

The Rationality, Risk, and Reward of Public Land

by Kali Natarajan

Public land is broadly defined as land that is owned by the government and managed at the federal, state, and local level. This land includes National Parks, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, and many other entities (“America’s Public Lands Explained,” 2016). Access to places like National Parks encourages people to connect with nature and learn about the importance of the natural world; personally, I often spend many hours exploring Washington’s environment. Yet, unfettered access to public land can lead to ecosystem degradation caused by resource exploitation. The conflict between allowing humans access to natural areas versus restricting access has nurtured the conservation versus preservation debate. One solution to this conflict is to retain land for public use, but only under regulation as to avoid misuse and overexploitation.

American ecologist, Garrett Hardin, analyzed the risks associated with public land by using the analogy of ranchers grazing their livestock on a common field. This scenario, known as the tragedy of the commons, can accurately depict the conflict between the individual and the common good, particularly pertaining to land use. In the tragedy of the commons each individual allows their cattle to graze on public land with no restrictions, and since each farmer wants to maximize their profits, they graze until all the grass is consumed. The tragedy of the commons occurs because “social and private incentives differ” (Mankiw, 2017). Since no one farmer owns the land, it is overused. The tragedy of the commons shows how, on unregulated public land, natural resources can be overexploited and abused. This concept is applicable to natural areas since people can disrespect the environment when they aren’t held accountable. For instance, in Zion National Park, rangers removed 9 pounds of human feces from trails and found “more than

1,000 handprints or etchings on the rock walls” (O’Donoghue, 2021). Utah’s public lands are an example of how land available for human use can be misused.

Contrary to the tragedy of the commons is Aldo Leopold’s land ethic; Leopold argues that a set of ethics can be applied to the natural world which will allow humans to be good stewards of the land. The land ethic, “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals” (Leopold, 1949). Leopold’s land ethic argues people can restrain from overusing resources, and land can be used in a way that does not harm the integrity of the biotic community. When the land ethic is applied to the tragedy of the commons, the farmers would refrain from overgrazing to protect the integrity of the ecosystem. If everyone followed Leopold’s land ethic, public land would be a haven for both humans and wildlife.

The contrast between the land ethic and the tragedy of the commons can be seen in the conflict between preservation and conservation. To Leopold, “conservation is a state of harmony between men and land” (Leopold, 1949). Conservation can be achieved through the land ethic and the maintenance of ecosystems. Preservation, on the other hand, “seeks protection of nature from use” and protects ecosystems from human impact altogether (“Conservation vs Preservation and the National Park Service,” 2019). While conservation on public land is ideal, it is currently not feasible without regulation due to the risks associated with human impact. Some land preservation is necessary to ensure the future success of ecosystems that are currently at-risk of human-induced degradation.

While some areas should be barred from public access to preserve their integrity, having land accessible to the public offers many benefits to humans. National Parks avoid the tragedy of the commons by offering careful regulation of ecosystems as well as regulation of human impact, while still allowing the public to engage with nature. In the case of Zion National Park,

rangers cited having decreased employee numbers, but a continuing desire to “educate the public about responsible land use,” an idea echoing Leopold’s land ethic (O’Donoghue, 2021). There are many benefits to visiting natural areas and in 2021, almost 300 million people visited America’s National Parks (“Visitation Numbers,” 2022). With so many people visiting the National Park system, the benefits of public land are unquestionable. Being in, and “interacting with nature has cognitive benefits” as well as “improvements in mood, mental health and emotional well-being” (Weir, 2020). Personally, I visit Liberty Lake County Park whenever I need to take time for myself since being in nature allows me to clear my head. For myself, and for others, public lands offer a place where conservation can thrive and where people can enjoy the mental benefits of being outdoors while also learning of the importance of respecting nature.

The conflict of preservation versus conservation extends beyond the public realm and into private property. My family owns a wheat and livestock farm in Dayton, Washington, and I have grown up exploring the Blue Mountains on areas designated for public use and on family-owned property. Our land is habitat for Washington State’s largest wolf pack, and many would like to see this pack eradicated. In 2020, the state “killed the three members of the Wedge pack,” a pack in Eastern Washington that had been reported killing cattle (Adler, 2020). Most people agree wolves are needed in places like National Parks; however, wildlife does not see borders and wolves will go where they please, even if that means they go on private land and leave restricted areas, a common problem with parks and preservations. Conservation on private land becomes a delicate balance between maintaining a state of harmony between person and land and maintaining a livelihood; something I have seen while visiting Dayton and living in Walla Walla.

Based on my own experience, and the ideas of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic and Garrett Hardin’s tragedy of the commons, public land should be preserved for human use under strict

guidelines and regulations. The benefits offered by nature are intangible but allowing the unchecked usage of nature will likely result in the exploitation of resources. For this reason, not all public land should be available for human use, and where needed, land should be used as preservations to maintain the integrity of fragile and at-risk ecosystems.

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