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# The Sagebrush Rebels ride again – and again

editorial - December 10, 2007 by *Paul Larmer*

A decade ago, I caught a scene in one of the West's longest-running political melodramas: The Sagebrush Rebels Ride Again. I was in a dingy hotel room in Denver, surfing the television for something worthwhile to watch, when I stumbled upon C-SPAN. There was my congressman, Republican Scott McInnis, standing on the floor of the House of Representatives, railing passionately about the "War on the West" being waged by an unholy alliance of Clinton administration lackeys and environmentalists.

I don't recall McInnis' exact words, but I remember his righteous tone; he zeroed in on the Clinton administration's push to create new national monuments on public lands. These monuments were undemocratic and elitist, he said, because they shut out the true Westerners - ranchers, miners, loggers and off-road vehicle enthusiasts - from the decision-making process, and because they would drive these hard-working people off the land. For the half hour I watched, McInnis gave not a word to constituents like me who value the public lands as much for their wildness and beauty as for their mineral wealth or livestock forage.

I was amazed that a politician in the last years of the 20th century could espouse such a simple, stereotypical view of the West. But I shouldn't have been. As Ray Ring reports in this issue, angry retaliation against environmental regulations has a long and storied history in the West, from the ranchers who almost succeeded in privatizing the public lands back in the 1940s, to Ronald Reagan's first Interior secretary, James Watt, who tried to turn back the clock of regulation for all extractive users of the public lands. Even today, there remains a fairly robust group of lawyers devoted to defending traditional Western interests against what they see as excessive governmental regulation and the cult of environmentalism.

Though the Sagebrush Rebels have had a long run in the West, their list of accomplishments is ultimately rather meager. As Ring notes, many of their most trumpeted recent legal victories - over endangered species, land-use regulations and public-land management - are either not holding up well in higher courts or are yielding ambiguous results.

Which brings up the question: Will the Sagebrush Rebels eventually ride off into the sunset? Not in my lifetime. As long as we have large chunks of public land to fight over, we will see new insurrections. But we have crossed a threshold in the West from which we will not return. A majority of Westerners - and even most of their elected officials - understand that the quality of life we enjoy can be overrun by development or marred by overuse, whether by gas drillers, strip-mall developers or out-of-control off-road vehicles. They realize that the public lands are a rare and still relatively unspoiled national resource that needs to be conserved for everyone.

I am reminded of this growing maturity every time I drive past one of our newest conservation areas, located near the Utah border. Its creation was spearheaded by a foresighted congressman who collaborated with environmentalists to create a lasting legacy for all of us, including himself. The name, though, still grates on me: McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area.

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