

# Between the Shining Seas

Behind the billionaire-backed campaign to deregulate, defund, and privatize our public lands.

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If you haven't passed through the American heartland in a minute, if you haven't paid a visit to the high dry side of the hundredth meridian, then maybe you've missed the vicious little heist that a bunch of billionaires and associated toadies are hoping to pull off out here. Perhaps you're in the dark about their dirty conspiracy to steal away with our country's most iconic, most essential, social-democratic institution.

The heist is happening now, it's happening fast, and its sole objective is to deregulate, defund, and ultimately dissolve hundreds of millions of acres of public land.

*The public lands* — first thing to know, they're a treasure. They're the national forests, the national parks, the wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, and more. They're the mountains and grasslands, the deserts and tundra and swamps that together represent one of the greatest accumulations of collective wealth in the world. They're rich in precious minerals, replete with wildlife and stunning to behold. They provide clean water, fresh air, jobs, food, healthy fun, and spiritual fulfillment to millions. You can camp, hunt, hike, fish, raft, swim, walk, wander, stargaze, make love, get lost, find privacy, and seek solace in them, free for the most part from crowds, fees, or surveillance cameras. They're ours, they're everyone's. At least for now.

Some want all this to end. Some want to terminate a century of public land conservation in this country by rolling back environmental laws, gutting budgets, and transferring large swaths of federal forest to the covetous mitts

of right-wing local governments or private interests. Over the last five years, at least, a cohort of anti-public-lands politicians and activists across the West have been promoting a [land seizure campaign](#) that would see states like Utah and Idaho requisition most of the federal lands within their borders, thereby robbing millions of people of their claim to the public domain.

These agitators have simultaneously tried to sabotage laws like the Endangered Species Act and the Antiquities Act, an 111-year-old statute that allows the executive branch to independently create national monuments and preserve public land. The Trump administration has largely supported such atavistic objectives, pushing policies to financially starve land management agencies, eliminate national monuments, and eradicate public interest safeguards on the people's forests.

Who's behind these efforts? An eclectic mix of anarcho-capitalists, corporate apologists, and grinning ideologues. Allow me to introduce you to them.

Meet first Congressman Rob Bishop of Utah, a sunburned lizard in loafers who seems to harbor a preternatural antipathy to public lands and all things living and green. Bishop, who has received nearly half a million in oil and gas industry campaign contributions over the course of his career, is the chair of the ultra-reactionary House Committee on Natural Resources. He has presided over an endless stream of bills and bureaucratic maneuvers meant to break America's conservation system.

In January, for instance, he helped sneak a budget rule through Congress that makes it much easier for that body to sell or give away public lands to state and local governments or private interests. At present, he is at work on a package of bills that would essentially destroy the Endangered Species Act. In 2015, Bishop was caught on tape [saying this](#) about one of our country's oldest conservation laws: "If anyone here likes the Antiquities Act the way it is written, die. I mean, stupidity out of the gene pool. It is the most evil act ever invented."

Next up is the striving man-child Jason Chaffetz, a former Republican representative from Utah who in February [proposed legislation](#) that would have disposed of 3.3 million acres of federal land. After he introduced the bill in the House of Representatives, potent protests erupted around the country and Chaffetz's constituents lambasted him at a well-publicized town hall in his home state. Chaffetz ultimately withdrew the bill and, in June, he quit Congress, saying it was "the right time to turn the page."

Other key players in the assault on public lands include Ryan Zinke, Trump's swaggering hatchet man, who as secretary of the interior has endorsed an Interior Department budget [so austere](#) that it would make an international bondholder blush.

Then there's Gary Herbert, the governor of Utah, who in 2012 signed a bill urging the federal government to hand most federal lands in the state to the right-wing government there. Herbert's public lands policies are so backwards that the massive outdoor industry trade show, Outdoor Retailer, decided [to depart](#) the state for Denver this year in disgust. Another essential actor in this sordid affair is Lisa Murkowski, the senator from Alaska and an avatar of Big Oil, who used her position on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to endorse the land-seizure movement in 2015.

Behind these politicians, the think tanks and policy shops loom. A slew of wealthy hard-right organizations, including the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, are using their political connections and access to powerful media platforms to relentlessly promote the idea that the federal lands are a form of tyranny and must therefore be abolished. In June, for instance, Steve Hanke, a Cato Institute fellow writing in *Forbes*, called the public lands a "huge socialist anomaly in America's capitalist system" and argued that the "Trump administration should expand the scope of its privatization efforts to include the Federal government's vast holdings of commercial public lands."

Similar arguments abound at the state level too. Consider the Sutherland Institute, a Utah-based think tank at the leading edge of this struggle. If the Heritage Foundation and the Mormon hierarchy procreated and popped out a bratty first child, it would be the Sutherland Institute.

The organization, which is a member of the far-right State Policy Network, promotes fundamentalist free market policies and a robust anti-conservation agenda. More than any other local entity, perhaps, it [has pushed](#) to neuter the Antiquities Act, organizing a powerful media campaign to convince the Trump administration to roll back the Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah.

In its latest move Sutherland, along with the Heritage Foundation Action Fund, the American Legislative Exchange Council, Freedom Works, and other organs of the oligarchy, sent a letter to President Trump asking him to rescind or resize “egregious national monuments” across the country, a legally unprecedented move that could well render the Antiquities Act useless.

Finally, even further back, back behind the politicians and the other pawns, one gets to the beating heart of the matter: the billionaire heirs. Through dark money slush funds associated with the ubiquitous Koch brothers and their network of reactionary rich, our nation’s plutocrats have poured millions into the aforementioned think tanks and made common cause with the political operatives named above.

Since 2010, the Sutherland Institute has hauled in more than \$1.3 million from Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund alone, all while it wages war on the public domain. Cato, Heritage, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and the State Policy Network, among other kindred organizations, have together received many millions more.

As a whole, this anti-public-lands set is bent on snuffing out resistance to hyper-industrialization in the American West. They’re bores and buzz kills, and

they want to ruin the fun and the beauty for everyone. If they succeed, our country will be far worse for it.

One caveat, though, because I don't want to suggest that the public lands are perfect. On the contrary, they are fundamentally flawed. Historically, our land management agencies have been the obedient servants of industrial interests, from the oil and gas industry to timber tycoons. The lands themselves, meanwhile, are underfunded, their trails eroding, their bridges crumbling, and their roads descending into ruin. Worst of all, of course, is the foundational fact that many of these lands are the result of tribal dispossession. Nothing symbolizes this more than the Park Service's Mt Rushmore National Memorial, a sacred Sioux site in the Black Hills that is now desecrated with the ugly mugs of past presidents.

But these problems will never be solved, these historic injustices never made right, if the public lands are privatized and put into the oligarchy's grubby hands. As Charlotte Rodrique, the chairwoman of the Burns Paiute tribal council [wrote during](#) the militant takeover of the Malheur National Wildfire Refuge in 2016: "There's no real reason to change the status quo of land ownership out West. But if anyone should assume a greater care-taking role for the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge . . . it's not the state, or private owners, but the Burns Paiute Tribe." That logic can be extended across the West.

Despite their compromised nature, our public lands are a vital artery of social democracy in America. Born in the early twentieth century, and defended for generations by men and women of populist persuasion, these lands are a sui generis experiment in social ownership, democratic land management, and popular control over *the* fundamental source of wealth and power. They are a great leveler in American life and their support among the people transcends all kinds of geographic, race, and class divisions.

We have a couple paths before us: we can let the billionaires steal and conquer. Or we can use our public lands, our country's conservation legacy, to help fuel a new social-democratic renaissance in the United States. Fully funding the federal land agencies, rebuilding the roads and trails and bridges, restoring the forests and healing the streams, creating new parks and wilderness areas and wildlife refuges, could create millions of new jobs for the un- and underemployed. We could use these lands, as Roosevelt did during the New Deal, to put people to work and instill a lifelong conservation ethic in millions of individuals in the meantime.

The oligarchy has made its decision. It wants deregulation and destruction. Proponents of social democracy, of democratic socialism, of egalitarian economics and populist politics, have to choose too. We either let them eradicate this great pillar of public life, or we join the fray and defend it.