

# Who Owns the West?

By Elaine Young

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**“Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.” -Horace Greeley**

Land management in the American West is a battleground where policy, the need to acquire resources, tourism, and the desire to protect some of our most stunning American landscapes go toe-to-toe. With so many different ideas about how to use the land to meet the needs of the public, land management in the West became a collective effort of over six different government agencies. But each agency has their own agenda: how do they decide who gets what? Jess Rudnick, a graduate student at the University of California, Davis, studies environmental policy. She explains how our National Parks are “loved to death” and how we ended up with such a complicated system of land management in the American West.

In the United States, there are two Departments within the government that manage public land: the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of the Interior. The US Department of Agriculture houses the US Forest Service, an agency that controls 193 million acres of land for timber harvesting, recreation, and wildlife habitat. The US Department of the Interior houses the National Park Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management, the US

Geological Survey, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

With so many government agencies that all have different agendas, different funding, and different supporters, managing our public lands, how effective is this system?

To understand our land management system today, we first have to understand how the American West began. The “Wild West” is often romanticized in American history, especially the time known as Westward Expansion. Westward Expansion, or Manifest Destiny, occurred during the 1800s, when the newly independent United States of America was coming into its own. Around the time of independence, America was less than half its current size land-wise. Within about 70 years, through a series of negotiations with other nations, the United States acquired Florida and every thing west of the Mississippi River.

With all this new land, the United States government was eager to populate the western states. This eagerness started the “Deposition Era,” during which the federal government sold land in the west to townships, states, and settlers at very low cost. They auctioned land for one dollar per acre in the early days! Statehood grants gave land to states to use for public schools, universities, and other purposes. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave land to settlers for free!

Settlers could get 160 acres of land, as long as they agreed to work and cultivate the land for five years. The most desirable land, located near sources of water, went first. A lot of land was sold to railroad companies in a buy-one-get-one-free type of deal. With all of the land in the west being sold at such low rates so quickly, no one bothered to think about the natural boundaries – or changes in habitat, climate, or resources—that could be important in the Wild West.

After all the best land in the West was sold to private owners, the United States government had to decide how to manage the scattered pieces of land they were left with. Because the land was sold without any attention paid to natural boundaries, it was not easy to decide how to manage the public lands of the West. At the ends of the spectrum were people who argued for total government control, preservation, and management of the land, and people who argued for no government land management. The result of this debate was the development many government agencies, each with different missions, to manage public lands.

So, after knowing all that – is this system effective? According to Rudnick, this question is at the front of environmental policy makers minds – Rudnick spent an entire 10 week course trying to answer this question and “at the end we hadn’t defined a clear answer.” She says, whether the system is effective or not depends on if you prioritize conservation or economics. The National Park Service is a good example of this.

The mission of the National Park Service is to protect and preserve the natural wonders of our nation. But they also promote tourism, and attract millions of visitors to the beautiful and fragile ecosystems under their protection. Are the tourists a good thing? Or are they causing permanent damage to natural wonders? According to Rudnick, tourism in National Parks is tricky business, but ultimately, she says the Parks are a good thing. Parks protect land from mining, logging, development, and other operations that would totally destroy the scenery. While they increase traffic to the area, parts of the Parks are only accessible with permits. This system allows parts of the park to remain wild and virtually untouched. The highly visited parts of Parks provide opportunities for education.