but getting to "yes" will not be cheaper, easier, or faster.

Lasting solutions will address the values of key parties. Almost every controversy is about the *values* people hold for those acres. The grazing controversy in the Southwest is only partly about the condition of the riparian zones and the upland rangelands—much of it centers on whether or not public policy should allow some to make money from the public's land base. Sandia Pueblo has strong spiritual ties to

Sandia Mountain, backdrop for the city of Albuquerque. The homeowners in Northeast Heights had strong concerns about their property values. In the end, 2 years later, the Pueblo got additional legislated protections for land with religious significance and the right to unfettered worship. In the end, homeowners got phones, electric lines, gas lines, cable television, a confirmed road right-of-way—things that affect property values of expensive homes.

You may be advised to avoid precedents at all costs. Well, every new second you live is a precedent. There is no future second in which the world will be exactly like this one.

If only those who pay lawyers only understood that lawyers seldom make money litigating. After they have revved you up with promises of total victory and charged you for every word they write and every piece of paper they copy, after their interest has subsided, after they realize that your issue is going to take a lot more work than you have money, they will begin to encourage you to settle—as will the judge.

At the end of the collaborative day, you will find that at some point you began to listen to the hearts and *fears* of those with whom you disagree, that you *can* do what you were told you cannot, and that tomorrow the sun will rise in the East. In the process, you learn what Woody's grandson already knows: In order to get something he really, really wants, he has to give up something else he really, really wants. Sometimes everybody leaves a little unhappy, and that might be as good as it gets. I can still hear former Regional Forester Gary Cargill saying, "Ellie, all's well that just ends!" Now, folks, if *you* know all of this at the front end of a controversy...well, you finish the thought.

People Who Do Not Look Like Most of You Will Have Tremendous Influence Over Forest Management

One hundred years ago, the Prussian image of Forest Service leaders was one of tall white males. I am smiling because the hand that writes this belongs to a gray-haired ample Black female lawyer.

When we speak of generations on Western land, we must not forget those who were here when the rest of us got here. They, too, have spiritual and economic ties to the land. They, too, have values for the land and a sense of place. Many were displaced, and others *demand*ed that they accommodate the cultures of others.

As predicted, Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the country and are on the way to becoming the majority. It has already happened in New Mexico, and it has almost happened in Arizona. Western old-timers are already trying to adjust to the fencing and preservationist values of Easterners and Californians. Coastal communities are being repopulated by large numbers of immigrants from a variety of economic and cultural circumstances whose knowledge of Western ways might be limited to old cowboy movies.

Questions for the Future

Gifford Pinchot, the conservationist, said, “The forest may be handled so as to supply a wide range and combination of uses... It is the art of producing from the forest whatever it can yield for the service of man.” Pinchot’s emphasis was on *use* of the woods. Such words contrast with the beliefs of Pinchot’s friend and foe, leading preservationist of their time, John Muir, who sought to stop the spoiling of natural areas. Neither Pinchot nor Muir would be surprised to know that in the *next* 100 years the underlying policy struggles that engaged the two of them and “birthed” the agency will continue.

Should the public’s lands be used or preserved? Can we both use some and leave some in the “natural state”—even if we can never agree what that is or was? Is there an acceptable balance between those who would use them up and those who would lock them up? Should there be public lands at all? For what purposes should these lands be “public”? For the livelihood and private gain of neighboring citizens? Who should manage them—the States or the Federal government? Private entities? Who should have the most say about how they should be managed? The neighbors who depend on them? The other citizen owners? Local governments who provide services to national and international visitors—despite the fact that Congress never fully funded payment in lieu of taxes?

And what are “appropriate” uses? Who knew we would be permitting “geocaching.” Speaking of which, a few years back I was in the woods with the Routt’s Middle Park District Ranger when an engineering tech emerged from the woods. He was wearing goggles and had GPS equipment duct-tapped to his yellow hard hat. He was riding an all-terrain vehicle. I turned to the Ranger and whispered, “The mother ship has landed.”

What is the responsibility of the user? What conditions must be met in exchange for the *privilege* of using lands owned by the rest of us? Should fair market value be true *unadjusted* fair market value or should public policy reduce the amount we charge for some uses such as grazing or summer homes? How long do we continue summer homes, or do we now have enough presence in the woods? As opportunities arise, should we allow others to compete for the privilege of having a cabin in the middle of the woods? And what is that privilege *really* worth?

Should a private entity be allowed to use the land so long that we risk converting a “privilege” or “permit” or “license” to a “right”? Or should the private user be held to his written agreement to amortize his investment so he has no claims against the government, and so use is *really* limited to the permit’s written or statutory term? How do we balance private property rights with our statutory responsibilities for managing surrounding public lands? What type of access must be provided—and at what cost to the surrounding public land?

How Can Science and Research Help Us Reduce Those Threats?

What flexibility can be provided to decision makers seeking intergovernmental solutions to complex natural resource issues? What old rules need to be more flexibly interpreted to allow managers to collaborate on solutions tailored to local matters? What laws? What regulations? For example, can we allow willing ranchers to use grass banks to relieve the stress on the land? Can we buy, trade for, or lease available ranch property to provide grass banks? Can Land and Water Conservation Fund criteria and funding be adjusted so that states can make such acquisitions? Can nonranchers manage some of the grass banks? Can we have intergovernmental grazing permits at the rate of the original agency? Can we waive fees and give tax incentives to those willing to use a grass bank and let the ground rest? What about similar or identical agency rules among range management agencies? I did not say it would not be heresy or that it would be easy. Would it help, and is it possible?

How will our management be affected by the diversity of our users: tribes, land grant communities, citizens to whom the concept of public lands is new? Should there be exceptions to accommodate cultures such as subsistence ranchers in northern New Mexico? Or does that open Pandora’s box to those not of ethnic culture asking for exceptions to the Endangered Species Act based on a concept they call “custom and culture”?

Concluding Thoughts

I grew up 90 miles northwest of Chicago. I do not have family history that connects me to Western places, the land, the Agency, or Western culture. Nonetheless, “This land is your Land AND this land is my land.” Actually, this land is *not* your land; this land is *their* land. Sometime during the past 30 years, the Forest Service became one of my families.

This Centennial celebration is a milestone in the history of the best governmental entity on the planet—bar none. Yes, I ate the cheese. It was my privilege to have worked for the United States Forest Service. Best wishes to the Nation as we move thoughtfully into the Agency’s next century. Some of us will not go far down that centennial road with you, and it was time for us to move on. I left, *knowing* that we are indeed in good hands. I also leave you with words from an Agriculture Information Bulletin: “Where people have cared for the forests—used them wisely and protected, developed, and replenished them in good time—the forests, the land, and the people alike have prospered.”

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