

If You Love Nature, Desocialize It

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Nature magazines are delightful to read. The photos that grace conservation publications are often magnificent. Yet it is hard to ignore the economic illiteracy or the socialist propaganda that is espoused in many of their thoughtless articles, and it is even harder to ignore the strength with which statisticians call for government expropriation of resources in order to achieve their goals. I will examine why this is ethically incorrect and economically inefficient.



First things first: I am not against nature or the preservation thereof. What I am against is the use of the state – the agent of institutionalized aggression – to advance the agenda of the conservation movement. It is imperative that the distinction be made between freedom and statism. While freedom involves property, prosperity, and free exchange, statism involves theft, plunder, and poverty.

The opinions of legislators, upon becoming codified and written in certain "official" documents, become law. These laws are funded by theft and are usually enforced by threats of fines, jail time and, ultimately, death. So when we speak about voluntary options, we are definitely not talking about government decrees.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Whenever there is an exchange of goods, those who are engaging in it are *ex ante* better off than they would have been had they not traded; they expect to benefit from the exchange or they would not be doing it. If A is buying apples from B for \$1, then A must necessarily value the apples more than he values the dollar. A similar thing happens with B, who thinks that the value of the dollar is greater than the value of the apples. Free exchange is therefore a double inequality.

Under government intervention, however, the relationship between those exchanging goods is no longer as it is described above. Instead of two parties freely deciding to exchange goods based on their needs and calculating through prices, the government is the one that gets to set the terms, unilaterally. It allocates resources according to the political climate, neglecting the needs of everyone by proposing and establishing one-size-fits-all schemes. Instead of both parties being better off, one (usually the politician or lobbyist) becomes better off *at the expense of the other*.

What does any of this have to do with nature? Quite a lot. We are living under partial nature socialism. The government has arrogated to itself the responsibility to take care of some areas of land that it has declared important. By simply saying that it is so (through the issuance of law), groups of politicians claim to be the rightful owners of either previously unowned land or of land that already has an owner. Let's look at each one of these scenarios.

In the first case, the government claims to have appropriated resources where no one held a previous claim. At this point most would say that this is legitimate. That is, since there is no previous owner, and, thus, nothing to complain about, then the government can claim ownership of the land in question. While it is not the purpose of this article to go into the deeper question of whether or not the government can be treated as a potentially legitimate owner in the first place, suffice it to say that

in many (and perhaps most) cases, the state has simply declared that it owns land by decree. There was no homesteading or any link (<http://mises.org/daily/2291>) between the government agents and the land claimed.

The second case is much easier. If there is a legitimate owner of property – land in this case – and the state decides it has a better claim ("eminent domain"), then it is simply theft. It invalidates previous (and better) claims to property and takes over. Under this hostile takeover the owner is either ejected or his ownership rights (the right to control) are diminished.

In either case, the formation of state and national parks must, at some point, use aggression. This would be true even if a formerly privately owned preserve were to be voluntarily given to the state; from that point on its maintenance and management would require victimization through further taxation. State-controlled property must be returned to the rightful owner at once.

States cannot legitimately own land (<http://blog.mises.org/archives/002502.asp>) (or any property at all). It does not matter whether such property came under state control by purchase, decree, conquest, eminent domain, or by "homesteading" – all these methods involve the violation of rights when they are done by or on behalf of the state.

NATURE UNDER SOCIALISM

National parks are socialist parks. The same economic analysis used to determine the consequences of socialism can be applied to national parks, namely, that without a market there is simply no way to determine if the resources dedicated to the park system are being allocated efficiently. As Mises showed (<http://mises.org/econcalc.asp>), economic calculation is impossible under socialism.

How much should people be charged to enter the park? Should they be charged at all? How many families or cars should be allowed per season? Or should they be allowed at all? These are all critical questions that end up being answered politically. Sure, there are many private and public agencies that perform studies and suggest courses of action, but, ultimately, their recommendations can be ignored by the tyrants in office. And even if they did follow them, would this fix anything? The answer to this requires a bit of economic understanding.

A natural park is a higher order good that could have alternate uses such as a residential development. And this is determined by the price that people would be willing to pay for that park or for similarly priced parks. The private owner knows if offers can be made on that park and he can accept such offers by comparing the benefits that he receives today (fees plus the psychological satisfaction of owning and running the park) against those he would receive by selling it.

Insofar as the state owns and does not sell these assets, no one can become aware of potential alternate uses, and even if these uses were known, the state, by holding those properties (not selling them), perpetuates senseless productive structures. And by supporting the parks by taxation, it is amortizing a capital good that might otherwise be profitable.

A common problem today in national parks is that they are becoming continually more crowded. Notice that this problem is not as extreme or as common wherever there are private property and markets. Usually, grocery stores open lanes when there are long lines. If it experiences high demand, it might open another location. The same happens with every good or service offered by competing entrepreneurs. It is very rare to find extremely inefficient businesses. They simply do not survive if customers do not care for the quality of service being offered there. Further, even if a business were to somehow remain inefficient (perhaps surviving by spending capital) compared to its competitors, there's no obligation to patronize them; one can simply refuse to participate. Not so with state-controlled parks where taxation is almost inevitable and avoidance is risky.

Here are just some ideas of how a market could deal with the issue of large crowds. Perhaps it could ban families and allow only qualified explorers. Or maybe property owners would establish waiting lists or priority queues. It's not difficult to imagine that they would charge different rates depending on the activities that the patrons want to pursue while visiting, or the number of days that they stay. For more fragile areas, perhaps the price would be higher than what we're used to. Or maybe access could be free so long as certain rules were followed. Private incentives like land trusts and long-term contracts could be used to establish guidelines for the caretakers as well as visitors. Many of these proposals would be political suicide under government control because there is the expectation of openness. This might be true for the private park or preserve as well, but it would be balanced not by

political fiat but by the expectation of a loss of value, both psychological and marketable. If the owner sets destructive policies then the damage caused could reduce the value of his land.

We must also emphasize that monetary value is not the only factor in the entrepreneurial analysis. Dedication, prestige, and exclusivity would come into play. If it is known that an owner is not being careful with his property the value of his land will decrease and all the effort and money that were invested would be lost. A good reputation would go a long way toward establishing oneself as a professional environmentalist.

DESOCIALIZATION OF NATURE

There are several common objections that are raised whenever the subject of privatization is raised.

(A) If we allow privatization of national parks, how can we guarantee that they will still exist or that they will be available to all?

There is no such thing as a guarantee under the market (or, for that matter, under government). In a market economy there is a tendency towards matching supply with demand. Entrepreneurs discover unmet needs and profit from this discrepancy. The only "guarantee" that there will be apples in the long run is that people will still demand them. As needs change, entrepreneurs see other opportunities to satisfy these new needs.

To those who say that the market can't guarantee anything, the same applies to the state. There are no guarantees there either. At least in the free market we know that if people value parks enough, the search for profit by owners and entrepreneurs will be directed towards that goal. How can this be "guaranteed" by the state? By hoping that ecologists will be in power? If so, then for there to be chairs, we would have to have carpenters and furniture experts in power also. And for us to have computers, then programmers would have to take over the state. This line of thought is nonsensical.

Further, one must never fall prey to the socialist challenge

(<http://www.lewrockwell.com/lora/m.lora20.html>) of "how will X work under a free market?" It's tempting to try to answer that question. And part of the problem is that if there is no market, no one has been able to really try. Further, absent socialism,

there would be competition in the satisfaction of unmet needs. A multitude of people would exist to solve problems. It would cease to be a matter of armchair theorizing. If we had shoe socialism, we might be curious as to how shoes would be produced, who would produce them, and they would be delivered. How much would they cost? What colors or sizes would be made? The protection of nature is no different. Instead of asking who would do it (in the future), the correct question is why should the state do it (now).

Finally, there are thousands of models of parks that already exist privately – everything ranging from country clubs to beaches to golf courses. The question then becomes which model should prevail. Answers abound; everyone has an idea. So which one should be chosen, and why? In the market, this is solved by property rights – whoever is the owner decides. This hurts no one because the property was obtained without it being taken from anyone, and, furthermore, in many cases the owner will try to profit by choosing the plan that would benefit the consumers the most.

Though governments worldwide control large areas of land, there are numerous examples of actual private natural parks and preserves (http://commonsblog.org/archives/cat_private_conservation.php) . These initiatives should serve as models of how nature can be protected without the need for taxation.

(B) Won't private property owners damage the land, animals, plants, and other resources?

The reasoning behind these kinds of questions never seems to go away. The premise is that property owners are careless and abusive, that they have no long-term outlook on their property, and are present-oriented. If correct, this view would mean that owners are only looking for immediate profit opportunities and exploit their resources as soon as possible. We would be left with nothing and the planet would be destroyed. Fortunately, this is incorrect.

People do value their property. When was the last time we saw people burning their houses immediately after buying them? Owners, particularly those involved with real estate and large projects like those being discussed, must invest resources to obtain property such as land. They have to spend large amounts of money and hire workers

and administrators to maintain the property. Property owners value not only current use but also future use. If they are negligent with their land, its future value will take a hit.

Still unsure? A recent article (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1214/p03s03-ussc.html>) reports a 54% increase of private land conservation since 2000:

Out on the east fork of New Mexico's Gila River, the endangered Gila trout is getting help from adjacent landowners who are setting aside 48,000 acres in several land trusts to protect its habitat by preventing development.

At the same time, on the shores of Chesapeake Bay, 206 properties totaling more than 38,000 acres of fragile estuary habitat for migratory birds and marine life, like the short nose sturgeon, have been permanently set aside using legal tools like land trusts and conservation easements.

It's all part of a huge new boom in conservation of private lands in which landowners voluntarily give up rights to develop their land - often in return for tax breaks, but also to save rugged landscapes they love.

Private land set aside for conservation grew 54 percent from 24 million acres to 37 million acres- an area larger than New England - between 2000 and 2005, according to a recent study by the Land Trust Alliance, a Washington-based umbrella group of local, state, and national land conservation groups.

National groups such as The Nature Conservancy were key in this push for preservation. But the biggest drivers for growth were volunteer local and state land trusts, whose protected acreage doubled from 6 million acres in 2000 to 11.9 million acres. Meanwhile the rate at which those associations were saving land tripled to 1.2 million acres a year between 2000 and 2005.

"People are not sitting around and waiting for a Washington bureaucrat to solve the problem of strip malls in their own backyard - they're forming land trusts," says Rand Wentworth, president of the alliance.

This is just one example of how people are spending money to protect the things they value. Imagine how much more could be done without taxation.

In the end, if people highly value visits to parks, they are willing to pay a premium for them. The benefits of having access to the park must be great, and so would be the park's capitalization.

(C) We cannot allow animals to be owned and traded as if they were property!

Lack of property rights is the problem; the value of endangered species is effectively zero. The state has claimed ownership rights over certain animals and bans their trade. There is no market for the polar bear or the bald eagle. And even though people value them because of their relative scarcity, there is no legal way to show demand for those animals in the market. Imagine, on the other hand, if we did have a market in endangered species. Immediately there would be incentives to protect them. There could be, just to name an example, a healthy market for the safe capture of animals so that they can be returned to their natural habitat or even a zoo.

The believer in socialist animal protectionism at this point could claim that under the free market scenario nothing would stop people from killing animals if they are not owned by anyone or protected by the government, and this would be true. However, in a free market (and, in general, a freer society) it would be considered trespass to enter someone else's property without his consent. Further, there is nothing today that stops anyone from killing endangered species. There are plenty of laws against murder and theft yet they keep happening. But in an animal market people by and large would generally know – as they know that jewelry or gold or vintage cars command a high price – that certain species are worth a lot of money to others. It is not unreasonable to believe that they would rather protect (perhaps for reward money) those animals than be totally indifferent.

There is a very telling example of the market at work (<http://cisle.org.mx/public/gallinas.htm>) . In Kenya, conservation groups and the United Nations pressured the government to prohibit the trade of ivory. After the ban, however, the number of elephants continued to drop due to illegal hunting (which is difficult and expensive to control). In Zimbabwe and Botswana, where it is legal to kill elephants, the number of elephants has been growing by 5% per year. During the 1980s, the Kenyan elephant population dropped from 65 to 19 thousand while in Zimbabwe the population grew from 30 to 40 thousand.

Why is it that even though we eat millions of chickens a day we're not running out of them? Because they have a value and it's in the best interest of the producers to keep the chicken population up to the demand level. It's unlikely that there will be a "chicken shortage crisis."

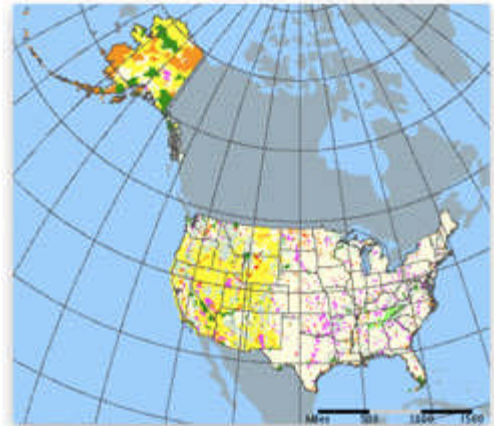
(D) *We're running out of land! What will be left to protect?*

(<http://www.nationalatlas.gov/natlas/natlasstart.asp?AppCmd=CUSTOM&LayerList=FederalLands&visCats=CAT-boundary,CAT-boundary>)

This map

(<http://www.nationalatlas.gov/natlas/natlasstart.asp?AppCmd=CUSTOM&LayerList=FederalLands&visCats=CAT-boundary,CAT-boundary>) is very telling. It shows

the amount of lands that the US federal government has appropriated and expropriated. Vast amounts of land, particularly west of the Rockies, and most of Alaska and Nevada, are being centrally controlled by Washington bureaucrats. Add the various state and local forests and parks and the picture becomes clear. The same people who wage war, inflate our money, fix potholes, regulate our lives, and impose trade restrictions – these are the same people who supposedly take care of nature. This travesty must be terminated at once.



The privatization of government land all over the world would open considerable opportunities to a huge number of explorers, scientists, conservationists, community organizations and entrepreneurs.

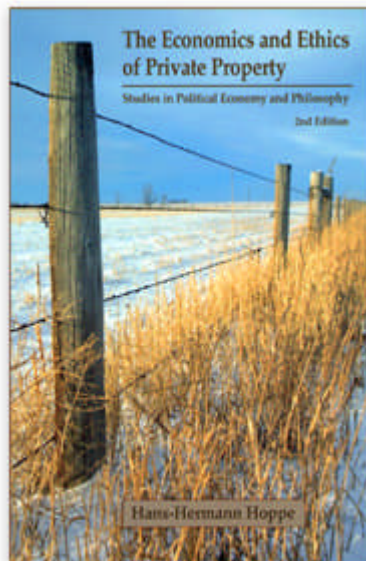
CONCLUSION

The most compelling opposition to privatization hinges on the questions of who gets the land and how could privatization, if done by the state, possibly be done fairly? These are valid concerns; given that the state operates within political means, any privatization initiative would most likely favor organizations with ties to the administration.

This seemingly insurmountable problem is itself the product of government control of resources, and not a failure of the market or of entrepreneurs in general. Perhaps there is no one best method to return property to its rightful owner or owners.[1]

(#_ftn1) However, one can be sure that the less state that we have, the better it is for freedom. Therefore, any initiative (such as secession, decentralization, deregulation, or abolition) that brings us closer to that goal – and the goal of desocializing nature – is a good one.

The case that I have presented is a fairly simple one: the abolition of government parks and nature preserves. Only by having a market can there be a sane profit-loss policy. If we love nature and want to preserve it, true property rights are needed.



(<http://mises.org/store/Economics-and-Ethics-of-Private-Property-P288C0.aspx>)

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Beautiful natural resources are a blessing. We must not allow the state to treat them with disdain by employing inefficient and unethical methods. The protection of nature cannot be left to socialism. The state has no business taking care of plants and animals. It has no business, in fact, doing anything at all.

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Note

[1] (#_ftnref1) Granted, there are some difficulties in how a particular property is desocialized. While complex, these issues represent merely a technical and logistical problem and not an economic or ethical one. Many authors, such as Rothbard (<http://mises.org/daily/2415>) and Hoppe (see his "On Socialism and Desocialization" from "Democracy: The God That Failed (<http://mises.org/store/Democracy-The-God-That-Failed-P240C0.aspx>) ") have proposed guidelines on how to desocialized state-controlled property. Also, free market environmentalist organizations such as PERC (<http://www.perc.org/>) and The Commons (<http://commonsblog.org/>) offer a good number of articles and books about saving nature through property rights.