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We Don't Need No Stinkin' Oil Money to Fund Public Lands



Oil wells on federal lands in Colorado. Photo: BLM.

What does it take to get the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the League of Conservation Voters in bed with anti-conservation Republicans like Cory Gardner of Colorado, the fossil fuel lobby group Western Energy Alliance, and President Trump, whose tenure has brought a wrecking ball to environmental law?

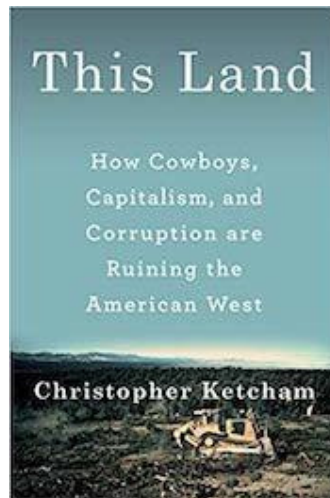
Behold the Great American Outdoors Act. The legislation passed the Senate in June and the House this week with ringing bipartisan support. Ballyhooed as providing many hundreds of millions of dollars for public land maintenance and acquisition, it has been lavished with adoring praise from enviro groups and progressive media. Mother Jones

declared it “a resounding victory,” Outside magazine said it was a “remarkable breakthrough,” and Sierra magazine called it “good news for all Americans.”

Gardner, otherwise known for his execrable environmental record, championed the bill in the Senate, and Trump, as the legislation made its way to passage, repeatedly tweeted that the moment it hit his desk he would sign it. “We MUST protect our National Parks for our children and grandchildren,” said the great hater of public lands.

So what’s going on here?

The Great American Outdoors Act is a devil’s bargain, a sad oil-soaked compromise with politicians like Trump and Gardner who feed at the tit of fossil fuel interests. Mainstream greens, for the most part, went along because they are politically weak, lacking in bold visions, and so



beaten down after years of taking losses that they assented to this obviously bad deal, a deal that will further entrench the fossil fuel industry and promote the interests of corporate recreation concerns – both of which are helping ruin the “great American outdoors.”

Read the bill closely and you’ll comprehend what’s at stake: it establishes a new pot of cash, the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, that directly ties rehabilitation of our dilapidated national parks and other federal parcels to industrial energy development. The new fund garnishes 50 percent of “revenues due and payable to the United States from oil, gas, coal, or alternative or renewable energy development on Federal land and water,” and uses that money specifically for public lands maintenance. In other words, maintenance funding for the Park Service, the Forest Service and other federal land management agencies will be increasingly dependent on drilling for oil and

gas and mining of coal, the primary extractive activities on the public domain today and in the immediate future.

This explains the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's fulsome support for the legislation. The chamber tied its support to the continuation of fossil fuel exploitation at current levels, opposing "any efforts to establish moratoria on energy production" and averring that legislative amendments that would curb drilling and mining would be viewed as a "poison pill."

Within the context of the climate and ecological catastrophe we face, green groups should regard the Great American Outdoors Act as an object of shame, not celebration. For greens to promote a rapid shift away from fossil fuels while accepting fossil fuel pay-outs as a financial basis of public land maintenance and management is bald hypocrisy – after all, the fossil fuel industry, with its monstrous sway over American society, stands at the forefront of climate-change denial, manufacturing lies and funding candidates like Cory Gardner who spread those lies. In a time of climate consciousness, divestment campaigns, and youth-led street protests, green supporters of the bill are implicitly telling the public to rely on oil, gas and coal production in order to restore and improve our parks.

Granted, there is a precedent for the linking of conservation and fossil fuel development: the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (LWCF). The Great American Outdoors Act funds in full the LWCF for the first time at a total of \$900 million. Subsidized by the federal receipts from off-shore oil and gas drilling, the Land and Water Conservation Fund's worthy goals have included the purchasing of land to expand the public domain, which, done right, can protect landscape-scale habitat, wildlife and biodiversity.

Indeed, the fund has achieved many good things. On the other hand, much of the money in LWCF over the course of its history has been used not to protect habitat but to facilitate recreational infrastructure for the public to play in that habitat, play that by its very nature involves not only more burning of fossil fuels but endangerment of the very wildlife supposedly intended for conservation. It should be noted, too, that the LWCF, dependent on drilling activity uniquely destructive to ocean ecosystems, was established before the climate crisis was widely known. It is an outmoded model of public land funding.

But no matter: with the Great American Outdoors Act, green groups and their Democratic allies have gotten full permanent funding for LWCF, which they have long sought, in part

because they see recreational infrastructure as an unalloyed good, regardless of how it's financed. Republicans, meanwhile, get green cover in closely contested Montana and Colorado Senate races this year despite their loathsome conservation records. And fossil fuel interests get the honor of financing national parks, shoring up their tottering legitimacy. As the president of the Western Energy Alliance Kathleen Sgamma put it, "For too long our parks have suffered from eroded trails, crumbling roads and bridges, and other maintenance shortfalls" – and now it's the worst climate polluters of our time to the rescue.

Bill proponents like Sgamma were joined in the run-up to the bill's passage by a chorus of green groups highlighting the need for massive cash infusions to address the backlog of "deferred maintenance" in the parks. While the cost to fix the parks is now estimated at roughly \$12 billion, half of that, \$6 billion, is for maintaining paved roads. Some \$389 million is for upkeep of infrastructure for the private businesses, known as concessionaires, that operate hotels, restaurants, and trinket shops in the parks. Less than \$1 billion is for maintenance of trails and campgrounds. Under the Great American Outdoors Act, as much as 45 percent of the new fund will go to fix roads, bridges and tunnels, allowing more motorists to burn more fossil fuels on better, smoother, faster infrastructure. Among the beneficiaries: the private, for-profit concessionaires that depend on easy motorized access in parks.

The conservation movement did not need to support this ugly bill. If it had more courage and political influence it wouldn't have.

Instead, greens would have pushed for full permanent public funding of the LWCF that divorces it from any dependence on energy industry royalties (and pushed to ensure that land and water, not human recreation, is what's protected). They would have demanded that those royalties instead go toward a program that transitions our economy away from fossil fuels. They would have opposed any further entrenchment of the ill-conceived LWCF model of an industry-dependent financing scheme for public lands. They would have cried out that tying conservation priorities to fossil fuel developers and other energy interests is terrible folly in an era that demands drastic and immediate decarbonization and an end to industrial habitat destruction. They would have fought furiously to force Congress to deliver ample appropriations for public land health and regulation, just as Congress regularly doles out money for the military, banks, agribusiness, and the investor classes.

If there is enough to go around for huge tax breaks for the rich and generous subsidies for other favored parties, there ought to be enough to support the national parks and national forests. Conservationists can do much better than the Great American Outdoors Act, its pretty name notwithstanding. In this era of ecological crisis, they must.

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