

High Country Columns: On Conservation and Conflict

Land, wildlife, mineral wealth, scenic beauty and access to open space—these are some of the values at stake in America's centuries-long conservation experiment. From Theodore Roosevelt's creation of our country's first forest reserves to the more than 600 million acres of national park, forest and grassland that blanket the United States today, the public lands and the laws that protect them have always been a battle ground. Competing interests wrangle for control of their resources and debate over their management. Sometimes compromises are reached, other times the argument ends up in court. How we manage these lands and the animals that inhabit them are a reflection of our ethics and priorities, and an endless source of exciting, and sometimes confounding, stories.

The following columns, all published in *Pacific Standard* magazine, are an attempt to understand and document the politics of wildlife and land management in America today. From the recent occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's struggle to maintain the integrity of the Endangered Species Act, these columns try to take a close and skeptical look at some of the most important and controversial conservation issues of our time. Thanks for reading!

- Jimmy Tobias

Abstract:

A series of columns published in *Pacific Standard* magazine that report on a variety of conservation issues, including mismanagement of the Endangered Species Act, efforts by far right groups to requisition federal public lands, and the global epidemic of lethal violence against environmentalists. The articles focus on the way that public lands and natural resource conservation spark conflict, with an eye toward possible solutions.

Source List:

Erik Molvar - advocate at WildEarth Guardians

Kenneth Ostrand - spokesman at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Gretchen Goldman, senior scientist at Union of Concerned Scientists

Peter DeFazio, U.S. Congressman from Oregon

Brooks Fahy, executive director at Predator Defense

Pam Boehland, spokeswoman for USDA Wildlife Services

Tim Brass, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

Alex Reynoso, Guatemalan human rights activist

Billy Kyte, campaigner at Global Witness

Jim Posewitz, Montana hunter and writer

The Unbearable Pressures of Endangered Species Protection

Scientists and conservationists are concerned that politics are unduly influencing the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's time to protect the agency from its own worst impulses.

By Jimmy Tobias

Like an avian Archduke Ferdinand, the greater sage grouse has sparked a ferocious war of lawsuits, protests, and political wrangling in recent years. The plump bird, with its artful mating dance and awkward demeanor, roams some of the best wild land left in the American West. It also lives atop vast oil fields, coal deposits, and precious metal veins across the region and so its numbers [have plummeted](#) over the last half-century as the inevitable drilling booms and mining sprees, among other troubles, have decimated its range.

There was a lot on the line, then, when the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) debated last year whether the bird deserved Endangered Species Act, or ESA, protection. Back in 2010, the agency had concluded that the species warranted listing, though it refrained from doing so at that time due to higher priorities. When the [new announcement](#) came down in late September 2015, however, FWS had changed its mind. The answer was no.

To explain the reversal, officials pointed to long-term [conservation plans](#) that state and federal agencies have developed across the species' range. The plans limit development around crucial grouse habitat and are meant to

stave off the worst of the bird's woes. Though untested and less stringent than full ESA protection, these plans are the official justification for the grouse decision.

But the official story isn't the full one.

The grouse's ESA candidacy, after all, faced immense resistance. Before the September announcement, oil, mining, and ranching interests waged a [savvy pressure campaign](#) — scare-tactic radio advertisements, relentless lobbying, lots of noise from right-wing politicians — to prevent a listing. Industry feared that ESA protection would increase regulation on Western lands and hamper the pursuit of profit.

“Congress set up the ESA to ensure that decisions made about endangered species management are made solely on the basis of science,” says Erik Molvar, a WildEarth Guardians staffer and staunch grouse advocate. “But today, it seems political expediency is the single greatest driver to determine which species get listed and which are denied protection.” Molvar points to the official conservation plans' [failure to fully implement](#) the federal government's own scientific reports and recommendations as evidence that industry pressure influenced the grouse outcome.

What the grouse case shows, above all, is how politically fraught endangered species conservation has become in our time. Efforts to protect imperiled animals increasingly feature fights that pit scientists and conservationists against industry and their allied politicians. There are, of course, bright spots: countless collaborative efforts and people of all ideological stripes trying to keep our most fragile species, including grouse, alive. But the backdrop of brutal politicking

remains. In the middle of this sits the FWS. It's in a tough spot, and it needs help. Is there a way to insulate the agency from the pressure cooker of wildlife politics? Is there a way to ensure its fidelity to science alone?

According to FWS [literature](#), the ESA “requires species to be listed as endangered or threatened solely on the basis of their biological status and threats to their existence.” The agency is “required to base its listing decisions on the best scientific information available.”

Despite that clear legal mandate, the FWS's own scientists believe that politics are unduly influencing agency conduct. Last October, the Union of Concerned Scientists [released a report](#) in which a whopping 73 percent of more than 800 agency scientists surveyed said political influence at FWS is too high. The UCS also collected [a sampling](#) of anonymous comments from agency scientists. The results weren't pretty.

The “FWS has been ‘captured’ by the industries it is meant to regulate,” wrote one respondent. Another called political influence at the agency “very disheartening.” Still another offered insight into the way such influence manifests itself: “Senior management seem[s] to support science that supports the direction they want to go and [to] selectively interpret inconvenient science....”

FWS spokesman Kenneth Ostrand writes in an email that the agency appreciates the UCS's engagement, but “[s]cience has always been and remains the foundation of the Service's decision making.”

The UCS, though, has also monitored the Service's administration of the ESA in recent years, and its findings are troubling. Consider the wolverine. In August 2014, the FWS declined to grant federal protection to the species, a ferocious member of the weasel family whose total population in the contiguous U.S. hovers somewhere around 300. Much like the grouse case, the 2014 determination represented a change of heart: it reversed a 2013 agency proposal that deemed the species threatened. What's more, evidence has emerged that the agency did not adequately evaluate the best *available* science in dealing with the wolverine.

Last December, for instance, the UCS published on its website a [2014 memo](#) from a high-level FWS scientist in Denver. The memo, obtained in a public records request, endorses a recommendation that "the wolverine listing be finalized as threatened" under the ESA. The memo justifies its stance based on two studies it calls "the best available scientific information" regarding the effects of climate change on wolverine habitat.

Despite this prominent endorsement, and despite the clear threat that climate change poses to the snow-loving species, the agency refused to federally protect the wolverine. Why? Listing determinations lack transparency, so it's difficult to unravel the agency's exact reasoning. Apart from leaks, information requests, or lawsuits, the public has little access to the agency's exact formula for applying the ESA's legal and scientific requirements.

"I would say that there is a veneer of openness, but for the most part the decision making process is cloaked in secrecy," says Todd Tucci, a lawyer with Advocates for the West who has worked on ESA cases for 15 years. "We do not know how exactly they are making their determinations. The agency

hunkers down, pulls the shades, and starts preparing a listing rule.”

Between the UCS survey, criticism from conservationists, and the sketchy grouse and wolverine decisions, it seems science and politics [are struggling](#) for supremacy at the FWS.

The *good* news: There’s a potential solution on the table, one that might help the agency avoid the taint of politic influence, bolster confidence in its commitment to science, and further open its listing decisions to public scrutiny.

The idea, [proposed by the UCS](#), among others, is simple: The FWS should convene panels of independent scientists to review the best available science and make a recommendation regarding each and every species being considered for ESA listing. Such panels would release their recommendation to the public so the American people can better evaluate decisions as they emerge. The agency has used such panels in the past, but they are not always empowered to make listing recommendations nor are they used consistently.

Independent scientific panels “would give the agency cover to make decisions based on science,” says Gretchen Goldman, an environmental engineer and analyst at the UCS.

“Hopefully [FWS] would feel less pressure from outside sources to make decisions on a basis other than science.” Such panels, in other words, would be like nerdy little angels on FWS’s burdened bureaucratic shoulder.

The agency did, in fact, convene a scientific panel in the wolverine case, though that panel did not make any kind of recommendation about the species’ ESA eligibility. Instead, it reviewed scientific data and, [in a final report](#), expressed

“cautious optimism for wolverines in the short term,” but, crucially, “pessimism for the long-term ... future of wolverines in the contiguous” U.S. due to threats from climate change.

The panel’s work had consequences — it helped convince a federal judge this month to vacate the FWS’s wolverine decision. Dana Christensen of the U.S. District Court of Montana, [in a bombshell ruling](#), called the agency’s handling of the species “arbitrary and capricious” and speculated aloud why it had pulled back on federal protection in 2014. “Based on the record, the Court suspects that a possible answer to this question can be found in the immense political pressure that was brought to bear on this issue, particularly by a handful of western states,” he wrote.

An annoyed FWS, [in a statement](#) to E&E News, said it was “very disappointed” with the ruling and denied that politics had played a role in its work with *Gulo gulo*.

Meanwhile, the sage grouse clash still rages. After the FWS decided not to list the bird, [mining interests](#) and a number of [Western states](#), never satisfied, sued to weaken the collaborative federal conservation plans that are the species’ last remaining hope for survival. And since there’s no day without night, environmental groups filed their own [lawsuit in February](#), arguing that the federal plans, if they are to truly embody the best available science, must, in fact, be made stronger.

We’ll see who wins — and which species survive.

A Wake Up Call for the Wolf Killers

By Jimmy Tobias

In early February, a small group of federal agents grabbed their rifles, hopped in helicopters, and descended upon the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest in northeastern Idaho. They were there for the annual wolf slaughter. With choppers hovering and guns primed, the team scoured a remote wilderness landscape near the Montana border, tracking packs of wild carnivores as if they were fugitives on the run. State and federal authorities kept [the mission's details](#) secret while it was underway, fearing that it could spark protests. When news of the operation eventually reached the public, 20 wolves were dead.

The story isn't unique. This is the fifth year that Wildlife Services, a controversial [federal agency](#) that annually kills tens of thousands of native predators across the country, has sent its specialists to annihilate wolf packs in northern Idaho. The goal of these "predator control" operations, as wildlife managers euphemistically call them, is to boost local elk populations, which have declined in recent decades. Some hunters and state officials blame that decline on regional wolf re-introduction, so they've asked the feds to handle the problem. At least 60 wolves have been exterminated as a result.

Idaho, through its wolf control board, financed the recent killing, and Wildlife Services, a sub-agency of the Department of Agriculture, carried it out. In an emailed statement, a spokesperson for the federal agency said the operation was conducted "in compliance with State wolf management plans,

the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.”

Conservationists, however, say the slaughter is further evidence that Wildlife Services is out of control. “It was outrageous,” says Brooks Fahy, the director of Predator Defense and a long-time agency critic. “And it was done in secret.” Suzanne Stone, a staffer at Defenders of Wildlife, adds that the wolf kill was “far outside the bounds of the agency’s mission.”

On its website, Wildlife Services says it strives “to provide Federal leadership and expertise to resolve wildlife conflicts to allow people and wildlife to coexist.” For decades, however, it has endeavored to *end* the existence of many thousands of individual animals across the country, especially in the American West. This war on wildlife, as some call it, is the object of mounting criticism. In recent years, whistleblowers and activists have charged Wildlife Services with law breaking, wasteful spending, and animal cruelty. Journalists have published searing reports on its conduct and questioned its purpose and efficacy. In Congress, Representative Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) and a handful of allies have led an effort to investigate and restructure the agency. Wildlife Services, with strong allies in Congress who shield it from legislative meddling, has traditionally been impervious to change, but is reform finally coming?

Wildlife Services has had multiple makeovers over the years. It began in the 1930s as the Division of Predator and Rodent

Control, an agency that poisoned and shot wild creatures at the behest of ranchers and farmers. Today, the organization has a different name and a variety of responsibilities—it works at airports to kill birds that might collide with airplanes, it develops non-lethal animal management methods, and it eradicates invasive species, especially the ubiquitous European starling. Above all else, however, it is still the federal agency that kills native predators. According to a [recent investigation](#) in *High Country News*, the agency eliminated 580 black bears, 322 wolves, 796 bobcats, 305 cougars, and a whopping 61,702 coyotes across the country in 2014 alone. Predator control is a brutal kind of killing, featuring leg traps and poison, bullets and bait. It is relentless.

As in the 1930s, today's ever-growing pile of predator carcasses [primarily benefits](#) ranchers, hunters, and state wildlife agencies. These interests view coyotes, wolves, and cougars as a threat to their livestock, their big game, or their business models. They call in Wildlife Services to eradicate the threat. The agency's work, in this sense, is a massive public subsidy for private gain. *High Country News* [reported](#) that the agency took in \$85 million in federal appropriations and another \$80 million from state, local, and private contracts in 2013. But no one knows precisely how many federal dollars directly finance work on behalf of private interests.

“It is an incredibly opaque agency,” says DeFazio, who has been working to reform Wildlife Services for decades. “I have tried to get an accounting for how they are spending the money and the methods they are using, but it is a very decentralized agency ... and so there is no place to get a handle on the depth and breadth of what they are doing.”

Wildlife Services has recently taken a drubbing in the press. Earlier this month, *Harper's* published [an investigation](#) alleging that the agency has tested lethal poisons on dogs, killed endangered species, and broken federal law. Among other things, the article described Wildlife Services' illegal use and distribution of Compound 1080—a poison that was banned by the Environmental Protection Agency in the 1970s. This article followed a January feature in *High Country News* that questioned the agency's continued emphasis on predator extermination despite the availability of non-lethal wildlife management tools like portable electrical fencing and motion-activated alarms. Another [earlier investigation](#) in the *Sacramento Bee* reported that Wildlife Services killed 1,100 dogs and at least 12 federally protected eagles between 2000 and 2012. It also revealed that, since 1979, at least 10 people have died in crashes during the agency's aerial gunning operations.

Conservation groups have been eager to point out Wildlife Services' misconduct too. In a [film exposé](#), for instance, Predator Defense introduced the public to a cast of whistleblowers and former employees outraged at the agency's lack of accountability and oversight. One man describes Wildlife Services' "vast array of illegal activities." Another details the retaliation he suffered after speaking to his supervisor about agency wrongdoing. Together, these investigations paint a grim picture of what DeFazio has called a "rogue agency."

On top of all of these individual charges, the agency's work is not particularly effective: Despite decades of predator control, the number of coyotes in the American West, according to *Harper's*, remains steady.

The agency, for its part, denies many of the claims in the *Harper's* article and similar reports, calling them "biased." "These stories do not accurately represent the goals and missions of Wildlife Services or the wildlife professionals that work here," Pam Boehland, a spokesperson, wrote in an email. She added that the agency is staffed by "professional wildlife biologists who adhere to the public trust doctrine and love and respect our Nation's wildlife and animals."

Nevertheless, amid rising backlash, Wildlife Services seems ready for fundamental re-thinking. Reform proposals are plentiful. Animal rights groups, for instance, plan to introduce language into this year's Congressional appropriations process that would require the agency to detail how and where it is spending money on predator control. Led by the Animal Welfare Institute, this reform effort will give concerned citizens the ability to evaluate the scope and efficacy of the agency's activities, according to Joanna Grossman, AWI federal policy advisor.

Conservationists are also using the courts to hold the agency accountable. Last spring, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and other organizations filed a lawsuit in California that resulted in [the suspension](#), pending environmental review, of a Wildlife Services contract in Mendocino County. The agency's critics see such lawsuits as a way to challenge its lethal methods on a county-by-county, state-by-state basis.

People like Brooks Fahy at Predator Defense, meanwhile, are calling for the abolition of Wildlife Services altogether, arguing that the agency's culture of killing is too deeply entrenched to change in a piecemeal manner. "We feel like the beneficial aspects of their program, like their airport work, can easily be taken over by other agencies," he says. "It

is an agency whose time has passed. It is time to say goodnight to Wildlife Services.”

Despite the investigations and public concern, the agency’s critics still face a long uphill slog. Wildlife Services, after all, has powerful allies, most notably, as *Harper’s* reported, the American Farm Bureau, which helped sink one of DeFazio’s earlier reform efforts. DeFazio, for his part, thinks the political climate on Capitol Hill will have to change before any radical re-structuring takes place.

“Congress would have to wake up and decide that this is cruel, ineffective, and a waste of money,” DeFazio says, “but right now I have very low hope for that.”

Fair Chase and the Fight Against Drones

By Jimmy Tobias

In the winter of 2013, a drone buzzed across an open field on the outskirts of Oslo, Norway, and homed in on its target. It edged into a stand of trees and tracked down a hulking female moose, hovering so close to her snout that she tried to nuzzle up to the strange camera-equipped device. After recording the encounter, the drone departed and the resulting video, casually titled “Da Moose,” ended up on [YouTube](#). It got 900,000 hits. People loved it.

More than 4,000 miles away, however, in Missoula, Montana, a cohort of conservation-minded sportsmen and women saw the footage and balked.

“There was an immediate uproar,” says Tim Brass, state policy manager at the conservation group [Backcountry Hunters and Anglers](#). “Our members were like, no way, these things do not belong in the hunting field, they shouldn’t be used to scout animals.”

After “Da Moose” went viral, BHA became deeply concerned that cheap drone technology could upend American hunting culture and harm wildlife, giving some hunters an advantage over others and making it far too easy to kill game. The group, which works to preserve traditional hunting practices and protect wild land, immediately launched a campaign to ban the use of drones for hunting and scouting in states around the country. The campaign has seen great success and

it is a lesson in conservation ethics, particularly the bedrock principle of self-restraint. It's also a blueprint for those who want to prevent disruptive consumer products—whether drones, smartphones, or advanced off-road vehicles—from flooding into wild areas, where they might harm wildlife and make traditional skills like hunting, orienteering, and backcountry travel obsolete. With its small army of big game lovers and wilderness adventurers, BHA is trying hard to prevent that outcome.

The North American model of wildlife conservation is one of this country's proudest accomplishments. Originating, at least in part, with late 19th-century conservation icons like George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Boone and Crockett Club, the model emphasizes public ownership of wildlife populations, equal access to hunting opportunities, protection of habitat, and respect for wildlife as an enduring natural resource. It arose in the era of commercial hunting, when the trade in hides and meat led to the slaughter of tens of millions of bison and other big game across the continent. Backed by a growing conservation movement, with hunters providing crucial [financial support](#), the model led to the prohibition of most market hunting and put scientists and sportsmen in charge of wildlife management. We can thank this conservation approach for the animal abundance we enjoy today, from robust elk herds in the West to growing bison populations on the Great Plains to the flocks of wild turkey that occasionally [terrorize](#) residents in suburban New Jersey.

At the heart of the [North American model](#) is the sporting code called “fair chase.” Fair chase originated in the late 19th century from the Boone and Crockett club's effort to promote a culture of self-restraint among hunters and sporting people.

The code has influenced a wide variety of hunting and fishing regulations that limit the kinds of weapons, technology, and tactics humans can use to kill prey. It is meant to level the playing field between people, with our big brains and rifles, and the animals that we pursue. It means you don't ride around on the back of a pick-up truck and mow down deer with a machine gun; it means you don't shoot a sitting duck; it means you don't use a drone.

“If it is just about flying a drone in and finding elk, then the hunt is gone,” says Jim Posewitz, a Montana-based hunter, wildlife advocate, and writer. “And with it the whole model, which has done so much for wildlife in this country.”

Preserving the fair chase principle is what sent BHA members to state fish and game commissions around the country, where they lobbied against drone use in the hunting fields. Since 2013, the campaign has had success in 11 states, including most of the Rocky Mountain region. Montana, Colorado, Alaska, New Mexico, and Idaho, among others, all have bans in place thanks to BHA's work with willing state commissions. Some places, like California, already had effective bans on the books before the campaign began. Each state's policy is slightly different, but they generally prohibit drones for hunting or hunting-related scouting year round. What these measures *don't* do is prohibit drones for scientific research, fire suppression, rescue missions, and other legitimate uses. BHA is also working with Nevada and Wyoming, where officials are expected to pass drone prohibitions by summertime.

“It is our responsibility as sportsmen and women to keep the relationship between hunter and prey, and that involves skill,” says Karen Boeger, who helps lead BHA's efforts in

Nevada. “We see drones as crossing the line and giving improper advantage to the hunter.”

Boeger’s comment brings to mind Wendell Berry and his writing on technological innovation. New technology, he wrote in a famous 1987 [essay](#), “should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships.” BHA sees drones as disruptive of the *relationship* between sporting people and wildlife, a relationship of respect and fairness that is at the heart of American’s conservation legacy.

The drone campaign comes just in time. The market for such devices is on fire. Last July, the Consumer Electronics Association, an industry trade group, projected that 700,000 drones would be sold within the United States in 2015, a 63 percent increase from the previous year. And CEA estimates that individual [drone sales](#) inside the U.S. will climb to 2.8 million devices in 2016. If BHA’s members had waited to take action until today, they might have come up against stiff resistance.

“Every time some new technology like this comes out, we need to put the brakes on for a moment and ask whether it is appropriate,” Boeger says. “If we don’t address new technologies right in the beginning, then people quickly begin to feel like it is their right to use it.”

This, perhaps, is the most important component of BHA’s effort. Unlike, say, off-road vehicles, which spread like brush fire in the 1970s before conservationists became fully aware of their destructive impact on wildlife and ecosystems, BHA organized against inappropriate drone use while it was still in its infancy. The campaign is a road map for how

conservationists might manage innovation in the future— identify technologies that could disrupt wildlife, the landscape, or conservationist culture, and try to constrain them before they become ubiquitous. Many such technologies and projects, like Google’s plan to expand its commercial street view enterprise [into the backcountry](#), are worth scrutinizing already.

BHA’s work is a boon for wildlife, which might otherwise become easy prey for technology-savvy drone operators. It’s also a boon for hunters, fishing enthusiasts, and their ilk, people who maintain close ties with the land and its wild creatures. Sportsmen and women, and their culture of self-restraint, are worth defending. They have been a crucial mainstay of America’s conservation movement for more than a century.

Murdering the Movement

By Jimmy Tobias

On a January morning, I was crammed in the backseat of a bus as it climbed into the mountains outside Mataquesuintla, a small city in Guatemala's agrarian heartland. As we bounced along a rutted road, one of my traveling companions, an international human rights activist, pointed out a window at the street corner where the shooting took place.

There, on April 13, 2014, unknown assailants gunned down Alex Reynoso and his daughter, Marilyn Topacio, both prominent environmentalists in the region. Marilyn, who at 16 years old was already a respected organizer, died of her wounds. Alex spent more than a month in a local hospital, and survived.

Reynoso and his family are leaders in a peaceful [resistance movement](#) that opposes the nearby Escobal silver mine, a massive operation owned by the Canadian firm Tahoe Resources, Inc. Escobal has been pulling metals from the Guatemalan ground since 2013, despite dogged protests and lawsuits from some locals who see it as a foreign intrusion and a potential source of pollution.

A few miles further, amid banana trees and thick brush, we passed the site of the second assassination attempt. Here, on October 17, 2015, men on a motorcycle ambushed Reynoso [as he drove home](#) at dusk. The attackers came out of the forest and opened fire. Reynoso took bullets in his back, and survived.

No one has been held accountable for the attacks and Tahoe denies any connection to the crime, but Reynoso believes the men who want him dead are local mine supporters. His contention is rooted in context: Mine opponents have faced persistent repression. In April 2013, for instance, seven peaceful protesters were shot and wounded by security at the mine's gates. Others in the resistance have been jailed or killed. The Reynoso family's story is part of this [violent pattern](#). The violence, though, is not confined to one mine. Attacks on leaders like Alex, whether in Guatemala or Congo or Cambodia, are not an aberration.

Every year, across the globe, environmentalists opposed to mining, oil extraction, and timber production are killed in great numbers. The frequency of such assassinations is downright disturbing: In 2014, at least 116 environmental activists were murdered worldwide, according to [a report](#) released last April by Global Witness, an anti-corruption group in the United Kingdom. Between December 2009 and December 2015, to take a longer view, the total tally of such killings came in at 640.

“A shocking 40% of the victims were indigenous,” Global Witness wrote in its April report, “with most people dying amid disputes over hydropower, mining and agri-business.” The murders occur most often in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where multinational corporations and local businesses alike can pursue profit with little legal oversight. In general, the killings take place amid contentious land disputes that pit neighbor against neighbor. In general, the killers are not held accountable.

Consider the case of Emirito Samarca, Dionel Campos, and Bello Sinzo, indigenous Filipinos [opposed to mining](#) on their people's traditional lands. All three were murdered on the

same day last September, allegedly by members of a local paramilitary group. Consider the killing of Edwin Chota, a prominent indigenous anti-logging campaigner in Peru who was [gunned down](#) in September 2014 along with three of his allies. Consider the death of Chai Bunthonglek, a high-profile activist who led campaigns against palm oil companies in Thailand. According to Global Witness, unidentified gunmen murdered him in his home last February. With the exception of the Chota case, the perpetrators killed with impunity.

The Reynoso family's tragedy, in *this* context, is just one more disturbing consequence of the mad scramble for minerals, timber, oil, and other natural resources on our picked-over planet.

“Rapacious corporate interests are riding roughshod over environmental and land activists in order to access natural resources,” says Billy Kyte, a campaigner with Global Witness. “Environmentalists are being killed at the rate of two a week for defending their land and the problem is not well-reported. It needs to be addressed.”

As the famous Earth Day flag suggests, the environmental movement has long had global ambitions. But how does the movement hope to prevail in its campaigns against deforestation, illegal mining, climate change, and the like? How can conservation possibly succeed on a planetary scale if key green leaders and allies keep getting gunned down?

“There has been more than one occasion where we have been collaborating with someone in the field and then they end up murdered,” says Daniel Brindis, Greenpeace's senior forest campaigner. “Based on our experience in Brazil, it is a very common problem.”

The problem seems insurmountable, but there are solutions. It's instructive to look at how journalists, another oft-threatened group, deal with such perils. Global Witness points out that, in 2014, the number of environmentalists murdered was double that of journalists murdered. Yet journalists have rallied to combat their killers. In the Committee to Protect Journalists, reporters worldwide have [a prominent organization](#) solely focused on defending them against repression and violence. Among other things, CPJ, with backing from prominent media groups, tracks the killing and jailing of journalists, leads campaigns to bring perpetrators to justice, travels to countries where the press faces reprisals, and advocates in international bodies. CPJ's work puts killers in jail and gets journalists out.

Global Witness is doing similarly crucial work, but it can't be expected to go it alone. The broader environmental movement should rally to the cause. A coalition of powerful green groups, supporting a centralized and well-funded effort to counter environmental killings, would do a great deal to stanch the hemorrhage of international environmental leadership, of human life. Organizations like the Sierra Club, 350.org, Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and others could pool their resources to track murders, advocate on behalf of imperiled environmentalists, and bring this issue to international prominence. And Global Witness, Kyte says, is looking for such allies.

“I do think we need to do it,” says Payal Parekh, 350.org's global managing director. “We need to work together better and in a more coordinated manner, so that they do not think they can pick us off one by one.”

After the long bus ride, we finally arrived at the home of Alex Reynoso. He lives on a mountainous parcel where coffee

plants and banana trees thrive. Though the Escobal mine has turned him into an activist, Alex is a farmer at heart. His land is peaceful and set back from the road, the perfect place to heal. When I met him, he still needed surgery to fix his battered body.

“While I recuperate, I’ve decided to completely detach myself from the resistance movement,” Reynoso says. “I am not going to meetings, not doing anything, until I’m better.”

The attacks took a grave toll on Reynoso. For now, he is out of the fight. Unlike many fellow environmentalists, however, he survives.

Beyond the Bundys: The Far Right and the Future of Conservation

By Jimmy Tobias

In Oregon, where a small group of white people have brazenly plundered public land, the American people are getting a glimpse of things to come. The standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, after all, is just the extremist edge of a growing anti-conservation crusade bent on dismantling crucial environmental protections and abolishing most federal land. The crusade extends far beyond one government compound, far beyond Oregon's borders. It involves more menacing figures than the disgruntled ranchers holed up in Harney County. In fact, forget the cowboys—one is dead, some are in jail, and the rest are sure to disperse eventually. It's the crusaders in suits—the senators, the oil lobbyists, the right-wing legislators—who ought to have your full attention.

Consider, for instance, the anti-conservationists at work in our nation's capitol. Last year alone, Republican legislators, awash in Big Oil campaign contributions, proposed more than [80 bills or amendments](#) meant to undermine the Endangered Species Act. Some sought to prohibit protection for specific species, others tried to transfer ESA management to the states or exempt the oil and gas industry from the Act's mandates. President Obama vetoed the items that made it to his desk, but our country's most essential wildlife law will continue to be a target in 2016.

Lawmakers also threatened the beloved Land and Water Conservation Fund, which pipes hundreds of millions of dollars in oil and gas royalties to local, state and federal conservation projects around the country. Utah Representative Rob Bishop, the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee and an oil industry favorite, allowed [the fund](#) to expire last September. For months, he used it as a bargaining chip to push other Tea Party policies. Congress finally re-authorized the fund during this past December's budget talks, but only for three years, a short-term fix that's sure to turn it into a political plaything in future legislative sessions.

In the most extreme move of all, the 114th Congress embraced the land transfer agenda. Land transfer advocates seek to turn over large swaths of federal public land to the states, where right-wing legislators and developers can do with them as they please. Last March, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who has deep ties to oil and gas, pushed through a budget amendment that called for a fund to help finance federal land disposal on a broad scale. Since then, some Republicans, including Bishop and Representative Mark Amodei of Nevada, have formed a [congressional team](#) to promote the “return” of federal land to its “rightful owners,” by which they mean state governments, not [native tribes](#).

Congress, alas, is not alone in its anti-conservation zeal. Utah in particular has become a right-wing public lands laboratory of sorts—in 2012, its legislature passed the Transfer of Public Lands Act, which demanded that the feds turn over most of their holdings in the state or risk a lawsuit. The federal government did not comply, and the state is currently preparing the ground for what consultants have estimated will be a \$14 million [legal effort](#) to requisition federal parcels within Utah's borders.

The Koch-backed American Lands Council and its leader, a far-right Utah legislator named Ken Ivory, are the major organizing force behind the land transfer movement. Ivory has teamed up with the Koch-backed American Legislative Exchange Council to promote the idea in [states across the West](#). Together, the team has had middling success: Last May, the Nevada state legislature passed a bill calling for federal land transfer, and a number of other states have set up commissions to study the idea, but Utah's transfer effort is farthest along by far.

Beyond the Koch network, there are other oil industry organizations worth mentioning, like the Western Energy Alliance, a trade group that calls itself “the voice of the industry in the West.” It counts among its members Chevron, Halliburton, and Koch Exploration. Besides backing candidates like climate-denier Jim Inhofe and ferociously [opposing federal protection](#) for numerous species, WEA is [involved in a public relations campaign](#) meant to [undermine](#) the image and credibility of mainstream environmental groups in the West.

From Capitol Hill to the high country, these undertakings together constitute a multi-pronged and prolonged offensive against American conservation. They seek, above all, to hack away at the political and social values that gave us the Wilderness Act, the ESA, the National Environmental Policy Act, and more. The armed takeover at Malheur was born of this seeping anti-conservation culture, and so it has been instructive to watch some of the more mainstream crusaders respond to the standoff. Like items off an assembly line, the responses come standard: first the obligatory denunciation of Ammon Bundy's tactics, followed by a full-throated apologia of the armed gang's grievances.

For instance, [in a January blog post](#), WEA staffer Kathleen Sgamma condemned the Oregon standoff before transitioning into a sharp criticism of “too much federal ownership of land in the West” and the “conservation-only mentality” of some federal agencies. (The latter statement conveniently ignores the thousands of oil and gas leases issued on federal land over the last eight years.)

Bishop had similar sentiments. He distanced himself from Bundy’s violent methods then [denounced](#) the Department of the Interior’s “agenda of dogma” and sympathized with the “frustration many Americans feel when they have to deal with the heavy-hand of the federal land agencies.”

Oil and gas trade groups, far-right activists, Republican Congressmen. This is the clique, more or less, that has turned its back on America’s great conservation tradition. What’s to gain? Power and money. One of the militants, Ryan Payne, put it succinctly: “Land is power.” The goal, ultimately, is a huge re-distribution of wealth that will take *your* land, the people’s land, more than 600 million acres of it, and put the majority into state or private hands. With environmental laws weakened, and federal holdings dissolved, mining interests, oil companies, real-estate developers and more will have easy access to the landscape’s vast riches. As transfer activist Ken Ivory [told NPR](#) recently: “There’s more than 150 trillion dollars in minerals locked up in the Western states.” That says it all.

It’s unclear whether American conservationists are prepared to counteract the growing threat to public land and environmental law. If the Bundy occupation has any positive impact, it will be raising the profile of the crusaders and their extreme goals. Already, some public land supporters and wildlife enthusiasts are [rallying](#) around Malheur. These

counter-protestors seem keenly aware of the public trust—the promise of democratic ownership and management—that the refuge represents. They are wise to the broader context.

“There’s a movement right now to roll back natural resource protection, to roll back public ownership of land, and this occupation rips the veneer off of that agenda,” says Bob Sallinger, conservation director at Audubon of Portland and a counter-protest organizer. “People can now see what it looks like on the ground.”

As always, in the perennial struggle for Western lands, it’s “keep it public” versus “private profit.” In Oregon, the “private profit” crowd has shown us the future it hopes to foment.