

# Wrong, Wrong AGO

Another grand Interior scheme—America's Great Outdoors.

By Dave Skinner

*We should know by now that government has the corner on wisdom and that we, the mere citizens, aren't smart enough or interested enough to comprehend anything more complicated than the weather forecast. So when our politicians and bureaucrats decide what's in our best interest, there really isn't much sense in sharing the details.*

*From day one, the Obama people decided how we should get our healthcare, and a large section of the population is okay with whatever it is, as long as they don't have to think for themselves. It's all in our best interest.*

*Not to be totally overshadowed by her husband's social engineering, the First Lady took on the job of rewriting the national menu. In our best interest. Sure, our kids should eat a healthy diet and even get a little exercise out of the house but, without guidance from Washington, how are parents expected to know what, where or how?*

*A new federal initiative aims to help.—Ed.*

Almost lost in the shuffle and shouting over the Interior Department's "Our Vision, Our Values" stealth memo and "Wild Lands" administrative end run is another initiative that may be even more audacious: America's Great Outdoors (AGO). Announced by President Obama in April 2010, AGO is billed as "a promise to future Americans," with declarations "this initiative turns to communities" rather than "dictating policies."

The multiagency AGO has already held over 51 "listening sessions across the country, 21 of them specifically with youth" and cranked out at least 10 reports and "vision" documents, all conveniently posted to its website [americasgreatoutdoors.gov](http://americasgreatoutdoors.gov).

Now, producers know all about America's great outdoors—choking on chaff, fixing fence at high-baking noon, shoveling flop drizzling from above and below, wallowing inside greasy machinery below zero.

Ain't the outdoors great? But most other Americans simply have no clue, believing that meat comes from Safeway. Nonetheless, should government help Americans discover the outdoor life?

Well, the need for AGO is framed as a "public health" issue. AGO cites studies showing that today's kids spend only half the time outside as their parents did, and over seven hours a day with the boob tube and X-box. No wonder obesity rates have tripled since 1980. However, "[s]tudies show that access to the outdoors can help turn the tide on the obesity health epidemic." Fine, but that's still a job for Mom and Dad, not Uncle Sam. Might there be a bit more to AGO than getting kids outdoors to slim down?

Oh, yes.... One main goal is to provide quality conservation jobs, career pathways and service opportunities through a 21st century Conservation Service, "to encourage a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts."

A second goal is to enhance recreational access and opportunities by providing recreation spaces and "facilities such as trails and sidewalks." But aside from a tourism or restoration context, AGO systematically ignores economic access and opportunity. Only the briefest mentions of stewardship related to farming and ranching appear. Multiple use as traditionally regarded is nonexistent, appearing only twice in the 124-page, 50-state report, as in "multiple uses" of Platte River water. "Natural resources" appears mostly in agency names or in a restoration context, never associated

with production. The term conservation appears in AGO only in the greenest form. Working landscapes appear only in a context of conservation agreements and easements.

Furthermore, the forms of recreation are also carefully limited, not only in AGO text, but in the use of pictures, which of course speak louder than words. I found not a single AGO document image depicting anyone rid-

**"There are not enough environmentalists to save the environment."**

CARL POPE, SIERRA CLUB



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ing dirt bikes, hunting, rasslin' cows, fishing, or, God forbid, mining, logging or drilling. But there are plenty of lovely pictures of children bird-watching, hiking, water sampling, and doing trail work, or pictures of depopulated scenery.

A third goal, which is probably the most important to AGO's creators, is to raise awareness of the value and benefits of America's great outdoors—with a very special audience. With urban school budgets tight, the Three R's take precedence over frills like outdoors field trips and environmental education, without which kids lose "a primary point of early exposure to nature and natural systems that can spark their imaginations



and drive them to become scientists, innovators, conservationists, poets, or community leaders.”

AGO promoters say that green groups and churches still “provide varied environmental education opportunities, but, participants said, as wonderful and effective as some of these programs are, they cannot reach all the children who would benefit from them, as school programs would.”

In short, environmental groups can’t provide enough such “early exposure”—unless the government steps in. Why not?

Well, on November 19, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that longtime, long-toothed Sierra Club leader Carl Pope is retiring,

under some push. For instance, Pope has collaborated on promoting wind and gas energy with arch-capitalist T. Boone Pickens—yes, that T. Boone, married to Madeleine. It is Miss Maddy who bought the Spruce Ranch in Nevada (now the “Mustang Monument”) as part of her plan to save wild horses—hopefully *not* with encouragement for fat government management contracts. Pope further cut a four-year product-endorsement deal, putting the Sierra Club logo on Clorox’s “Green Works” product line.

Pope explained to the *Times* that Sierra Club dissent over the Clorox deal (to expire March 2012, unrenewed) came from Clubbers aged “between 50 and 68. They were

*Early morning in northern Nevada cow country. The Jackson Mountains are in the background.*

people who cut their teeth on the counterculture greening-of-America antibusiness stuff of the 1970s.”

Pope’s retirement note to the *Huffington Post* was even more blunt: “There are not enough environmentalists to save the environment.” Finally, as the *Times* duly noted, Pope’s successor, Michael Brune, “will have to address a decline in paid membership, from 714,000 in 2005 to 616,000 today.”

That same week, the *Times* reported that The Wilderness Society (TWS), facing a deficit of \$2.3 million on revenues of \$23

## Supposedly, America's Great Outdoors will be populated by formerly overweight city kids who have junked their video games in favor of federally sponsored nature romps.

million, will lay off 32 employees, leaving 155 staff (still too many). *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports a partial cause for this layoff—"wealthy donors making large gifts" donated only a third of 2008 (prebubble-bust) levels.

What about TWS's claimed 500,000 members? Impossible to tell—its IRS Form 990 claims no membership dues from those members, blending all income into "contri-

in "program service, outreach and education" spending went to: "America's Great Outdoors (AGO) began a national conversation about land conservation, and The Wilderness Society was involved every step of the way. Our goal was to ensure that wild land protection and funding for the acquisition of more green spaces [full, permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund which



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*Ranch and farm kids have no problem keeping fit. They are constantly on the move, usually working. This is Tillie Walker, Duck Valley Shoshone/Paiute Reservation, Walker Ranch, Owyhee, Nev. Between chores, she kicked the ball 60 yards in a powderpuff game!*

butions," which have declined from about \$35 million in 2005 and \$32 million in 2008 to \$20 million in 2009.

Don't think so?

This passage, from the Youth Agenda document, reads innocently enough: "When we kicked off our AGO listening tour in Missoula [Mont.] last June [2010], we had little idea where this initiative would take us, who we would meet, or what we would learn."

But they sure knew what they wanted to learn—for example, the second discussion question in the youth outreach sessions was: "What do you do personally to protect the environment? What do you see others around you doing?"

And others were there to make sure the right answers were given. A check of TWS's Form 990 tax return for fiscal year 2010 to verify its revenue decline revealed this discussion of what at least some of the \$5.5 million

expires in 2014] would become high priorities in AGO's final recommendations. We assigned full-time staff...generated nearly 40,000 comments...also help[ed] shape the location and/or topic of several of the public hearings."

Posted on AGO's site are public comments. Most are context-free, but comments from its Montana events have organization affiliations listed along with the comments. Question: "What are the most critical conservation challenges" today and the "best strategy to address these challenges?"

Of approximately 86 comments from the Helena session, no less than 35 came from environmental affiliations. Thirteen were from government agencies, including a Forest Service comment asking for "adequate and sustained LWCF funding"—joined by 12 more comments asking for more Land and Water Conservation funding. Of 17 written

comments that came from other entities (government and quasi-) at least partly dependent on federal conservation funding, at least a third asked for more money.

What about the "public"? Twenty-four or so stated no affiliation, with about two-thirds appearing to be either common folk or multiple use. One, likely a rancher, wrote, "A meeting in eastern Montana would have been nice."

One member of the multiple-use Coalition for Commonsense Use asked: "Where are the voice[s] of the stockgrowers, the farmers, ranchers, mayors, commissioners, mechanics, snowmobilers, etc.? The working man can't make a 9 a.m. meeting!"

With AGO's deck so nicely stacked, it's no surprise it declares: "When consulted during the AGO listening sessions, Americans across the nation made it clear that they want to reconnect—or connect for the first time—with the great outdoors. They expressed the desire to achieve this through jobs and service and through recreation and education, and they want their federal government to help."

Help is coming: AGO accomplishments for 2011 include "direct hire authority" for "career pathways to a diverse group of qualified young people, connecting them to jobs in natural resource conservation and historic and cultural preservation."

The bottom line of America's Great Outdoors: Capture new hearts and minds (diverse, of course), first through politically corrected, government-funded "outdoors" environmental education. Those so captivated (or captive) will be driven along "career pathways" leading to the correct college and major—"correct" being specialties useful to America's newly reformed land-management agencies or environmental nonprofits. Once these fresh recruits are duly "connected" to the correct jobs, they'll have an entire career to implement the proper outcomes.

Just like Wild Lands and Our Vision, Our Values, America's Great Outdoors is a partnership between environmentalists and the Obama administration to chisel federal land agencies away from their traditional multiple-use mission and toward a preservationist model.

And of course you'll pay for it. ■

*Dave Skinner is a major contributor to RANGE. He is a witness to many peculiar federal activities in his own backyard in Whitefish, Mont.*



Moonrise at Dyke Hot Springs on the Black Rock Desert. A series of springs flow into a large, warm pond and into an old bathtub in one place, offering a very hot soak. The pond was formed by a bulldozer to assist livestock, wildlife, birds and bullfrogs in this isolated and dry region in northern Nevada.

## Where Did The Wild Lands Go?

By Dave Skinner

RANGE has reported on the Obama administration's secret-monuments memo as well as the not-so-secret "Wild Lands" Memo 3310, and westerners' reactions to both.

What's happening now? Only as much as Interior Secretary Ken Salazar thinks is possible, apparently. On November 10 (the day before the long Veterans' Day weekend, probably not a coincidence), America's Great Outdoors website announced the release of a 26-page report: "BLM Lands Deserving Protection." It includes 18 "backcountry areas" deserving "bipartisan" designation as "national conservation areas or wilderness."

Interior's report rhapsodizes upon the last wilderness law passed by Congress, the kitchen-sink Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, which had "overwhelming bipartisan support." Not only did it legitimize the National Landscape Conservation System administratively established by former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt late in 2000, but it also created a mess of new wildernesses, four conservation areas and one national monument across nine states. As Speaker Nancy Pelosi pointed out then, Omnibus was the biggest expansion of wilderness (including NLCS, which

is regarded as "wilderness lite") in 15 years.

But a lot has changed in Congress since March 2009. In Montana—firmly in the crosshairs for monument designation, as proven by correspondence from American Prairie Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund—only two small BLM areas in Lewis and Clark County (county seat: liberal Helena) made the list.

In Utah, where Wild Lands appeared to affect millions of acres, only three sites were listed, all in Grand County, the county seat of which is mountain-biking-and-rafting-mecca Moab. Grand County was one of only three counties in Utah that backed Obama over John McCain in the 2008 election.

Finally, remember how Wyoming seemed especially ripe for major new Wild Lands restrictions as a precursor to new wilderness designations, of which the Wyoming Wilderness Association had recommended roughly 40? Keep in mind that both Wyoming senators, Mike Enzi and John Barrasso, had supported Omnibus bill designations on the Snake River and in the Wyoming Range in honor of the late Craig Thomas, a million acres out of the 2009 Omnibus's 2.1 million-acre total.

But Wyoming officials, from Gov. Matt

Mead (R) down the line to county commissioners, refused to recommend any areas to Interior for designation—therefore, BLM's report regarding Wyoming (and Alaska) massively understates that despite "significant potential [...] additional local dialogue and consensus-building is needed to identify priority areas and resolve key issues."

In short, things are quiet...for now.

### A Kinder, Gentler Sierra Club?

Don't imagine Sierra Club is going away, as it just passed its biggest budget ever—\$100 million. Remember, it is a 501(c)(4) organization—with the Citizens United et al. ruling, CAs on both the right and left will be wallowing in "independent expenditure" funding for the 2012 election.

Nor is Sierra Club expected to moderate. Pope's replacement is Michael Brune, executive director under Pope's chairmanship. Brune came to Sierra Club from the radical Rainforest Action Network. Brune made his chops at RAN with corporate blackmail campaigns against Lowes, Home Depot, Kinko's and Goldman Sachs—threatening businesses with "direct actions" (picketing or worse) by scruffy RAN hippies. He was Occupy Wall Street before Occupy Wall Street was cool. ■

### Further Reading

America's Great Outdoors website—[americasgreatoutdoors.gov](http://americasgreatoutdoors.gov)

BLM Lands Deserving Protection

<http://www.doi.gov/news/pressreleases/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=267130>