

Last Shot



Jack Ward Thomas
B&C PROFESSOR EMERITUS
Boone and Crockett Club

This my last shot “From the Center.” There is an outstanding new Boone and Crockett Professor in place at the University of Montana, Dr. Paul Krausman, whose contributions will fill this slot beginning with the next issue.

It doesn't seem like ten years and some 40 articles ago that I submitted my first piece for “From the Center.” As they say, “Time flies when you are having fun.” And, the last ten were indeed a high point for me and a great way to close out a 50-year career.

I want to use this last article to emphasize a growing concern of mine. That concern is the future of this country's public lands. Those lands are of increasing value to those who treasure wildlife and hunting and fishing. And, those lands are under increasing threat of mismanagement from neglect resulting from declining budgets for the managing agencies coupled with a simultaneous shift of existing budgets to fire control and management.

There is a “perfect storm” building relative to the future of the public lands. On one hand they represent the last stronghold of vast expanses of undeveloped land open to the American people for outdoor recreation – including hunting and fishing. The vast expanses of forest lands held by private corporations are in the process of being converted to real estate investment trusts. That simply means that, given current circumstances, there is more money to be made for investors by selling these lands in relatively smaller parcels for the “higher and better use” of development into estates for those able to purchase such lands. Would you care to wager what the consequences for fish and wildlife and access for those who would like to hunt and fish will be over the long run?

Our nation is, and has been for a long time, digging itself into a deep eco-

nomical hole. We have a huge public debt. And, that is just the beginning. There is an even bigger burgeoning liability in terms of a long-term neglect of the nation's infrastructure – bridges, highways, sewers, dams, airports, levees, public buildings, waterways, electrical transmission grids, etc. The military will have to be rebuilt after the current operations in the Middle East are, however and when, concluded. Problems loom with the long-term financing of Social Security. It seems likely from listening to candidates from both major political parties that there will be some effort to come to grips with the looming problem of universal health care.

Over the past several decades, public lands have become less of an asset (in terms of producing revenue) and more

Over the past several decades, public lands have become less of an asset (in terms of producing revenue) and more and more of a liability (in terms of costs to manage). At the same time, the value of those lands, if they were selectively sold to private sector (both foreign and domestic) is huge and growing. Why? As Will Rogers once said, “Buy land, son. They ain't making any more of it.”

and more of a liability (in terms of costs to manage). At the same time, the value of those lands, if they were selectively sold to private sector (both foreign and domestic) is huge and growing. Why? As Will Rogers once said, “Buy land, son. They ain't making any more of it.”

Attempts have already been made to sell off “isolated parcels” of National Forest lands with the money to go to County governments to make up for loss of revenues from essential cessation of timber sale programs from the federal lands. It wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last.

Nations are, in some respects, no different from families or businesses. When

debt loads are dangerously high, revenues are relatively static, taxpayers are stressed and resistant to new taxes, and demands for new or increased expenditures seem irresistible there remain only a few rational things to do. Selling off assets or dumping liabilities onto some other entity who (unencumbered by the inherent restrictions of federal ownership) can turn those liabilities into assets.

So, relative to the public lands – the lands owned collectively by all the people – the following seem to be the realistic options that are emerging.

- 1.) Selectively, sell off parcels of the most valuable public lands to the highest bidder. However, that will leave the federal government with the lands that nobody wants – an inevitable liability.
- 2.) Transfer whatever portions of the federal estate that the States will take. That will, at least, reduce liabilities and, at best, allow those lands to be managed to resume production of revenue.
- 3.) Resume federal management of the public lands, now essentially halted by environmental concerns, to produce revenue. Make sure that management is of the highest quality and state-of-the-art.
- 4.) Charge fees for use of the public lands for recreation – including hunting and fishing.

It will be, I believe, a matter of choosing among and between some such set of alternatives. I would, personally, choose a combination of alternatives three and four. Take your pick.

There are a number of “think tank” operations and discussions underway and planned around this subject. There will be more and more such probing as either “the plot thickens” or “reality sets in” – take your choice.

I know this is not a pleasant discussion – but, I believe what I describe herein is both realistic and inevitable. Conservationists can and should lead that discussion. Sooner would be better than later.

With that, I will say “goodbye.” ■