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Opinion: Public land belongs to all Americans

By [Guest Columnist](#)

Tim Palmer

The trial of those involved in the armed standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge again draws attention to the controversy and the values of our public land.

Beyond the guns, the bravado and the deeply fractured logic of those claiming to stand by the Constitution, political attacks on the property owned by all Americans are underway. These range from the platform of the Republican Party to "compromises" designed to allow more drilling, logging and unrestrained profiteering off national forests, national parks, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) landscapes and wildlife refuges.

With 650 million recreational visits per year to federal land, 60 percent of Americans' water supply coming from national forests alone, and with these places serving as the cornerstone of wildlife habitat, everybody should be concerned with what reporter Maxine Bernstein of The Oregonian/ OregonLive called "the turbulent politics of public land ownership" ("[Malheur jury selection begins](#)," Sept. 7).

Some county commissioners and some members of Congress (not mine, I'm proud to say) have jumped on a boisterous bandwagon that raises troubling questions about the mantra of "taking back" federal land. First of all, you can't do that. Nearly all the federal land in the West has belonged to America's taxpayers ever since we took it from the American Indians.

What the naysayers mean is that they want to "take" our federal land away from all of us who own it. Sometimes they soften their claim by advocating for state ownership. But look no further than ongoing efforts to sell off the Elliott State Forest to see where state control of our federal estate would end up.

Liquidating or otherwise compromising even *pieces* of every American's greatest inheritance would diminish us all. Our Western backcountry -- just out the door -- is available for everyone to visit, camp, walk, drive, hunt, fish, paddle, ski and simply relax. Our federal properties produce clean air and vistas of green that draw visitors

and homeseekers alike from no less than 38 states that have only nominal amounts of public land available to their residents.

The values of public land most evident to me in the pursuit of my own livelihood are in the rivers flowing from national forests and BLM land. Look no further than the water we drink, the streams where we swim and the fish we catch for sport or in commercial fisheries at sea.

Virtually every one of Oregon's renowned waterways -- from the Rogue to the Deschutes, the Umpqua to the Willamette, the Snake to the Siletz -- flows relatively clean and unspoiled because of the nationally owned acreage at its headwaters and along its banks. Appreciate clean tap water? Like to fish? Then the land at the sources of those streams must be protected -- as only the federal government has been able to do.

In my travels and photographic expeditions to rivers statewide, I've been amazed and heartened at how widely shared our rivers and public places are by Oregonians and visitors alike. I see hundreds of people appreciating our public estate for every person that I hear complaining about "too much federal land."

Malcontents like the ones waving guns at law enforcement officials and at the people of Burns, Oregon, are not going to care about the values that these lands provide to the rest of us. Nor are the county commissioners who claim that state or private ownership of our magnificent commons is necessary to balance their budget next year.

Here in the West, the best thing we have going is public land. We all need to protect it as if it were our own, because that's exactly what it is.

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