



# SPORTS AFIELD

HUNTING ADV



**High Country  
Adventures!**  
Sheep • Goats • Stags

**The 5 Toughest  
Mountain Hunts**

JULY/AUGUST 2017

\$7.99US

08>

0 74470 02707 2

BROUGHT TO  
YOU BY DSC

## THE BENEFITS OF AMERICA'S PUBLIC LANDS

*Is federal ownership of public lands in the best interest of U.S. citizens?*



*Some 72 percent of America's sportsmen and women depend on public land for a place to hunt.*

Despite the withdrawal of H.R. 621, the Disposal of Excess Federal Lands Act of 2017, in February, the public lands debate continues in U.S. politics. The most recent threat to public land ownership is the Review of Designations under the Antiquities Act, an Executive Order intended to allow some national monument designations to be rescinded, or reduced in size, as the federal government pushes to make more public land available for drilling, mining, and other development. The review will apply to about thirty national monuments, covering tens of millions of acres designated since 1996. It includes the nation's newest national monument, the Bears Ears in Utah, where Native American dwellings dating back 3,500 years are only one significant example of the area's 100,000 protected archaeological sites.

It is probably not surprising that this latest development has elicited vocal and unfavorable response from hunters and anglers. However, there is now a growing sense that the wider American public is beginning to realize this issue of land ownership doesn't just affect sportsmen and women

and self-proclaimed "nature lovers;" rather, public lands issues affect everyone. These landscapes and the scenic, ecological, and historical treasures they contain are a shared legacy of the American people. At the center of the debate rests one very fundamental question: Is federal ownership and management of public lands in the best interests of U.S. citizens? I believe it is.

Historically, federal lands added strength and stature to both national and state governments. This historical narrative began as colonies ceded lands to government and government gained authority to regulate federal property and create new states. An attraction for both settlement and economic development, the nation's lands provided a source of revenue for schools, transportation, national defense, and other national, state, and local needs. Thus, public lands played a central role in transforming the country itself and, as overseer, the U.S. federal government as well. Legislatively, lands were a prominent consideration in the historic transition from Articles of Confederation to the U.S. Constitution and, to a considerable degree, enabled the process. Lands were a major platform of authority and exchange and ownership of them a major and highly controversial issue.

Some would argue, however, this is all in the country's past and the time of fervent nation-building is complete. Perhaps. Certainly, the envisaged republic is an inarguable success, labeled with good reason "the land of opportunity" by patriots and foreigners alike. Ingenuity and freedom certainly did propel the nation forward, but along the way citizens bent, tamed, and sometimes ravaged nature to meet their needs and wants. Furthermore, it is clear the nation's wants have increased dramatically with each generation and demands for the country's resources are escalating. American citizens have evolved to become the ultimate consumers, and 80.7 percent of all U.S. citizens now live in cities, often far distant from the nation's public

BROUGHT TO  
YOU BY DSC

expanses. So why do we need public lands today? Why not develop them all? Can the nation afford not to?

Federally owned public lands are part of the public trust in the United States, a crucial underpinning of both the conservation of national treasures in the country and a signal of the citizenry's trust in government's custodial role of the same. The principle articulates that certain natural and cultural resources are preserved for the use of all citizens and that the government owns but must protect and maintain these resources for the public's use. The public trust is considered the most fundamental pillar of the "seven sisters of conservation," the integral underpinnings of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

In addition, public lands provide outdoor recreational spaces that are accessible to all U.S. citizens. By citizenship, every individual has the right to access such lands to hike, to hunt, to camp, to fish, to photograph, to reconnect with nature—or to enjoy any other legal pastime in the American outdoors. Though U.S. citizens may seldom consider access to public lands as a privilege, it most certainly is. By contrast, in many countries, and even in parts of the United States itself, access to land for recreational purposes can be quite limited due to private ownership and access fees that only the wealthy can afford. American public lands therefore exemplify the democratic ideals on which the United States was founded, equality and liberty being the most relevant.

For U.S. sportsmen and women, public lands are critically important. According to the nation's Fish and Wildlife Service, 72 percent of sportsmen and women depend on access to public lands for hunting and fishing. In addition to its personal, cultural, and recreational significance, this wild animal harvest is directly linked to the conservation of the nation's wild lands and waters, the environment generally, and to food security. Further, the growing U.S. outdoor recreation economy generates over \$646 billion annually. A recent survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Census Bureau found that over 90 million people participate in hunting, fishing,

or wildlife-watching, generating over \$144 billion in expenditures and supporting more than 600,000 jobs. Much of this activity, especially in the American West, occurred on public lands.

Federally owned and managed lands also create economic development and jobs of their own accord. In 2011, for example, the Department of the Interior contributed \$385 billion to the economy and supported 2 million jobs. Recent studies show proximity to national parks and open space enhances the value of residential properties and produces increased tax revenues for communities. In 2014, national parks supported about 240,000 jobs and generated \$14.6 billion in economic activity in so-called gateway communities, or areas leading into National Park Service units.

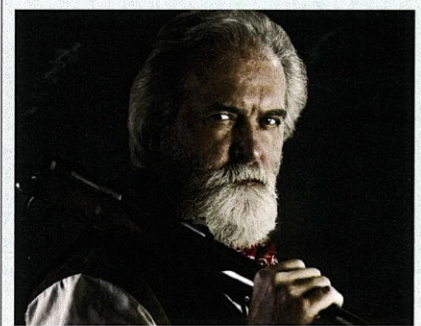
Public lands are essential for wildlife habitat and are cradles of biodiversity. America's 640 million acres of federally owned public lands encompass forests, coastal islands, tidal wetlands, and arctic wilderness, as well as vast deserts and shrublands. These highly diverse landscapes provide habitat to more than 3,000 species of fish and wildlife. Hundreds of these species are currently at risk, including 245 plants and animals listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. As reported by the Bureau of Land Management, public lands are often the last, best habitat for wildlife otherwise displaced by habitat loss and mismanagement. Furthermore, large tracts of intact public land will be critical to ensure wildlife species are able to migrate to more suitable habitats as climate change alters the natural environment.

Public lands also provide a host of ecosystem services to people, including clean air and water. While difficult to measure in terms of dollars and cents, these services are vital and benefit all citizens. More than 124 million Americans get their clean drinking water from national forests. Forests and grasslands also help filter air pollution caused by burning fossil fuels and other industrial activity and are extremely important for long-term carbon storage, which is related to climate change mitigation. Additionally, open spaces, or undevel-

oped landscapes, catch precipitation, reduce stormwater management costs, and protect underground water sources. Protected, functioning landscapes, including protected public lands, are thus critical to human economies and human health.

Finally, U.S. public lands are part of a national heritage. Every national park, national monument, and wilderness area represents a meaningful time or place, essential to the culture and history of the American people. These places still bring people together and remind citizens of a common national history and shared American values, and contribute to a stronger society. In 2013, the National Park System reported more than 273 million visitors, while about 160 million people recreated on lands managed by the National Forest System. These numbers reflect the enduring relevance of public lands in America.

While citizens may enjoy them for a while, and the federal government may hold them in trust forever, America's public lands essentially belong to the nation's future. If the next generation of Americans are to survive and live well, it is essential America preserve its public lands and the myriad benefits they provide. Federal custodianship of U.S. public lands remains something worth fighting for. Undoubtedly, American sportsmen will.



**Shane Mahoney**

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.