

Red, White, Blue...and Green

Publication: **Sacramento Bee**

Author: **Mike Matz**

08/14/2008 - When we think of what kind of country we wish to leave our children and grandchildren, we probably would rather not hand down a nation bereft of its natural wonders with its once-abundant resources depleted, gone forever. We need places such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, the Arctic Refuge and the Grand Canyon, just as they are, for future generations of Americans to marvel at, as we have had the good fortune to do. So despite calls today for more drilling, I think most people understand that we need to strike a common-sense balance between our hope of passing along something for the next generation and our need to tap into our shared domestic resources today. To do so, we must be forward-looking, by providing some places the strongest protection possible.

The current Congress has laid the foundation and could before the end of the year achieve impressive gains in land conservation. Legislation now awaiting final approval would safeguard forested valleys in Virginia and West Virginia, sweeping sagebrush canyons in Idaho, lush mountain meadows in Colorado, and magnificent desert hills in southern California, among other wondrous natural spots. More than a million acres, and perhaps as much as 2 million, could be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System before the November election.

Every American plays a vital role in the decisions Congress will make. The land involved is your land, whether you're from New Jersey or New Mexico, Oregon or Ohio. Recent polling by Zogby International, one of the pollsters for presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, found that 87 percent of likely voters think protecting public land as wilderness is important - and seven in 10 of us would be ready vote for a candidate who worked to protect wilderness.

Perhaps it's because right now our public lands are under threat. Experts tell us that America loses four acres of open space a minute, amounting to 6,000 acres a day, or more than 2 million acres annually. Much of our public land has been turned over to energy companies, and 68 million acres of that lays idle, even as oil companies record off-the-chart profits, like the \$11.8 billion Exxon-Mobil reported for the last three months. The Bush-Cheney administration has "issued more than three times the number of well-drilling permits" than the previous administration, according to reports, and still prices have skyrocketed to \$4 a gallon.

Think of our public lands as a fabric, with different places being used for different purposes; many places are devoted to energy development or timber production, while some places are valued more for their natural attributes. Those we formally designate as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, the strongest level of protection possible. Congress takes great care in deciding which landscapes to protect using a process outlined in the 1964 Wilderness Act that's tried-and-true, and red, white and blue.

These bills are neither a Republican nor Democratic issue, strikingly. Members on both sides of the political aisle, such as Rep. Mike Simpson in Idaho, a Republican, and Sen. Barbara Boxer, a Democrat, in California, are pushing to pass these measures.

Each of the dozen bills now pending started with one person who had a dream, found others who shared that dream, and together they conveyed a vision for protecting the quality of life in their community to city councilors and county commissioners. Each of those bills has the backing of Main Street businesses and has been reviewed by authorities in the agencies administering this land on our behalf. Often, the places the bills would protect have been visited by the member of Congress who takes up the banner and champions their protection on behalf of his or her constituents.

Americans have a history of rising to meet our most difficult challenges when we work together, when we believe in the kind country we want to see, when we strive for balance, and when we seek common ground. Saving these places makes good economic sense, provides for clean air and crystalline water, gives wildlife favored habitat. These places are about as pretty as it gets. Take your dog for a walk. Ride horses. Have a go at camping or fishing or hunting in them. Or just revel in the deafening quiet and marvelous scenery. Most important, think about giving them as gifts to our children. What makes America great, whatever the current difficulties we are presented with, is knowing our children can have a better country in which to live and work.

The good news is that Congress is listening to the majority of us - the nine out of 10 of us who believe this goal is important. In this respect, it's not just politics-as-usual posturing for the coming election. Your representatives and senators are quietly and commendably going about their job and getting these things accomplished. We are not ill-advisably sacrificing the expedient for the long-term. We are wisely realizing our desire to leave this nation a finer place for those who follow.

Mike Matz is executive director of the Campaign for America's Wilderness.