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Rock Climbers, Public Outrage, and Deliberate Fires: An Expedition to Public Lands on the East Coast

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Abstract

Many are familiar with national public lands like national parks, forests, and monuments. But people are often unaware of the complex histories of these lands and the current problems facing their management. This project focuses on various public lands on the East Coast, including the Wayne National Forest, New River Gorge National Park, and the Monongahela National Forest. This poster examines the history of these lands, how they are viewed conceptually, and the managerial challenges currently facing them.

Keywords

Public Lands, Forest Fires, Nature, Land Use, Commodification

Disciplines

Environmental Studies | Land Use Law

Comments

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Rock Climbers, Public Outrage, And Deliberate Fires

An Expedition to Public Lands on the East Coast



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Background

Much of the West's history surrounds the displacement of natives and the expansion of territory. The East coast represents the birth of a nation, and settlement of land. As a result, the East Coast was depleted of resources first, and lacks the federal land protections that are prominent in the West. However this also means that many restoration and revitalization efforts, as well as current managerial issues, are unique to the East Coast public lands.



"Forest Fire" by Ervins Strauhmanis Licensed: CC BY 2.0

Rock Climbers

The area of New River Gore historically served as a big resource for coal and lumber. Today, one of the main functions of the land is adventure tourism, specifically rock climbing. Rock climbers have consistently found the resources and facilities of New River Gorge National Park appealing. A 2019 article published in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* examines the economic impact of rock climbing in the New River Gorge. It draws an interesting comparison of economical replacement and environmental impacts. The article notes that with the heavy removal of coal resources, a permanent effect on natural structures occurred, and rock climbing could have a similar effect.

Recreation and resource development has always occurred on land; to argue the opposite would hold the connotation that nature is unpeopled. Tourism has continued to rise and a concentration of activities such as rock climbing may have an impact that is irreversible. Do we prioritize preserving natural sites before irreversible damage occurs, or do we prioritize using public lands for recreation and the enjoyment of all?

Deliberate Fires

The early history of the George Washington National Forest starts with colonizers who saw the land as a prospect for economic development. The clearing-cutting of trees led to heavy flooding and erosion. Early management of the forest included the suppression of any forest fire that occurred. In contrast, focused efforts currently in place within the George Washington and the Jefferson National Forests surround prescribed fires. The prescribed fires are to recreate the disturbances that were historically present in the forests. In an analysis report published by the United States Department of Agriculture, it was noted that prescribed fires,

" used in a controlled, well-planned manner to manage vegetation, restore fire-dependent ecosystems and species, create desired wildlife habitat conditions, and modify uncharacteristic fuel conditions resulting from extended absence of fire and/or tree mortality from nonnative insects and disease."

The deliberate suppression of fires that once took place promoted the idea that nature is static. This current management plan demonstrates through its use of prescribed fires how the old practices of clear-cutting and fire suppression can be harmful but can also be reversed.

Public Outrage

The community surrounding the Wayne National Forest voiced concern over the management plan, claiming that it promoted the overuse of resources and did not address public concerns or public health. One main complaint was the discovery that the Bureau of Land Management was selling land for the use of fracking without ever conducting an evaluation of fracking effects on the local community, something they are legally required to do. Additionally, many citizens living in the area around the Monongahela National Forest felt that their concerns for clear-cutting practices were being ignored. Congress responded to these concerns with legislation. Two pieces of legislation encourage and mandate public comments being considered in managerial plans; *The National Forest Management Act* and the *National Environmental Policy Act*.

The management of these forests seems to favor an approach that prioritizes nature as a commodity. While using the land for resource development and recreation is certainly not uncommon, one could argue that the locals and experts raise legitimate concerns that the current Forest Service management plan may harm the environment and surrounding communities in their current approach.

Citation

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