

Harbingers of Things to Come

By Paul McFarland

Monday morning broke with the year's first red-winged blackbird song. Sounding like a liquid flute, the metallic notes poured through our open window to announce, once again, that the season of life's renewal - Spring - is on its way. Along with the increasing day length, the increased activity of white-tail-feather-flashing juncos and the delicate green sprouts gracing some snow-free south-facing slopes, the signs of seasonal change are hard to miss.



There are other signs out there – other harbingers heralding change – that also grow harder and harder to miss; namely, the disturbing trend to view our Public Lands as revenue generating trading stock. One of the greatest gifts our grand American experiment has given the world is our institution of Public Lands – lands owned by you and me and the guy next door. Whether from Arkansas, Maui or Buffalo, as an American you inherit some of the world's greatest treasures – the dizzying depths of the Grand Canyon, the primeval hardwood forests the Great Smokey Mountains, and, right in our backyard, the granite grandeur of much of the Sierra Nevada.

If you stop and think about it, our collective ownership of Public Lands makes each of us richer than the kings of old. Sometimes I think of Public Lands as the principal in our national investment account. From this investment – this land - we have created our lives, farms, institutions and singular American culture. By holding these lands together in trust, we can always return to them, as one does to a favorite book, prayer or family photo album and remember where we came from and draw strength from a shared past.

Over the past few months, a fair number of proposals have come forward from our federal government that directly threaten the principal in our national investment account. Proposals to sell off our collective land holdings have been justified as a way to cover our burgeoning national debt or fund the agencies in charge of managing these lands for us.

The argument is made that, “We don’t need some of these lands,” “They are too expensive to manage,” or “We really need the money.”

Thomas Jefferson admonished a youthful nation that, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.” For what price will we sell the freedom of our public lands?

We have enjoyed wonderful returns from our collective investment in Public Lands – lifelong memories of family camping trips, hooking your first trout, reaching the top of your first mountain peak, your first backcountry ski or snowshoe, simply lying on your back watching clouds pass over craggy cliffs, spotting your first bear or bighorn sheep...There is no price one can put on these experiences.

Soon, the blackbirds, juncos, and the rest of our local plant and animal life will begin their ancient cycle of renewal – mating, birthing and nurturing another generation. May this Spring also bring about a renewal in our collective commitment to our nation’s Public Land heritage.

May we realize that our best Public Lands policy is to never touch the principal...

Future generations will thank us for it.



An American and his dog out capitalizing on our Public Lands investment north of Bishop. Photo: Paul McFarland